What's in a word?: the "problem" of women and "barriers" to VET participation

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Abstract

In this paper I explore how dominant discourses of VET construct access and equity issues for women via the notion of barriers, and in doing so, frame the terms of debate about how women enter, participate in, and benefit from VET. Current VET research takes as its starting point a set of language rules that carries already constructed meanings: barriers to women's participation are presented as a set of conditions to be dismantled or overcome. Rather than obstacles that prevent 'successful' participation, I assert that these barriers are structural, systemic and social conditions within which women define their understandings of self. The central problem therefore emerges, not as the presence of barriers, but in the naming of certain experiences as such, and the underlying assumption that once entry to the VET space is achieved, barriers cease to exist.

I argue that the notion of barriers can be explored as a construct of a particular discursive approach that carries problematic implications, not for women learners in VET, but rather for educators, providers and funding agencies who set the terms by which barriers are reinscribed through contemporary provision.

Introduction

Identification of *barriers* and subsequent strategies to enable participants to overcome them shape the philosophy that governs Vocational Education and Training (VET)'s approach to access and equity (ANTA 2004; Considine, Watson & Hall 2005). *Women: shaping our future* (ANTA 2004), the accompanying policy document to the *National VET Strategy 2004-2010 Shaping our future* (ANTA 2003), cites 'barriers due to disability, age, gender, cultural difference, language, literacy, numeracy, cost, unemployment, imprisonment or isolation and have particular needs, with these varying from person to person' (ANTA 2004 p1). This former document emphasises the need for 'learning supports that acknowledge whole of life needs' (p1) and for VET to 'acknowledge and value the diversity of women's lives and experiences' (p1).

I argue that these sentiments are set within a context that places *woman* as a deficit model in relation to *man*; does not identify the ways in which potential barriers to men's participation are addressed, and constructs *woman* herself as a complexity of barriers. What is not acknowledged in this and much of VET documentation is the gendered construction of the VET system itself, and of the society within which it operates and within which women are located.

This paper presents an analysis of how women's participation is in fact made problematic through the creation of barriers constituted through language. The analysis is a segment of a broader doctoral study in which I investigate how mature women experience learning in VET. My research questions the assumptions that women in general no longer have

issues in VET. While many women are indeed 'doing well' in VET (NCVER 2005), I contend that this conclusion is drawn from research that views women's concerns through a masculinist lens, limiting the ways in which women learners, and their needs, can be understood. Current research in VET reflects a male orientation, ignoring women's broader notion of work as life experience that includes family responsibilities and the unpaid activities that occur in the 'homeplace' (Gouthro 2005).

Using a feminist socially critical theoretical approach informed by the work of Dorothy Smith (1987) and Carol Lee Bacchi (1999) a problematic approach to the construction of women learners' needs in VET is revealed, demonstrating how barriers are constructed *for* women. Through analysis of women's stories of learning an alternative reading of these barriers then becomes possible, highlighting how women's everyday is in fact an integral part of their participation and learning. Discussion focuses on the need for alternative approaches to VET research and implications for the way we organise, provide and deliver VET.

Key issues in the literature

My research is informed by three broad categories of literature: women and adult education; feminist theories of learning, knowing and experience; and VET policy documents and related literature. A range of Australian and international literatures introduced the many ways in which women are encapsulated in educational texts: these literatures ranged from issues in higher and further education (Blackmore 2006; Haggis 2006; Jackson 2004; Reay 2003) to aspects of learning (Newman 1999; Sanguinetti et al. 2004; OECD 2007). The substantial writings focusing on gendered constructions of knowledge and the ways in which women understand learning (for example Gouthro 2005; Hart 2002; Hayes & Flannery 2000; English 2006) considered aspects on women's learning that are not explored elsewhere: significantly, that women's everyday experiences are an integral, but often unacknowledged, part of learning.

Australian VET literature used in this study comprises research reports (Karmel & Nguyen 2006; Quay Connection 2004; Stanwick, Ong & Karmel 2006) and policy and related documents (ANTA 2003, 2004; DEST 2005). From this category I identified a body of VET documentation that is instrumental in organising and framing the research, funding and provision of VET in Australia – and that I have named the *organising texts* of VET. Dorothy Smith (1987) tells us how the world is organised through texts; it is through language and words that we communicate ideas. These organising texts create a conceptual space within which ideas, values, and meanings are constructed in certain ways. Smith emphasises the power imbued in texts, claiming '[w]e are ruled by forms of organization vested in and mediated by texts and documents' (p3). By 'text', Smith refers to the language, words, and the concepts and symbols that are produced for, and by, these 'forms of organization'. The organising texts of VET are located mainly on the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) database (http://www.ncver.edu.au/). This literature has significance for my research, because it also illustrates the limited way in which women learners are – and are able to be – theorized and researched within this dominant discursive framework.

While women are understood quite differently within the literatures investigated for my research, most noticeable is their lack of visible presence in the organising texts of VET. Women make few appearances in these texts. The notion that women's issues in VET have been solved (NCVER 2005) has resulted in the almost complete disappearance of women from subsequent research priorities (NCVER 2007) and so from much VET research and literature. Put another way, as Butler and Ferrier (2006) note, although 'the voices of women in Australian VET have continued to speak … they are no longer heard' (p581). This lack of a conceptual space highlights a key issue for women who participate in VET learning, and who find there is no way to express concepts, ideas and meanings or to locate their everyday within the discursive framing of VET's organising texts. The consequence of this approach is that:

> the stories of women told in *Women: shaping our future* mirror the narrow focus of VET … [that] views experience, expectations and outcomes primarily through a work-focussed lens. (Daniels 2005 p111)

Work is indeed the focus of VET, but it is a definition of work that is restricted to paid employment. Unpaid and home-related work and women's other life experiences are not included. Consequently, attempts to address women's concerns have simply reflected the dominating message of VET's organising texts, have not taken into account how women might view their whole-of-life experiences, and have re-affirmed women's lack of visibility and voice within VET texts.

A feminist narrative methodology

The organising texts of VET create a knowledge base that frames what vocational education is all about. Also within this framework are notions of what women want, need and get in VET. Embedded in this conceptual framing is the belief that issues can be investigated in relation to existing organisational structures.

I argue that these texts produce a discursive framework that, by making women's everyday experiences invisible, reinscribes problems instead of creating spaces within which problems can be identified and named by those who experience them. To explore this premise, I applied a socially critical feminist theoretical approach to my study. Smith's (1987) concept of women's *everyday as problematic* gave me a platform to place women's stories at the starting point of the study, and from which I could investigate women's learning as both a gendered and contextualised experience.

Smith (1987) contends that, for women, everyday life is lived through the filter of an outwardly generated, and gendered, organisation of social relations. The *rules* of these relations - the accepted way of *doing thing*s - govern how women are expected to *be*, and to think about the world. Women's experiences may be quite different, but whilst these are felt, they are not easily expressed. Language, according to Smith, is the tool through which these rules are communicated and reinscribed. Because the conceptual framework for this language is of (some) men's experiences and not women's, it offers women few means of expressing their needs from within their own understandings, or communicating how their *everyday is made problematic* by this social organisation.

What has not been problematised, or even acknowledged, in VET research, is how women learners experience this organisation of social relations (Smith 1987); yet it is from such a perspective that questions can be asked that make visible an otherwise unrecognised set of problems. To explore this *everyday as problematic* I first needed to investigate how, and by whom, women and their needs were currently being interpreted. Bacchi (1999 pp12-13) asserts that interpretations can be challenged through a set of questions:

- What is the problem represented to be?
- What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation?
- What effects are produced? Who is likely to benefit?
- What is left unproblematic?
- How would responses differ if the problem were thought about or represented differently?

These questions shape Bacchi's (1999) *What's the problem?* approach, which shifts the focus of a problem from the *identified* to the *identifier*, providing a strategy for stepping outside the discursive assumptions through which women learners are currently understood in VET. As Bacchi reminds us:

> [C]onstructions can be challenged. If we accept that our world is socially constructed, then it can be changed by challenging – deconstructing – constructions which have effects we wish to reduce or eliminate. (p62)

Using Smith's (1987) notion of women's *everyday as problematic,* and Bacchi's (1999) *what's the problem* approach, I interrogated VET's organising texts and the women's stories to explore the particular problematic embedded in the contradictions and tensions that were revealed.

The site that provides the backdrop for my study is the TAFE SA Women's Education Course, which provides woman-centred VET education for women in South Australia. It is situated within the Vocational Preparation Program in TAFE SA, and is provided at a number of metropolitan and regional TAFE Institutes. Twelve women were recruited from two metropolitan campuses, and two ninety minute open-ended interviews undertaken with each woman. I used large 'chunks' from the interview transcripts as the major data source for my study. These data were analysed using a framework that recognised the contextual nature of experiences, and therefore enabled themes of learning to be developed *in relation to* women's everyday experiences, not despite them.

Re-naming the barriers

The women in their interviews speak of their reasons for not returning to study, and the concerns they confront in order to do so. Rosalie, Avril, Sylvia and Greta, four participants in my study, talk about issues of childcare, early schooling experiences and family abuse. Rosalie gives a single mother's perspective:

> … a nine o'clock start, I would have struggled to get there. Or a quarter to nine start or an eight-thirty start. You know, you got to … and then I'd go "ah, look, forget it. You know? It's too hard. I need, I need to prioritise my daughter. I can't be putting her into Before School Care. I can't afford it, or I can't afford the, the emotional energy that that's, or energy and pressure that that puts on her, and on me. It's not fair". I didn't want to do that, you know, I decided to parent, so, obviously, I just can't study. (Rosalie. Interview 1,p13)

Childcare is an *issue* for Rosalie, but the *barrier* – what makes it all too hard – is the way in which she and her child are required to organise their lives so that she can participate in vocational learning. The struggle to satisfy the needs of all parties and conform to 'rules' clearly made from outside the experience of mothering, can become 'too hard'.

Early experiences of schooling can leave women resistant to further learning, either through fear of humiliation or through a belief in their own intellectual inadequacy. Sylvia and Avril both revealed negative attitudes towards education resulting from their experiences as schoolgirls:

> Most of my primary schooling was Catholic. I'm an ex-Catholic. Um, classic line: Adam and Eve – three sons, you don't hear much about the third. I'm sure, I, I now know in the Bible there's a hell of a lot more. We were only taught the three sons. And then Cain killed Abel, and Cain disappeared, and ran into some woman and started begetting, and that's how the human race came about. I asked a nun at one stage, 'cause a lot of the teachers at that point were nuns, in Catholic schools, "if God made Adam and Eve, and that was it, and we were all descended from them, who was this other woman? That Cain ran into, and married? And if Eve was the only one around, was the begetting with his mother?" Well, I got slapped across the face for that one, and told that's just the way it is, because it's in the Bible. "Don't ask questions". So you stop asking questions. (Avril. Interview 2, p8)

For Avril, this and similar experiences created an effective *barrier* that discouraged her from considering any form of education until it became absolutely necessary for her financial survival. Unlike Avril, Sylvia had enjoyed learning at school, but was frequently disparaged by her father:

> I think comments that are made by our parents like when we excelled at things, like, you know, like at school for instance, em, I was very good at English. And I was very good at English. I loved it! Absolutely loved it! … and I came top, in English. And when I went home and told my dad, you know, he said, "oh, you're proud of yourself aren't you?" And I said, "Well I thought *you* would be" …. I thought he'd be thrilled. But, yeah. And so consequently, that was just like, uh-oh. There again, I don't matter. You know? So if you keep getting told the same thing over and over again, you em, internalise that. It's very difficult to turn around. (Sylvia. Interview 2, p9)

Sylvia knew her education wasn't important – her father had told her so. The difficulties Sylvia faced in 'turning around' her belief that she 'didn't matter' were compounded by her subsequent marriage to an abusive man who further diminished her belief in herself. Internalising such criticism would have made it very difficult to voluntarily return to study. Not until she came to the realisation that, as a sole parent, the only way out of her situation was obtaining better qualifications, could she face the prospect of returning to education. It is worth noting too, that once Sylvia did enrol, neither lack of time or energy, nor work commitments deterred her from attending:

> I worked full time six days a week … sometimes I'd have to work back on nights when, ahm, my, when college[1] was on, but I'd still go. I, I'd leave work and em, I'd just grab ahm, a hamburger or something and I'd drive to the, drive to the course. I'd get there probably, you know, a little bit late. An hour late, or whatever, but I'd still go. (Sylvia. Interview 1, p6)

Had Sylvia's lecturer demanded that she attend for the entire class time, of course, this would have presented yet another barrier: it was the lecturer's acceptance of Sylvia's participation as a negotiation of her everyday life that enabled her to successfully attend, and complete her studies.

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[1] Sylvia refers to her Women's Education classes as 'college', or 'going to school'.

Like Sylvia, Greta too is a survivor of emotional and physical abuse that has alienated her from study and resulted in:

> … [an] almost complete lack of self-confidence, which I allowed to be undermined … by my ex-husband … there was, you know, the physical abuse, so he, he used his physical abuse to intimidate me. And it worked … so. That's what prevented me from going [to study]. (Greta. Interview 1,p3)

Greta's situation is an extreme one, in which she names as the barrier her abusive husband and the fear, intimidation and bullying he inflicted on her. I suggest that this misogynistic situation is in fact a consequence of a much greater barrier created by the gendered social conditions that enable a husband to believe he has the right to force his way into his wife's home and destroy her week's work[2].

I have used these examples to illustrate that, while links can be made with women's identified barriers and those cited in the VET literature – in some cases – there is a crucial difference in the way the issues are expressed and, importantly, experienced, by women. As Bacchi (1999) suggests, responses differ when the problem of barriers is 'thought about or represented differently' (p13). My research highlights that difference.

Discussion

The findings above offer a different perspective on what constitutes barriers to that presented in much VET literature. Alienation from education that is a consequence of forms of abuse suggests a more complex set of factors at work both preventing women participating, and also helping them to do so. Childcare for parents, too, is an issue, but as Rosalie explains, it is the lack of freedom to negotiate her responsibilities that affects her access, not the lack of childcare. Significantly, women also spoke of critical life incidents that could be expected to present barriers, but were not described as such.

The contemporary notion of educational barriers can be compared to a model of disability that creates 'a deficit model of the individual' (Haggis 2006 p526). Haggis suggests the notion of barriers be conceptualised as one constructed from specific value systems. She uses an approach similar to Bacchi, shifting the *focus* of the problem. As Bacchi asks: Who is calling these conditions barriers? What are the assumptions that underlie the representation of women's everyday activities as problems to be overcome? What conditions, actions, feelings and values go unrecognised in this representation? And how are the features and assumptions evaluated, that represent this as a problem?

While it is evident that some of these named barriers do present very clear obstacles to participation, others are situations or conditions that are particularly relevant to women's lives. In fact these barriers are structural, systemic and social conditions, rather than obstacles that directly affect the actual process of learning (Heenan 2002 p42). Seen in this light barriers are revealed as the activities and experiences that constitute women's

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[2] Greta's husband on one occasion systematically cut to shreds the garments she had spent all week producing as part of a VET project.

daily lives outside paid employment (and by association work-related education and training).

In a UK-based study of women who elected not to continue their study into higher education Heenan (2002) found that it is not the barriers, but the women who 'are viewed as problematic' (p 42). Heenan concludes that in effect women become the *problem*, constructed so by an organising discourse that defines a set of issues to be 'overcome'. These issues are, however, elements of women's everyday and they are integral to her concept of learning. Moreover, if age and disability create barriers as *Women: shaping our future* (ANTA 2004) suggests, then in effect it is women's lives that must be overcome so that they may participate.

Yet, from women themselves, there are few challenges or attempts to problematise barriers, as acceptance of external modes of thinking has come about through the normalising effects of dominant language-use (Smith 1987). Indeed, why would women question these clearly defined barriers, when they identify with the situations they represent? It is difficult to argue against what is assumed when the language used is already 'sedimented with meaning' (Smith 1997 p394). Simply asking women what helps them to participate assumes that the system in which they are being asked to participate is a given, and is not negotiable. This starting point provides no opportunity to name the system itself as problematic, and even less to interrogate the conditions that make it so. Unless VET's gendered and organising discursive framework is acknowledged, alternative representations may still elide the effects of gender that conceal women's experiences. The absence of women's experiences in framing these questions results in women not being able to respond within their own understandings of how barriers to participation are constituted in the first place.

While links can be made with women's identified barriers and those cited in VET's organising texts – in some cases – it is the way in which the issues are expressed and, importantly, experienced, that illustrates how they are understood differently by women. As Bacchi suggests, responses differ when the problem of barriers is 'thought about or represented differently' (p13). The situations described by women in my study certainly matched those identified in the literature as barriers, but were neither described nor experienced as obstacles to be overcome. In fact, set within women's everyday contexts, these situations cease to be barriers. These concerns of everyday life are part of the experiences of women, shaping who and what they are. They do not want to overcome them. It is this lack of lack of understanding that creates, for women, ongoing barriers to access and participation.

If problems facing women continue to be investigated using interpretations that emanate from particular assumptions, there is a risk that the representation of the problem itself will not be interrogated. In fact, it is the representation of such problems that *constitutes* the problem, for 'if the interpretations of the nature and/or causes of the problem miss the mark, so to speak, we can expect little to change' (Bacchi 1999 p66). Problems will be re-inscribed instead of solved.

Conclusion

Within the literatures focusing on women and education, a body of Australian VET literature conceptualises women in such a way that experiences of everyday life are identified as barriers to access and participation. The language of these documents – the organising texts of VET – shape what can be said about women and what can be researched. The result has been an increasing lack of women's visibility in contemporary VET research, further shaping assumptions about women from outside women's experiences.

Research that begins from women learners' experiences reveals misconceptions in how barriers are constructed within the VET system. This research has shown that women returning to vocational learning bring with them a range of life experiences, and the knowledge and skills acquired in diverse roles within the family and broader society. The contexts in which these roles operate continue to be important to women learners, yet VET's organising texts exclude these contextualised experiences from *what VET is about*. In doing so, women's barriers are assumed through an exclusionary discourse (Smith 1987), and current research and subsequent provision based on these constructions promulgate the assumptions. It is the lack of women's experiences in the construction of barriers that creates the problems. The lack of acknowledgement of experience denies women the opportunity to relate their needs, and prevents those who make the 'rules' – that is, the educators, providers and funding agencies – from stepping outside the assumptions implicit in VET's organising texts.

Women have told stories of being faced with identified barriers such as family commitments, social isolation, low educational achievement and lack of self-esteem, yet who took these conditions with them into their experience of VET learning. The suggestion that these conditions prevent women participating is contradicted to some extent by my study's findings. The women's stories suggest that what VET and a broader literature have identified as barriers are in fact the conditions within which women define their understandings of self (Gouthro 2005; Jackson 2004), and as such they do not necessarily prevent access and participation. The stories are in fact a rich commentary on the structural, systemic and social conditions that shape many women's lives.

A language-use that emphasises the need to overcome these conditions in order to achieve success, denies women's lived experiences and also has problematic implications for those who set the terms for provision, reinscribing 'barriers' as they do so. Issues of trauma, illness and family responsibilities need to be acknowledged as part of the identity of the learner who enters the VET space. This can be achieved by shifting the focus of the *problem* from women to education. Vocational educational provision understood as part of a whole of life experience can then be shaped to fit the actuality of women's everyday existence.

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