

*What's Worth Work? Reflections on the difficulties of challenging gendered stereotypes in a museum based audio installation.*

Towards the end of last century the acclaimed feminist historian Joan Scott began 'writing critically about identity'. In a challenge to the growing belief that peoples' racial, ethnic and gendered identities were 'rooted in our physical bodies' and 'cultural heritages' Scott argued that instead of asking 'how changes in the legal, social, economic, and medical status of women affected' women's possibilities for emancipation or equality, feminist historians should be asking 'how these changes altered the meaning (socially articulated, subjectively understood) of the term women itself.' To refer 'to a category of person (women, workers, African Americans, homosexuals) as if it never changed, as if not the category, but only its historical circumstances varied over time' was, Scott argued, to run the risk of reproducing some of the fundamental inequities of power which feminist, gay, aboriginal, African-American and other 'hidden' histories were designed to overcome.<sup>1</sup>

The perspicacity of Scott's critique came home to us when we began producing a sound installation for a permanent exhibition entitled *What's Work Worth?* at the National Pioneer Women's Hall of Fame in Alice Springs. Installed in part of a former gaol building, *What's Work Worth?* explores the gendered nature of work in three linked but separate displays. The first display, located in the narrow confines of the gaol's corridor compresses 20,000 plus years of local and international work history into a single shelf of objects. The second display, located in a former prison cell, consists of a carefully selected series of historical films detailing the history of Australian women's struggle for equal working rights. The third display, located in another former prison cell, contains the above mentioned sound installation. This is an audio collage of extracts from longer oral history interviews which we and a small group of volunteers recorded, and later worked on, with Alice Springs residents who spoke about the way work and gender have structured their lives.

Independently and together, the three displays which form *What's Work Worth?* invite visitors to ponder two sets of questions about the gendered nature of men and women's working lives. The first of these sets of questions revolve around the thorny issue of why the revolutionary changes in women's work which have occurred since World War Two do not appear to have increased women's worth. The second invites visitors to consider the possibility that the objects adults use in their work-a-day-worlds might gender us in the same way that children's toys gender them.

As this brief description of *What's Work Worth?* suggests, one of the key things we wanted to do with this exhibition was to avoid replicating the kinds of gendered stereotypes on which the construction of women's, as opposed to men's work, has been based. Though neither of us was acquainted with Joan Scott's work at the time we developed *What's Work Worth?* our aims were similar to hers. Without wanting to detract from the extraordinary achievements of equality feminism, we also wanted to turn the tables on the social construction of gender itself.

This was why we decided not to put the word 'women' into the exhibition title. As Marilyn Waring, a New Zealand economist and conservative politician argued so forcefully in the 1980s, unpaid work— which research shows is still overwhelmingly done by women - is as

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<sup>1</sup> Scott, Joan W. 2001. "Fantasy echo: History and the construction of identity." *Critical Inquiry* 27 (2):284-304.  
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important a part of any country's gross national product as work which is paid.<sup>2</sup> Childcare, elderly care, cooking, cleaning etc is as integral to the smooth functioning of modern capitalism as it was to the smooth functioning of hunter-gatherer communities long ago. To acknowledge this is to acknowledge that the history of women's work affects not just women, but everyone in society.

Given our determined effort to avoid gender stereotyping it came as something of a shock to realise that, despite our best efforts, we ourselves had failed to avoid reproducing the gendered stereotypes we had hoped to escape. The surprise was not so much that gender stereotypes are difficult to avoid, but that we had inadvertently inserted them into something (the exhibition) whose production processes we allegedly controlled.

Indeed, until the moment we began listening to the interviews which formed the basis of the sound installation we both felt quietly pleased that the first display had gone a good way to achieving our goal of producing an exhibition which challenged gendered norms rather than reproducing them. Our confidence came from the kind of feedback exhibition visitors gave us. Whilst it was true that the lack of text in the first object based display left many of our visitors more puzzled than delighted by what we were trying to do, it was also the case that those visitors who were intrigued enough to read our curatorial essay praised our attempt. The idea that liberating women from the constraints of gender might benefit men and not just women struck a welcome chord with many visitors, especially those women who were reluctant to call themselves feminists. This felt like a real achievement.

As already stated, our realisation that we had not succeeded as well as we could came when one of us (Megg) began creating the audio installation. Though we had gone out of our way to avoid bias by advertising the project in the local community rather than inviting people known to us to participate, bias still occurred. Of the 40 adults (an amazing number) who put their hands up to participate, almost three quarters were women. This disappointing gender bias appeared to suggest that if, as some of those early feminists fought against, women's history was of interest to women only, then they had failed in their task of including men in the conversation, at least in Alice Springs.

Just as disappointing was the slow realisation that of the small group of men who participated, the vast majority were stay-at-home dads who wanted to share the joys of their unconventional lives. These were exceptional men with exceptional stories. And whilst we would not want these men to stay silent, the lack of what we might call ordinary male interest appeared to confirm what most contemporary social research shows. Whilst women have entered the world of men's work in droves, men have been less eager to take on traditional female roles limiting the possibility of social revolution.

The second and more disturbing because potentially more avoidable way in which the audio segment of the *What's Work Worth?* exhibition reproduced the gender stereotypes we were trying to avoid, was revealed when Megg began listening to the interviews with twenty-two primary school children who Dianna and our volunteers also interviewed. Dianna and the volunteers conducted these interviews in small groups using questions which Dianna and the volunteer interviewers had created from a larger series of questions Megg had put together. Though none of those involved in the question production noticed it until long after the interviews had been conducted, most of our questions were gender skewed. That is to say, by

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<sup>2</sup> Marilyn Waring, *If Women Counted* (Harper and Row, 1988).

specifying the gender of the relative whose occupations we were trying to characterise, we reproduced the very stereotypes we were trying to avoid. So for example, instead of asking, ‘what work did your grandparents do?’ and thus alerting our listeners to the possibility of a gender neutral answer, we asked, ‘what work do/did your grandmothers/s do?’ Similarly, instead of asking what work an interviewee’s ‘siblings’ did around the home we asked, ‘what work do/did you and your brothers and sisters do around the house?’.

Though we doubt that the formulation of these questions produced any serious biases in the responses, their gendered framing appears to assert the normality of gendered work differences rather than contribute to the notion that gendered work differences are more artificial than natural. And again, whilst we doubt that this had any real impact on the adults we interviewed – in part because most of them volunteered for the interviews because they already had very clear views about the gendered norms of Australian society – we began to worry about what impact the continual iteration of ‘my mum cooks dinner’ and ‘my dad mows the lawn’ might have on both the children we interviewed and the visitors who listened to our audio collage. Were these questions, like the gendered toys most children still play with, consolidating tradition rather than challenging it?

Having said this, we wouldn’t want to leave you with the impression that the audio phase of the *What’s Work Worth?* exhibition was a failure. On the contrary, we think the audio adds an important and necessary local dimension to what at least one local reviewer regards as an atypical and really interesting representation of women’s work history<sup>3</sup>. The children’s voices, which attest to the limits of gendered change, also add a delightful lightness to the sometimes depressing observations of those adults who spoke about the limits of change.

Though the exceptionalism of our male interviewees signalled, in our opinion at least, the continuance of traditional gendered bias in work place attitudes, this same exceptionalism did help us challenge at least one important regional stereotype. This is the media representation of Alice Springs as one of the last bastions of racial and masculine chauvinism. If our interviewees – none of whom were born in Alice Springs – are to be believed, it’s easier to be a stay-at-home-dad here in Alice Springs than it is in other parts of Australia, especially the metropolis. Though all of us who helped create this exhibition had an intuitive feeling that this was the case, having our intuition confirmed in a manner which can be transmitted to visitors feels good.

Given the recent resurgence of what some are calling a ‘third wave’ of feminism, it’s probably not surprising that the audio material we gathered simultaneously delighted and depressed those of us who took part in this small local oral history project. As the briefest of interactions with the audio demonstrates, it’s clear that the world of work has undergone revolutionary gender based change in the last few decades. As a longer engagement reveals, there is also a great deal to be done in the gender equity stakes, if indeed equity is the goal of a work based revolution.

Significantly, there was no clear agreement amongst our interviewees about what has, or has not, been achieved, especially amongst the women. Some women, particularly those who identified as ‘second wave’ feminists, were bitterly disappointed about the lack of progress in

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<sup>3</sup> For this review please see: Kieran Finnane at

<http://www.alicespringsnews.com.au/2016/06/08/humble-objects-of-womens-work-used-to-ask-big-questions/> )

wage equity. On the other hand, many of those women who had been content to live in a gendered world sang the praises of the changes made. Listening to these disparate views during the editing process was a cogent reminder that one of the greatest obstacles to change is the absence of a universal women's voice.

One of the things almost all our female interviewees did was base their assessments of gendered change on their personal observations about the progress women had made penetrating what they all regarded as the far more interesting world of traditional men's work, and how little men were contributing to what they also all regarded as the far more mundane world of traditional women's work. Like our gendered questions, we think that women's continued use of this gendered benchmark to measure change perpetuates gender stereotypes rather than challenges them. In the same way as we worry that the sound of children describing how their mums wash up and their dads mow lawns might help reinscribe traditional gender roles amongst our listeners, so we worry that that the iteration of this benchmark in the audio component of this exhibition may undermine the challenge to gender stereotypes we believe we achieved in our object-based display.

To be kind to ourselves, the answer to these questions may lie less in the shortcomings of our own interview techniques than in an essential paradox of feminism. As Joan Scott, and at least one of the young feminists who participated in our oral history project both pointed out, feminism is based on the paradoxical premise that 'one must emphasise one's difference (as women) in order to claim one's sameness (as equal human beings)'.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Joan Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996) as cited in Miriam Ticktin, 'The Gendered Human of Humanitarianism: Medicalising and Politicising Sexual Violence' *Gender & History*, Vol.23 No.2 August 2011, pp. 250–265.

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