Gendered learning: Women negotiating subjectivities, finding ‘self’ and learning through their work

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ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to enhanced understandings of workplace learning experiences of female auxiliary workers in the legal sector. The purpose is to examine the impact of gender based subjectivities on women workers and explore how these workers traverse their positionality to participate in meaningful learning. In spite of impeding subjectivities and low workplace affordances it was found that women’s learning is mostly shaped by their epistemological agency in securing workplace learning experiences. The women identified themselves as pragmatic learners and demonstrated how they negotiate subjectivities, and challenge ‘self’ through agentic actions and reflexivity. Only through greater management awareness and more conducive educational pathways for workplace learning will auxiliary women workers achieve their goals and realise their full potential.

Keywords: women and work, learning, women workers, gender barriers

INTRODUCTION

This study is about auxiliary women workers and how they learn through their work in general legal practice. The purpose of the study is to establish how women workers at the support level engage in meaningful workplace learning. Understanding how these women learn is important because they are representative of a growing proportion of workforces in most countries. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006) reports full-time participation numbers of women in work increased from 2,075,300 in July 1996 to 2,518,800 in July 2006. The 8.23% increase is indicative of a trend which is expected to continue. Many of these women are contingent workers and employed in administrative and service related roles (Billett, 2006b). Workers are contingent when they are in part-time, contractual or subordinate roles and most have to learn how to perform their work without any structured learning programs or organisational support. Clerical workers or legal staff, who provide secretarial and administrative support to professional workers, are auxiliary workers and often contingent because they are in subordinate roles and granted low status despite analyses of their work suggesting they perform highly complex work.
Within the Australia workplace women (and men) are protected by legislation. The Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act (EOWWA) 1999 ensures equality for all women workers and the Sex Discrimination Act (SDA) 1984 protects women against all forms of discrimination. The Affirmative Action Act (AAA) 1986 and now known as the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act 1999 also provides women in this country with conditions conducive for equal opportunity in employment (Naughton, 1998). Despite these legislative conditions, today’s workplaces are characterised by more flexible environments (Fenwick, 2001) and emergent part-time, casual and self-employment arrangements. Such conditions of work impact on women (as well as male workers) and how they adapt at work is important (Billett, 2006c). Many women still experience erratic hours, the fear of being dispensable (Grensing-Pophal, 2000) and many women have limited access to promotion and equal remuneration than their male counterparts (Scutt, 2000). Women’s work experiences are affected by the power relations that play out in hierarchical organisations such as legal practices (Fenwick, 2001). Given that women are affected by the dissemination of power in these kinds of workplaces how they learn at work is critical to their very survival at work.

Notwithstanding changing dynamics, gendered barriers still exist and the support for women has not necessarily increased (Billett, 2006c). This paper considers perspectives of subjectivity, agency, reflexivity and self-identity. It elaborates the nature of learning through work, the discovery of ‘self’, self-identity and social identity of women at work within organisational practice. For many auxiliary workers their work and learning exemplifies how they are characterised in the workplace and the ways in which they strive towards more symmetrical workplace experiences. Procedural considerations, analyses and findings are also presented. Overall, the paper develops better understandings about auxiliary women in hierarchical workplaces and enhances management understandings of subjectivities that impact on these workers and their workplace learning.

NEGOTIATING SUBJECTIVITIES TO FIND ‘SELF’

It is acknowledged there are numerous influences that impact on support women workers. For instance, the hierarchical interplay of ethics and equity, and gender differences affect women’s workplace
experiences and impact on the opportunities available to them through their work (Cox, 2004). At the auxiliary level, diverse levels of discrimination impact on women’s experiences and it is commonplace to find that these employees are excluded from decision-making processes that affect their professional development (Kincheloe, 1999). Fitch and Ravlin (2004) argue when these and other kinds of boundaries are broken down women workers will finally experience their most participative form of involvement. However, this paper is focused on subjectivities and how auxiliary women workers negotiate subjectivities to find ‘self’ to engage in meaningful work.

Ellis and Flaherty (1992) first classified subjectivity as a lived experience within a physical, political and historical framework. From a different perspective Trites (1997) suggests subjectivity presupposes that, from an early age, each individual is influenced by a number of sociolinguistic forces to construct ‘self’ as a member of different communities of practice, where various levels of discourse apply, the language that an individual engages in constructs who that person is, what that person is and how that individual performs. From a contemporary socio-cultural perspective, Fenwick (2000) suggests:

“Subjectivity results from one’s positionality respective to the norms and knowledge of particular communities, one’s complex and changing understandings of ‘self’, one’s desires and intentions shaped from the cultural imaginary, and one’s moving location within cultural discourses” (p.1)

Subjectivity can be therefore interpreted in terms of multiple subject positions and the negotiation process for different subjectivities through work, and learning how to learn, is particularly complex for many women such as those working with in general legal practice. The issue will be how best to educate staff and relegate staff positions in terms of subjectivities is an issue for management. The following section explores ‘self’ and the concept of intercession and relationships.

To better understand identity many theories of ‘self’ have emerged from the social sciences. Two theories provide a basis for how women (and men) construct ‘self’, namely, Stryker’s Identity Theory; and the Social Identity Theory developed by Tajfel and Turner. According to Stryker (1980), Identity Theory focuses on the ‘self’ (for example, employee, solicitor, and secretary) within social structures. The
‘self’ embraces a collection of identities each of which is based on a particular role and the interactions taking place within a social setting such as a legal workplace. Each role or social identity influences behaviour within that role because it has a set of meanings and expectations of ‘self’. Meanings within an identity reflect an individual’s conception of ‘self’ as an occupant of a particular position or ‘self-in-role’. Each ‘self’ is expected to know what is right and accordingly to determine a direction. Identity must be conceptualised as a variable to explain differential social participation (Stryker, 2000). For instance, while the role of a female auxiliary worker is to engage in the administrative side of the changing practice of the law, that same worker might have several other salient and more personal identities such as mother, wife and sportsperson. How an individual such an auxiliary level woman working for a legal practice defines herself may shape her identity and subsequent behaviour, including how she is motivated to engage in learning new tasks.

Social Identity Theory as developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979) illuminates the social, motivational and psychological development of the collective ‘self’ through inter-group processes and social group relations. An individual’s self-concept is derived mainly from group memberships where individuals may identify with same gender groups. We categorise ourselves in social groups such as legal office workers, Australians, and so on.

Giddens (1987) proposes that individuals have the power to change their social status. He sees relationships as negotiated between the individual and society. When individuals repeat certain acts they effectively reproduce social structure. Whereas Gordon cites Foucault (1980) as arguing that such reflexivity is embedded in historical disciplinary processes, Giddens (1991) sees a more co-operative concept of identity, arguing that individuals are knowledgeable agents who make conscious decisions based on situational experiences to form and re-form the ‘self’. These kinds of relations are played out in the workplace.

We need to know more about how an individual engages in learning at work and how they and negotiating new ways to engage in learning. To what extent an individual is provided with opportunities to participate in workplace activities and how that same individual engages in workplace activities is
imperative to their workplace experiences and learning. Individuals who choose not to engage in workplace activities are obviously restricting their experiences; but those who do are more likely to become knowledgeable agents within their work environments.

**AGENTIC APPROACHES**

An individual’s agency is most consistently applied through their routine work practices and their identity and subjectivity is shaped by their intentionality and agentic actions in completing work activities (Billett & Somervile, 2004). Billett (2006a) argues it is critical to elaborate the practices of learning and pedagogical practices if we are to advance understandings of the requirements of work. Social agency and an individual’s agentic actions can best be understood by developing understandings of how an individual engages in learning at work and the interrelationships between their identity and different subjectivities (Billett & Pavlova, 2005). How the individual’s decision making is shaped by their agentic actions depends on their level of participation in work practices and how they expand upon their workplace knowsledges organisational performance.

Billett and Pavlova (2005) conducted a study with five participants (both male and female) from diverse workplaces to determine their subjectivities and decision-making processes and how they changed over a twelve month period. The study found that the participants carried out their work in ways that were adequate enough to realise their goals, albeit with some drawbacks. However, overall they achieved connections with their sense of self when negotiating the many changes in workplace requirements. An earlier study of working women from diverse work environments conducted by Fenwick (1998) found that the basis of agentic action was connected to how secure women felt in their jobs. For the women of this study, work activities illuminated the intentional ways in which these women achieved their work goals. On this basis alone, further investigation of agentic orientations warrants obtaining more diagnostic data to better represent changing degrees of growth and contemplative preferences. In particular those demonstrated by social actors in connection with facilitating, slowing down or even impeding an individual’s workplace actions (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Hence, it is important to better understand
how women engage in learning, how they change to improve their everyday practice and how they discover ‘self’ and grow to become someone new at work. Reflexivity can also help to engage with perceptions.

REFLEXIVE PRACTICE

Reflexivity is defined as “self and social questioning that people are able to engage with and (en)counter – be affected by but also affect – contemporary uncertainties” (Edwards, Ranson, & Strain, 2002, p.527). It is through these kinds of personal and community levels of questioning that individuals are able to make changes that develop their work and learning practices. Therefore, if individuals seek to improve their work and learning practices they need to be more reflexive.

In a qualitative study examining their own experiences as researchers, Bryman and Cassell (2006) analysed the researcher’s interview process and through reflexive insights were able to draw out information that might otherwise have been ignored. That is, they added another dimension to their research, thereby adding new meaning to their interviews. In another study conducted within an accounting practice, Komori (2004) found how reflexive practices allowed her to develop an affinity with the participants of the study. She was also able to build trust and learn more about the participants through reflexive practice. These studies are evidence that reflexive practice potentially takes qualitative research to a deeper level. How auxiliary workers perform at work and how they learn may well be improved through reflexivity and new thinking behaviours.

Edwards (1998) argues there should be more emphasis on reflective and reflexive practice motivated by workplace change and supported by management. Individuals need to be critically reflexive about how they develop knowledge and how they learn at work. Hence, it is important to understand how auxiliary (and professional) workers develop their practice. This also brings to the fore the question of how women are defined and how they define themselves at work because how they see themselves will determine their relationships with others at work and ultimately their work and learning experiences.

A CRITICAL ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH
To examine auxiliary women’s learning within the legal workplace, a critical ethnographic study was carried out. The study was primarily concerned with various levels of social discrimination, and explored the proposition that society and culture are inequitable in many ways (Carspecken, 1996, 2001). A critical ethnography allowed myself as the researcher to enter into the world of others - to engage in realistic activities of day-to-day life (Mariampolski, 1999). The methodological processes undertaken to explore auxiliary women’s experiences incorporated observation, reflective journals, and interviews. As both researcher and observer-as-participant I was able to observe and examine situated activity to gain authentic insight into the interactions of staff in context. During this phase it was imperative the researcher gave consideration to accuracy in what was observed (Lofland, 2006) whilst remaining sensitive to my relationship with the participants (Seidman, 1991). For the participants and the researcher reflective diaries were maintained over a twelve month period and provided a place to record events, thoughts and personal feelings (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1993). Interviews with the participants explored the conditions of employment that impact on women’s learning experiences, workplace affordances for participatory practices and organisational support for learning. This approach was the most appropriate, as it was the least intrusive method of establishing what the participant women knew about their working environment that helped and/or impeded their learning experiences (Lofland, 2006).

Once data were collected, the researcher searched for emergent concepts and conceptualisation of contributions to the field that might also be of benefit to the many women working within legal practices. A foundational approach to the analysis of raw data was integrated with a second stage process to conceptualise information into categories (Glaser, 1998). Constant comparative methods fostered the discovery of relationships, categories and characteristics (Lecompte & Goetz, 1984). This revealed participants personal values, successes, struggles and coping strategies (Anzul, Evans, King, & Tellier-Robinson, 2001). Data also revealed what the participants understand about the workplace and the influences that impede and enable their performance.

THE PARTICIPANTS AND THEIR WORK SETTINGS
The main cohort of participants comprised nine female auxiliary workers under the pseudonyms of Tina, Anna, Louise, Sarah, Karla, Amy, Chloe, Kate and Mia. Each of the women had worked within legal practice in excess of eight years. These women workers are held to be illustrative of the growing ranks of contingent workers and their experiences in contemporary working life. Although the confines of this paper limit the data presented here, it is pertinent to note that three legal practice managers were also interviewed in the larger study. These managers have power over their employees’ work conditions and exercise and control workplace practices. They also distribute opportunities for the development of the auxiliary staff representative of these workplaces.

THE WOMEN’S PERSPECTIVES

The study involved three legal workplaces and each of the three practices was diverse in size and areas of practice. The analysis of this study was activated at the research settings and determined emergent understandings arising from the data relevant to each of the settings (Glaser, 1992, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data were then integrated with a second stage process to conceptualise information into categories (Glaser, 1998). Constant comparative methods fostered the discovery of relationships, categories and characteristics (Lecompte & Goetz, 1984). This revealed participants understandings of subjectivities, successes, struggles and coping strategies (Anzul, et al., 2001). Fundamentally, the data revealed how the participants make sense of their workplace experiences.

The auxiliary workers acknowledged subjectivities that influence their workplace learning. It was accepted that professional staff workers receive more support for work and learning due to the fact they have greater responsibilities linked directly to the law, clients and fee production. Whilst the women accepted professional workers receive regular learning through Continuing Legal Education (CLE) and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) they were adamant that auxiliary workers are disadvantaged. In the women’s talk there was constant mention of “disillusionment” because of a perceived lack of acknowledgement of the need for and “encouragement” (from management) towards their learning. “Auxiliary staff are really not encouraged to learn...any money budgeted for
training/learning is generally for the professional staff” – (Tina). “It is very difficult to get the approval from the powers that be to attend a CLE (or any other seminars) when you are a support person and not a professional staff member” – (Anna). My reflective diary noted a look of despondency and frustration on her face. Even when Mia asked to attend a course in dealing with difficult clients she was repeatedly given “excuses” as to why she could not attend seminars. This was evidence that workplace affordances support learning in favour of fee earning capacities and professional staff. Nevertheless, what the female participants understood about how they learn through their work became evident in their talk about their daily activities.

It was apparent that work and learning coalesce and for the nine auxiliary women articulating what they do at work and how they learn helped them to identify traits of ‘self’. There was evidence that they often alternate between discouragement and despair, and a strong motivating force that compels them to find ways to learn. Tina had wounded images of ‘self’ when she talked about “not identifying with the professional staff – I don’t feel important enough as an employee”. In her diary she wrote about “not being allowed” to attend seminars that would benefit her work and even though she was disheartened she became more resolute about solving problems on her own or with her co-workers. Sentiments amongst the women were strong; “we deal with the learning by ourselves” – (Kate). We learn by “being thrown in the deep end”- (Amy, Sarah); by “doing the job” – (Sarah, Mia, Tina); by “mastering…one part of a job before moving on to more difficult sections” – (Karla); and “for some of us it’s because we can’t stand not understanding”- (Chloe). These women share what Anna refers to as “a common purpose to learn” and how they go about that learning is practical. Notwithstanding workplace barriers the women adapted to low affordances to work and learn as competent and capable women.

The women continually revealed their different work selves in their talk. Tina described how even though she was “non-legally qualified” she had to fulfil “a number of roles – accounts clerk, secretary, para-legal and administrator - all rolled into one”. “Me?....I’m a hard worker and I search for work when I’ve done what I have to do” – (Karla); “I’m proactive as a worker….I’m a very experienced, conscientious para-legal – (Anna); “I’m methodical and pedantic” – (Louise). The women also
questioned their work and individual selves. Louise echoed the sentiments of some of the other women “Who am I? Why am I working this hard? In their reflective diaries Karla and Mia wanted answers to the same kind of question “why do I put work before myself?” whilst Anna was questioning being “part of the equation at all”. Anna felt as though she had been ignored at work. “My conscientious work …was basically laughed at… it was quite a bit of a joke the fact that I was so conscientious and professional in my behaviour towards the clients of the firm”. Anna had been told she was giving clients far too much information when she was simply being the efficient secretary she had always been. So here, she was struggling with a sense of self constrained by the workplace role. Every one of the women described a very practical and positive approach to their work.

For the participants learning represented what they needed ‘to be aware of’ to perform their jobs. During the interviews the women talked about the fundamentals of having to ‘know’ legal facts, documentation, databases and how to manage client files. It was also important for each of the women to share what they ‘know’ because in the legal environment they have to constantly deal with “new information and new knowledge” – (Anna) to be able to solve everyday client problems. The women engaged in reflexivity by challenging and questioning themselves to solve issues or make changes. Chloe “couldn’t trust anyone to do anything” for her at work but she began asking herself “can I let go?” and Karla asked “how can I get other people to help?” Chloe and Karla were struggling with their own thoughts and how to go about changing they ways in which they worked. Once they articulated their thoughts they started to find ways that would see them let go of certain tasks and delegate. The women demonstrated their propensity to apply various knowledges and transfer their skills from one set of circumstances to another. In many cases this was their only option. For instance, Anna had not been involved in commercial work for many years but when she found herself in that area of law again she became “determined” and called upon her “background knowledge” to master the practice. When Louise had to “learn something new” she also called upon her knowledge of a past area of law to “work out” for herself how to complete a matter. My observation recordings saw a sense of achievement
and confidence in the way these women find out how to learn something new. These are clear examples of how auxiliary women engage in reflexivity and a form of agentic learning shaped by their epistemological agency and directed towards securing both their learning and sense of self through these agentic activities.

Even though the auxiliary women of this study recognised that professional staff workers have a legal responsibility warranting mandatory learning the women were disillusioned about the lack of support for auxiliary level learning in the workplace. Nevertheless, the participant women were practical in their approach to work and their intentionality was evidenced in the agentic ways they apply epistemologies and learning at work. What is needed is a workplace culture that embraces women’s ways of knowing and learning.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING COMMENTS**

Work conditions and legislation support women at work yet the legal environment is not always conducive to fostering learning practices beyond professional workers. Nevertheless, this study has provided a foundation from which to gain a better understanding of how auxiliary women work and learn through their work. How these women workers change and grow and how they identify and challenge ‘self’ may assist management to develop understandings of the complexities of workplace influences.

What resonated throughout the women’s stories was their disillusionment about their restrained potential for learning, low management affordances for support staff learning and subjectivities that characterise them as lower level employees. The women remembered their first experiences in the workplace and reflected on who they were when they first commenced legal work. It evoked memories of difficult times with little to no support yet there was strong intention to participate (Billett, 2001, 2004). Their work selves began to emerge and the women characterised themselves as “non legally-qualified” (Tina), “hard workers” (Karla) who are “proactive” (Anna), “methodical and pedantic” (Louise).
However, there were shadows behind these descriptions as they were clearly constrained by a lack of autonomy that affected their decision-making powers.

The ways in which auxiliary level women defined ‘self’ shaped their identity and subsequent roles/behaviours at work, including how they were motivated to engage in learning new tasks. Each identity influences behaviour within that role because it has a set of meanings and expectations of ‘self’ (Stryker, 1980). The women’s self-concept was essentially imitative of other group memberships where individuals identify with same gender groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). However, as Giddens (1987) argues, each individual has the power to change, as did each of the women here when they demonstrated their individual resolve to make changes and find a better balance within their working and personal lives.

Learning for each of the auxiliary workers epitomised the work ‘self’ because it was part of the process of developing ‘self’ for these women. They recognised and challenged ‘self’ to be able to perform with excellence; they sought and achieved their own personal approval to make changes that improved their work experiences and ultimately their work ‘selves’. This reflexivity was at the core of these women’s sense of ‘self’. Each of the women demonstrated a prevailing personal and purposeful commitment to their learning. Through several defining moments, each of the nine women identified and confronted ‘self’ in ways that approximate agency and reflexivity (Edwards, et al., 2002). The process of asking questions also demonstrated the reflexive struggle the women had with their work and personal selves. It was apparent through this process that the women here were able to make changes to their work lives.

Strong evidence of personal epistemologies, reflexive practice and personal agency was exercised in the conduct of auxiliary women’s work and learning. There was also an interrelationship between each individual’s learning and their identity. The relationship between learning and identity formation was found to be deeply problematic for these workers because it is constrained by workplace categorisations. Nevertheless, the women’s continued existence in work, their individual development and their professional progress were pledged on a complex negotiation between the affordances of the workplace
and their own levels of agency. Therefore, the women’s personal histories or ontogenies and the exercise of their personal epistemologies became the foundation for the intent and direction of their learning, which was determined by directing their agentic actions (Billett & Pavlova, 2005) in terms of work related learning in a way which might be best characterised as a pedagogy of necessity. These understandings may well be important mediators for women’s future experiences at work.

It is time for understandings of workplace learning to take a paradigm shift and focus more on auxiliary workers and their learning experiences. The potential is to advance individual and organisational performance and better respond to increasing client demands. Research into the pedagogical needs of auxiliary level workers needs to take into consideration workers perceptions of what they know, how they gain access to learning and how they learn; we must include more women in building better understandings. We also need to ensure that learning environments are conducive to continuous and positive change. Organisations who embrace women’s understandings will be better able to engage in innovative practice to provide auxiliary women with improved epistemological and learning opportunities at work. The challenge will be how adult educators and managers use workers perspectives as bases for future workplace curriculum. This can only be achieved through active collaborations between organisational managers, workplace educators, scholars and women, all with a common purpose to include ways to help auxiliary women to change and grow at work.

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