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## The discursive construction of older worker identity: A reflection on process and methods

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### Abstract (Article Summary)

Ainsworth presents a reflection on the process of doing critical discourse research using examples from a current project on the discursive construction of older worker identity. The study illustrated the potential of discourse analysis to enhance understanding of the processes and implications of public policy development.

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ABSTRACT

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This paper presents a reflection on the process of doing critical discourse research using examples from a current project on the discursive construction of older worker identity. While the study targeted an under-researched topic in the discourse literature-age identity and its implications in employment-some additional contributions emerged from the research process. Firstly, applying multiple methods permitted a greater understanding of the complexity of processes of social construction of identity. Secondly, the sampling approach allowed exploration not only of the discursive processes of construction of social identity, but also of its suppression in discourse. By adopting a critical orientation, it was possible to show the implications of this suppression for different (gendered) groups in the labour market. Thirdly, the study illustrated the potential of discourse analysis to enhance understanding of the processes and implications of public policy development.

#### INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the process and experience of doing critical discourse research, using examples from a current project, that explicitly focuses on the social construction of age identity and its political implications for different groups in the labour market. The social construction of age identity has received scant attention in the discourse literature, and yet it is an area of increasing social, economic, and political importance for developed countries. However, the adoption of discourse theory as a research framework presented various challenges, and the ways in which these were addressed in this current research are reviewed. Some brief background to the study is provided, followed by discussion of the justifications for using discourse theory as a research framework, the research design and site, the collection and management of data, and the application of a variety of discourse analytic methods in data analysis. In addition, it shows how a staged approach to analysis permitted initial findings to inform subsequent analysis. These findings were able to be further explored in the analysis and

framed in the context of broader debates about age, gender, and unemployment. The paper concludes with a reflection on the contributions of this study to the current state of organizational discourse research, including the ways in which integrated use of discourse analytic methods can lead to more complex understandings of the processes of social construction and their implications.

## BACKGROUND: THE "OLDER

## WORKER" AS AN OBJECT OF STUDY

Over the last twenty years, research on aging has undergone a dramatic expansion (Andrews, 1999). Yet much of it presents aging as essentially problematic, focusing either on the social problems of older people (such as health) or older people as a social (and economic) burden (Arber & Ginn, 1991) on the rest of society. which Butler (1989) argues is evidence of a new and disturbing ageism towards the older population (Clark, 1993), Such concerns have also stimulated interest in research on older people and the labour market. Trends such as the early retirement and early exit of older men from the workforce (Laczko & Phillipson, 1991) have heightened concerns about whether societies can "afford their older populations" (Saunders, 1996). The older population is also recognized as increasingly heterogeneous, with substantial differences in socio-economic status, employment patterns, and stability, education, ethnicity, and gender (Bernard, Itzin, Phillipson, & Skucha, 1995; Elman & O'Rand, 1998; Ginn & Arber, 1995; Phillipson, 1998; Settersten & Lovegreen, 1998). More fundamentally, the definition of "who" is an older worker is ambiguous and contingent. While people may be living longer, they are being defined as older workers at increasingly younger ages, and this classification can vary with industry, occupation, and gender-for example, women report experiencing age discrimination or being considered "too old in employment" at earlier ages than men (Encel & Studencki, 1997; Ginn & Arber, 1995; Onyx 1998).

From a multi-disciplinary review of literature (economics, labour market research, sociology, gerontology, and cultural studies), some specific research questions were developed to study the construction of older worker identity. They related to exploring the versions of older worker identity that were being discursively constructed, identifying those who were being targeted by these constructions (du Gay, 1996), identifying the social actors involved in this discursive construction of older worker identity and exploring the reasons for their involvement, and examining the implications of such constructions of identity. Much of the existing research on older workers has focused on the content of age-based stereotypes, their cultural meaning, and the outcomes or material effects of the marginalisation of older workers in the labour market. Yet no research had explicitly addressed the issue of the processes of identity construction, and this was the potential contribution of discourse theory; coupled with a critical orientation, it would permit an exploration of the processes of constructing social identity and its political implications in relation to the labour market.

## DISCOURSE THEORY AS A RESEARCH

## FRAMEWORK.

There are many definitions of discourse, but it can be understood as referring to:

...a group of statements which provide a language for talking about a topic and a way of producing a particular kind of knowledge about a topic. Thus, the term refers both to the production of knowledge through language and representation and the way that knowledge is institutionalized, shaping social practices and setting new practices into play (du Gay, 1996, p. 43).

While approaches to discourse analysis also differ widely, they share some common characteristics: the use of naturally occurring, unedited text or talk as data, attention to the significance and structuring effects of language, a focus on the local and global context of discourse, a focus on discourse as social practice (that is, how discourse users enact or resist social and political structures), an attention to the ways in which social members interpret, categorize, and construct their social experience, and the use of interpretive and reflexive styles of analysis (Burman & Parker, 1993; van Dijk, 1997a). Beyond these general similarities, discourse research varies in its focus and approach, for example, between descriptive or critical studies (Phillips & Ravasi, 1998; van Dijk, 1997a). Descriptive studies explore the discursive processes of social construction, whereas critical studies focus explicitly on the reproduction of power relationships and how structures of inequality (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997), such as class, race and gender, are reproduced in discourse (Fairclough, 1995). In this context, social texts can be used as empirical data that "articulate complex arguments about race, class and gender in contemporary life" (Denzin, 1994). It follows, then, that struggles for power and control underlie the creation and dissemination of such texts (Phillips & Hardy, 1997). Texts provide discursive cues to these power relationships and, thus, through textual analysis, the power implications of the different constructions of social identity can be studied.

The construction of social identity in

discourse

From the perspective of discourse analysis, identity is an ongoing process accomplished through social interaction (Burman & Parker, 1993; du Gay, 1996; Phillips & Hardy, forthcoming), particularly language and communication. This is not to imply that people or objects do not have a physical or material existence, but that the social meaning of this existence, *nee* is discursively generated, rather than inherent and internal to the person or object itself (Hardy & Phillips, 1999). For example, discursive studies of gender and racial identity do not regard them as stable, pre-existing characteristics, but embodied identities constructed in discourse. They exist in concert and people experience different types of social identity simultaneously, such as gender, race, and class. Such a constructionist view of social identity has implications for research design and methods: if social identities are seen as socially accomplished, then their relevance to social action can only be determined within the context in which they are accomplished (West & Fenstermaker, 1995; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

Discourse constructs social identity (Hardy, Lawrence & Grant, 2000; Mumby & Clair, 1997) by defining groups, groups' interests, their position within society, and their relationship to other groups (van Dijk, 1997b; Wodak, 1996). Social identity acts as an interpretive frame for social action (du Gay, 1996) by indicating to people what they should think about a particular issue or group of people and in doing so, it functions as a mechanism through which collective group interests are played out in the social practices of individuals (van Dijk, 1997b). Language users engage in text and talk, not just as individuals, but also as members of multiple social categories, and they construct or accomplish and display these social identities in discourse (van Dijk, 1997b). However, such constructions are never fixed or stable, as they are the outcome of a complex and contradictory interplay of discourses (Garsten & Grey 1997; Hardy et al., 2000). Thus, social identity may be fragmented, ambiguous and subject to continuous reproduction through political, social, and discursive processes (Hardy et al., 2000).

Critical discourse analysis and social

identity

Critical discourse analysis has been used to study social identity because identity reproduces and sustains power relationships between different social groups. Through discursive strategies of

group definition and differentiation, social identity is constructed through position and relation to other groups:

Discourse about others is always connected with one's own identity, that is to say, with the question, "how do we see ourselves?" The construction of identity is a process of differentiation, a description of one's own group and simultaneously a separation from the "others". (Wodak 1996, p. 126)

While age identity has rarely been examined, the construction of gender and racial identity has been the subject of critical discourse research (Mumby & Clair, 1997), broadly referred to as "discourses of difference" (Wodak, 1996). For example, gender studies research has explored how language use and behaviour constructs, reproduces, and resists masculine and feminine identities, gender prejudice, and gender-based inequalities in employment (Garnsey & Rees, 1996; Gill, 1993a, 1993b; Mumby & Clair, 1997; West, Lazar & Kramarae, 1997). Discourse has also occupied a central role in studies of the reproduction of racism and ethnic identities and prejudices (van Dijk, 1984, 1997c; Wetherell & Potter, 1992; Wodak 1996, 1997, 1999). Critical discourse studies have examined the role of the media in reinforcing dominant racist stereotypes (van Dijk, 1996), as well as how racism is enacted and perpetuated in talk about minority groups (Kleiner, 1998; van Dijk, Ting-Toomey, Smitherman & Troutman, 1997), both in terms of the context of talk and the language used. The current research project attempted to extend this existing discourse of difference tradition to research another body-based system of social categorization - age identity.

## Methods

Undertaking discourse research presents many inherent challenges, one of which is the considerable variety of discourse analytic methods available (Burman & Parker, 1993; Phillips & Hardy, forthcoming). While Burman and Parker warn against blurring approaches which subscribe to "specific and different philosophical frameworks" (1993, p. 3), van Dijk (1997a) has argued that there is scope to attempt more multi-method studies. He suggests that, given its breadth of orientation, critical discourse analysis may benefit from multi-method and multi-dimensional approaches because they have the potential to contribute to "our insight into the role of discourse in society and the reproduction of inequality" (1997a, p. 24). The discursive construction of social identity occurs through the complex interaction and convergence of various discursive moves, resources, and strategies. In recognition of this complexity, the research design for this project has deliberately attempted to apply a range of discourse analytic methods to the object of study, notwithstanding the widely acknowledged, labour-intensive nature of data analysis (Burman & Parker, 1993; Phillips & Hardy, forthcoming).

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND SELECTING

### THE RESEARCH SITE

The first consideration was the need to select a research site which provided naturally occurring texts and talk as data (van Dijk, 1997a). The particular research questions and their theoretical assumptions of this project also imposed certain requirements on the selection of a research site. A specific social context needed to be selected because of the social constructionist epistemology underpinning the research (viewing identity as socially accomplished required it to be studied within a specific social setting). Moreover, the research site selected needed to offer the potential for discursive struggle over identity (Phillips & Hardy, forthcoming), be clearly focused on the object of the research (the older worker), convene a range of clearly identifiable social actors, and allow the power implications of the construction of social identity to be explored in ways that would ideally permit some connections to be drawn between versions of identity and material outcomes, such as labour market assistance or unemployment.

Obviously, practical considerations played a role (Phillips & Hardy, forthcoming): a research site had to allow ready access to textual data within the timeframes and resource constraints of Ph.D. research. For all these reasons, and consistent with other critical discourse research, the site finally chosen for this study was an extended instance of social interaction which took a linguistic form (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997)—an Australian parliamentary inquiry into the problems facing older workers (defined by the inquiry's terms of reference as 45 years and over) once they had become unemployed. The following section provides a brief overview of this inquiry and some further discussion of the process used to assess its suitability.

#### The older workers inquiry and its texts

In March 1999, the Australian federal government launched a public parliamentary inquiry into the problems faced by older workers following unemployment. The specific terms of reference of this inquiry were to investigate and report on "the social, economic, and industrial issues specific to workers over 45 years of age seeking employment, or establishing a business, following unemployment" (House of Representatives, 1999a).

The inquiry commenced in early March 1999 with a call for submissions from all interested organisations and individuals. On the basis of these written submissions, the Standing Committee started taking evidence at a series of public hearings held throughout Australia. From this written and oral evidence, the Committee released a final report in August 2000, which included a range of specific policy and program recommendations to address the problems facing older workers who become unemployed. The inquiry attracted a wide range of participants, and most of the texts generated by the inquiry were publicly available, collected, and analysed.

#### Research design and assessment of research

##### site

To assess the inquiry's suitability as a research site, a research design was developed which provided a description and chronology of the inquiry, an outline of the processes, texts, and actors or groups involved, discussion of how data from this research site could be used to address the research questions, and an outline of the discourse analytic methods that would be appropriately aligned to these research questions.

In summary, the selection of this inquiry into older workers as a research site for studying the construction of older worker identity offered a number of potential advantages. Firstly, the inquiry involved a set of interrelated processes, and permitted an examination of how, over time and through various means of social interaction and communication, certain versions of older worker identity emerged and became legitimated in this specific political context. Thus, it permitted a close study of the processes involved in the construction of identity.

A second major advantage of using the inquiry as a research site was the accessibility, volume, and range of publicly available data and texts that lent themselves to the application of a variety of discourse analytic methods. The inquiry also provided a specific, clearly defined event and situation that assembled and involved a broad spectrum of social actors, such as politicians, journalists, welfare and lobby groups, private individuals, and government, employer, and union representatives.

The fourth major advantage of the inquiry related to its orientation to policy and practice. Such an inquiry could be described as performative in its intent (Fournier & Grey, 2000), in that it was directed towards affecting policy and employment practices in the wider community. Thus, the later stages of the inquiry were concerned not just with the formulation of certain versions of

acceptable older worker identity, but also with recommendations for policy and program initiatives to address the perceived key problems faced by older workers in the labour market. This performative orientation facilitated the exploration of the implications and material employment-related outcomes of certain versions of identity.

The inquiry provided a specific context within which the social accomplishment of identity, and the relevance of social identity to social action, could be studied (West & Fenstermaker, 1995). This specific site also held the potential for studying different levels of context, including the specific institutional setting of the inquiry, as well as broader social contexts and discourses of aging, gender, and employment.

In addition, as "exercises in collective sensemaking" (Brown, 2000), public inquiries can provide insight into how individuals and groups reflect on and interpret events and produce shared accounts and explanations. The "shared" nature of these accounts does not, however, imply that they are the outcome of "consensus" between equal parties: power is exercised in the development of shared views as some views and voices may be more privileged than others. Brown (2000) argues that inquiry sensemaking works to support and legitimize, rather than challenge, the interests of dominant groups and social institutions:

Public inquiries constitute societal level "last resort" ceremonies (Emerson, 1981), which re-establish dominant myths by offering acceptable interpretations for the events, and hence re-establish the legitimacy of social institutions (Gephart et al., 1990, p. 29; see also Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Pfeffer, 1981; Suchman, 1995). Public inquiries, and the reports they produce, may... be described as exercises in power, where power is defined as the capacity to extend hegemony reach by suppressing or overwhelming competing accounts such that one's own interpretation dominates (Barry and Elmes, 1997; Boje, 1995; Molotch and Lester, 1975) (Brown, 2000, p. 48)

This interpretation of public inquiries suggested the older workers inquiry offered the potential to explore political issues stemming from the research projects underlying critical discourse orientation, including an examination of how power relations were reproduced and resisted in discourse.

Selecting a public inquiry as a research site also presented the opportunity to make additional contributions to existing discourse research. To date, most research on public inquiries has been dominated by studies focusing on the content or subject of inquiries rather than the texts they produce (Brown, 2000). Like Brown (2000), this current research applies textual analysis to the final report of a public inquiry. However, in this project the discursive processes leading to the production of the final inquiry report are also studied, from the earliest media release, through submissions and public hearings, to the launching of the final report in parliament. In this way, the discursive processes and power effects of inquiry sensemaking can be more comprehensively explored.

### Disadvantages

The disadvantages of selecting the older workers inquiry as a research site related to timing and the nature of the textual data available. The inquiry was selected after the series of public hearings had been held, thus, opportunities to observe this social interaction in-person were missed. In addition, using the official committee records (Hansard transcripts) of these public hearings limited the use of some discourse analytic methods. For example, while Hansard transcripts are verbatim and unedited, they do not allow a full range of conversation analysis techniques to be applied. Conversation analysis is concerned with how talk is organized and coordinated in interaction (Hutchby & Woolfitt, 1998), and due to the nature of the textual data available the conversation analysis that was eventually undertaken had to be limited to the verbal

features of talk rather than its paralinguistic (that is, sound quality, pauses, gaps, restarts) or visual features (for example, gestures, postures etc. [Pomerantz & Fehr, 1997]). However, overall, the advantages of using the public inquiry as a research site to investigate the discursive construction of the social identity of the older worker and its implications outweighed these disadvantages.

## DATA COLLECTION AND

### MANAGEMENT

One of the reasons for selecting the older workers inquiry as a research site was the large number and range of publicly available, naturally occurring texts. These included media releases, written submissions, Hansard transcripts of public hearings recording the interaction between the inquiry committee and witnesses, media reports, the committee's final report, and Hansard transcripts of parliamentary proceedings when the report was tabled. Overall approximately 2,000 pages of text relating to the inquiry were collected which were released over the period March 1999 -- August 2000.

Such a large volume of textual data was one of the attractions of the inquiry as a research site yet it also presented a key challenge in terms of data management. One of the first steps taken to deal with this issue was to record and catalogue the texts collected in the form of a database. The categories used to classify the texts in this database were derived from the research interests underpinning the project and the nature of the site itself. For example, the inquiry was an extended (or multiple) example of institutional discourse which occurred over a period of time. Thus, recording the date of texts was important in terms of identifying discursive shifts over time, and also to enable some examination of intertextuality (in terms of the sequence of texts). Because of the distinctly different types of texts generated in the research site, text genres were recorded as well as the length of texts.

Other categories for the database were more explicitly related to the research questions of the project. For example, the influence of the research question relating specifically to social actors ("in the political arena, what social actors are involved in constructing older worker identity and why?") is evident in two of the dimensions of the database: the organisation or individual (or both) to whom the text was attributed was recorded, in addition to their grouping to a category of social actor (such as "private individual", "employer organisation", "union organisation", "welfare group", "labour market service provider", "government") relevant to the inquiry.

The last two dimensions of the database classified texts according to their orientation to the object of the inquiry. Texts were differentiated between those that exhibited a stance of personal identification with the older worker (classified as personal) and those that were constructed from a position of "objectivity", "neutrality", or "distance" (what Gill [1993a, 1993b] refers to as "out-there-ness" and here classified by the label distance). For example, a submission that discussed the "problem of the older worker" was classified under distance, whereas a written or oral statement from an individual of their personal experience as an older worker was labelled personal. This classification was included to identify different forms of access to discourse, that is, whether elder workers were spoken about by other social actors as a topic of discourse (passive access) or whether they spoke for themselves (active access). In his work on racial prejudice in discourse, van Dijk (1996) found that passive access to discourse (being a topic of discourse) was related to the reproduction of racial stereotypes in the media. In addition, an interest in the relationship of narrative to social identity stimulated the inclusion of the personal or distance classification, and it was designed to assist in identifying the presence of personal narratives and their relationship to the construction of older worker identity.

## DATA ANALYSIS

The database functioned as a means of recording, classifying, and managing the large volume of texts, yet the issue of analysing this amount of textual data remained. This was addressed using a staged approach to data analysis, including an initial pilot study of a sample of texts. Findings from this pilot study were then used to inform a second stage of data analysis that involved a more comprehensive examination of the discursive processes that contributed to key outcomes identified in the pilot.

#### First stage: the pilot study

The inquiry generated texts over the period March 1999-August 2000, and one preliminary strategy adopted was to concentrate on identifying the changes, similarities, differences, and discursive shifts evident over this period of time. Accordingly, the sample for the pilot study consisted of a selection of texts taken from the beginning and end of this period, including media releases, submissions, transcripts of public hearings, the inquiry's final report, and the Hansard record of the report's tabling in federal parliament. Comparative textual analysis (Fairclough, 1995) was undertaken on this sample, exploring some of the key issues relating to the research questions concerning the construction of older worker identity. The pilot also purposely trialled a variety of discourse analytic methods, such as argumentation strategies, interdiscursivity and intertextuality, conversation analysis, critical linguistics, and critical discourse analysis. The selection of methods for the pilot was informed by their application in discourse research relevant to the current study, such as research into social identity, the reproduction of prejudice and inequality in discourse, and critical discourse studies (e.g., Fowler, 1996; Garnsey & Rees, 1996; Gill, 1993a, 1993b; van Dijk, 1996, 1997c; West, Lazar & Kramarae, 1997; Wetherell & Potter, 1992; Wodak, 1996, 1997).

#### Initial findings

While the pilot study was exploratory, there were some significant initial findings concerning the discursive construction of older worker identity and its implications. A range of findings related to the importance of different levels and dimensions of context in understanding the discursive processes, social interaction, and social action of the inquiry, as well as the ways in which forms of textual analysis can reflect broader contextual issues. In order to make sense of the inquiry, both its local context (for example, recent Australian welfare and labour market reform) and broader social and cultural context needed to be described (such as concerns over the economic consequences of aging populations in developed countries, and youth-centric cultural norms in Western societies). The inquiry texts also contained references to other texts (such as popular films), as well as cues to broader discourses. One noticeable characteristic was that mature aged unemployment was often described using terminology and references drawn from discourses of (declining physical and mental) health and death.

Moreover, the specific institutional context of the inquiry and its effect on this discursive "field" also needed to be explored. More "micro" level textual analysis contributed to an understanding of the discursive effects of the institutional context. For example, the Hansard transcripts of the public hearings do not reflect informal talk in an ordinary social setting, but rather a lengthy example (or multiple examples) of "institutional talk": formal talk in a specific institutional context (Pomerantz & Fehr, 1997). Conversation analysis was adopted to analyse the social interaction of the public hearings—the processes of "witnesses" appearing before the Committee and giving "evidence" on the problems of older workers who become unemployed. This revealed that various discursive strategies were used by members of the Committee to direct and influence discussion. More specifically, they relied on identifiable patterns of topic-changing and questioning to stifle criticism of current government systems and policies.

Repetition within and across the structured set of inquiry texts illustrated the effect of institutional context on discursive processes and Brown's (2000) argument that while public inquiries



represent exercises in shared sense-making, some voices will be more privileged in this exercise than others. In the inquiry, the views and voices of Committee members appeared to be fully-formed by the time of the earliest public hearings, and there were no major shifts evident in the final texts. Rather than a discursive shift over time, what was evident here was the opposite-the consistency of these dominant voices and views throughout the inquiry. It also illustrated the power dynamics of this particular institutional setting-through analysis of repetition, an asymmetry of power between speakers was evident, and some voices had a much greater impact on the discursive processes and outcomes of the inquiry than others.

### Social identity

There was also a range of initial findings illustrating the relational nature of social identity. Older worker identity was constructed in relation to a number of other groups, including other social actors in the labour market institutional domain and other "disadvantaged groups" in the labour market, including women. These findings confirmed the complexity of the processes of social construction, as well as the need to consider multiple, overlapping social identities in research on older worker identity.

Older worker identity was constructed in relation to a number of other social actor identities. Within this specific context, relatively recent changes to the Australian system of providing labour market services (such as job placement and vocational training) were particularly pertinent. In effect, the provision of these services was "privatised"-instead of being provided through a government agency, these services were "contracted out to a range of labour market service providers who had to compete for their initial and subsequent contracts. At the same time as the older workers inquiry was occurring, a review of this system was underway. In the pilot study, it was found that social actors such as labour market service providers constructed versions of older worker identity consistent with a favourable version of their own identity and role within the labour market system and the meaning of labour market reforms. Critical linguistics was used to connect the use of a "marketization discourse" and distinct lexical patterns to support these versions of identity (older workers as "clients" or "customers" rather than "unemployed"). This finding illustrates how close textual analysis enriches an understanding of the processes by which broader institutional structures and systems are maintained.

The identity of other disadvantaged groups was used to construct older worker identity. Older workers were defined in relation to these "pre-existing" identities (such as indigenous people, migrants, women, people with disabilities). The existence of these other disadvantaged groups assisted social actors to extend the concept of disadvantage to older workers, but it also presented a competitive challenge: disadvantaged groups were constructed as competing with each other for attention and resources from government, welfare groups, labour market service providers, and employers:

Mr. Stevenson (witness):...If we were to put a white mature age male up on the stage with a female, and a person of some ethnic minority, and a person witting in a wheelchair, it would be interesting to take a view about which one it would be okay to sack. They are the sorts of decisions that businesses have been making. (House of Representatives, 1999b, p. 214)

In fact, because older workers have appeared late in an already established territory of disadvantaged groups, one of the most immediately discernible discursive struggles throughout this inquiry appeared to be to achieve recognition of older workers as a disadvantaged group. In the final texts, it appeared that this strategy had been successful for a particular sub-group: older (male) workers were seen as one of the most disadvantaged groups in the labour market in the view of Committee members: "Being a mature age worker in Australia today, particularly a male, means that you are one of the most disadvantaged groups for labour market assistance." (House of Representatives, 1998-1999-2000, p. 17247).

However, on closer examination, the relationship between older workers and other disadvantaged groups was more complex. Disadvantaged groups were constructed not only as discrete social categories, but also as intersecting and "overlapping" with older worker identity. The complexity of this overlapping appeared most extreme when it concerned gender. Women over 40 or 45 years were constructed as clearly within the older worker category in submissions from female private individuals who recounted the considerable difficulties for women returning to the workforce. However, in other accounts from government departments and labour market service providers, older women were constructed as "easier to place" in jobs than older men, and thus, they appeared to be considered a lesser priority in terms of assistance and attention.

In fact, one of the most significant findings from the pilot study concerned the discursive construction of clearly gendered versions of older worker identity. While male and female versions of older worker identity were constructed in the early texts of the inquiry, by the final texts the female versions had been suppressed, marginalized, or "disappeared". This key discursive outcome was used to structure the second phase of analysis in order to explore the discursive processes that contributed both to the construction of different versions of older worker identity and, more specifically, to the suppression of female versions of older worker identity.

Second stage: Investigating the  
construction and suppression of female  
versions of older worker identity

The objective of this second stage of analysis was to identify the multiple discursive processes through which the construction and suppression of female identity was achieved. In this stage, more extensive and focused analysis was undertaken on texts spanning the overall period of the inquiry (for example, all the Hansard transcripts of the public hearings). However, because of the volume of texts included in this second stage, the discourse methods used were limited to discourse-- historical method and conversation analysis.

Taking previous research into gender and racial identity and inequality as models (e.g., Gill, 1993a; 1993b; Wetherell & Potter, 1992), discourse-historical method was used to analyse the various texts of the inquiry which involved the search for patterns of similarity and difference in versions of identity and accounts; the functions and effects of these patterns in this specific discursive context; and traces of contextual influences and broader social discourses (Wetherell & Potter, 1992).

In addition, some techniques of conversation analysis were used to analyse the social interaction of the public hearings. As previously mentioned, conversation analysis is concerned with how talk is organized and coordinated in interaction, the role of talk in wider social processes (Hutchby & Woolfitt, 1998), and how talk enacts social actions (Pomerantz & Fehr, 1997). The nature of the textual data (Hansard transcripts of public hearings) limited applicable conversation analysis techniques to the verbal features of talk (Pomerantz & Fehr, 1997). However, conversation analysis facilitated a focus on the ways talk was organized and controlled throughout the public hearings, such as: topic initiations and changes, questioning, interruptions or "overlaps" between speakers (Tannen, 1994), repetition and difference in lexical choice between social actors. Despite the textual limitations of the available data, conversation analysis was retained because it enhanced understanding of the discursive processes of social interaction (or collective sensemaking) of the inquiry and how these contributed to the outcomes and shared views in the final inquiry report.

EXAMPLES OF FINDINGS: THE

## FLEXIBLE FEMALE

The application of different discourse analytic methods in this second stage generated a range of findings regarding the complexity of processes of social construction (and suppression) of identity and their implications for different groups. The complexity of these processes and implications will be illustrated here using examples from analysis relating to one particular version of female older worker identity (the flexible female) which was constructed and then suppressed in the discursive processes of the inquiry.

The label the flexible female refers to a version of older worker identity constructed as an older woman employed in low-skill, low-paid, contingent or "flexible" jobs in the expanding service sector, accompanied by a discontinuous work history (due to family responsibilities). The flexible female "receded from view" in the final texts because of its construction as relatively advantaged, compared to male versions of older worker identity. The discursive processes contributing to this construction of relative "feminine advantage" can be categorised as argumentation strategies (group construction and differentiation, self-justification and reversal, and accounts and explanations of women's relative advantage), discursive frames ("condensation"), and the "foregrounding" of older men's experiences throughout the inquiry. In combination, these discursive processes had complex effects, not just for older women, but also for older men. Overall, this analysis demonstrated the relational nature of social identity, the connections between the discursive construction of social identity and the development of government-policy, and the importance of considering the (sometimes unintended) impact such discursive outcomes and processes may have on the power relations between different groups, in this context, in relation to the labour market.

### Argumentation strategies

Argumentation strategies are "cohesive devices in texts which serve specific argumentative aims" (Wodak, 1996, p. 111) and have been studied in the reproduction of racist prejudice and gender inequality in discourse (Gill, 1993a, 1993b; Kleiner, 1998; Wodak, 1996). In this current analysis, group construction, accounts and explanations, and self-justification and reversal were identified as argumentation patterns that contributed to the construction and subsequent disappearance of the flexible female version of older worker identity.

### Group construction

Together, group construction and differentiation function as a primary starting point for the reproduction of prejudice and inequality in discourse (Wodak, 1996), and here both the construction and the suppression of social identity were accomplished in relation to different groups. A key discursive struggle in the inquiry was concerned with gaining recognition of older male workers as a disadvantaged group in the labour market. This was achieved through the construction of a parallel feminine construction-the flexible female-as "advantaged" in comparison to older men. Cultural recognition of one group (older male workers) was achieved at the expense of another - older women became invisible, leading to their omission from the Committee's final report and depriving them of access to government and media attention, policy changes, and assistance.

### Self-justification and reversal

Self-justification is a feature of prejudiced discourse that enables speakers to avoid being labelled as prejudiced by displacing personal responsibility for their views onto a wider group. This displacement also promotes the view as authoritative because it is shared by many others (Gill, 1993b; Kleiner, 1998; Wodak, 1996, 1997). In essence, ideas about the lesser social and

economic power of women in the labour market were inverted to construct a position of their relative privilege. Older women's more marginal workforce attachment, lower expectations of work, and their concentration in low-paid, low-skill contingent jobs in the service sector became used as signifiers of relative privilege and success. In competition for the same low quality jobs, women were constructed as relatively successful, whereas men were rejected because employers associated them with higher quality jobs.

Conversation analysis was used to explore how the social interaction of the public hearings accomplished such self-justification and reversal strategies. For example, one witness (a territory politician) tentatively shared a view she labelled "politically incorrect"-that older women were not disadvantaged, but comparatively advantaged in the labour market. As the exchange proceeded between the witness and the Committee Chair, the witness was effectively relieved of having to displace her negative prejudice onto a wider group because her views were confirmed and reinforced by the Committee Chair. A shared view was thus enacted through the social interaction of the inquiry: "Now we can all be politically incorrect" (House of Representatives, 1999c, p. 482).

### Accounts and explanations

Particular versions of reality and identity are constructed in discourse (Gill, 1993a, 1993b; Wetherell & Potter, 1992) through reliance on another type of argumentation - accounts and explanations. In the context of the inquiry, accounts were used to support and explain the construction of feminine advantage represented by the flexible female identity. These included women's: suitability to the "new labour market, greater flexibility and more positive attitudes, lesser expectations of careers and greater willingness to accept casual, low-paid and low-skill work. As Gill (1993b) has pointed out, the construction of feminine identity can be positive and still reproduce gender and economic inequality. By celebrating older women's greater "motivation" and willingness to accept low-skill, low-paid, precarious employment, more fundamental questions about the desirability and impact of such labour market trends on older women were avoided, as were alternative explanations for feminine advantage which located its origins in the changing structure of the labour market and industry. Older women were constructed as less problematic than older men because they represented a match for the lower quality, contingent jobs in the expanding service sector.

These accounts had far-reaching implications in the discursive processes and outcomes of the inquiry for both older men and older women seeking employment. While older women were rendered invisible because they were constructed as relatively advantaged, the discursive construction of competition between gendered groups in the labour market also contributed to policy recommendations designed to influence behavioural and attitudinal change in older unemployed men. Locating the source of feminine advantage in older women themselves (their better attitudes, more positive outlook, greater flexibility, and lower expectations of work, all compared to older men), rather than in the structure of the labour market, contributed to an account which "blamed" older men for their own lack of work: if older men could be more like older women, they would not be unemployed. This was evident in one of the Committee's final recommendations targeted towards "educating" older men about the changing nature of the labour market: "The Committee recommends that the Government fund an education campaign targeting mature-age people, especially men, concerning the changing nature of the labour market and the issues associated with portfolio employment, including its possible benefits." (House of Representatives, 2000, p. xxv) Thus, the construction and explanation of older women's success in the new labour market contributed to the development of policy recommendations designed to affect attitudinal and behavioural change in older unemployed men.

### Condensation and repetition

In the construction of gender-specific older worker identities, and the argumentation strategies explaining older women's greater labour market advantage, the term flexibility figured large. This term, and its variations (flexible, flexibility), were repeated throughout the discursive processes of the inquiry and such repetition leads to a naturalization of this lexical structure and a reification of particular employment arrangements (such as flexible work) illustrating how ideologies "may become to a greater or lesser extent 'naturalized', and hence be seen to be commonsensical and based in the nature of things or people, rather than in the interests of classes or other groupings" (Fairclough, 1995, p. 35).

A key objective of critical discourse analysis is to examine the underlying assumptions of a widely accepted lexical structure such as "labour market flexibility", which is here enacted in the micro actions of specific speech events (Fairclough, 1995). Yet the repeated use of these short-hand terms (condensation) discourages the exploration of its underlying ideas: "There is an assumption that the reader accepts the discourse and will understand what is being said" (Garnsey & Rees, 1996, p. 1051).

Condensation decontextualizes concepts such as flexibility, separating them from the broader structures of inequality. In this inquiry, the condensation and repetition of flexible and flexibility to explain the increasing labour force participation of older women did not account for the ways in which such flexibility was created through the interaction of broader structural and contextual factors, such as the availability of work, and work and family responsibilities. It did not include any examination of the affects such flexibility had for older women, including: greater work discontinuity and insecurity, their concentration in low-paid, low-skill jobs in the expanding service sector, and their resulting inability to accumulate sufficient funds to ensure an adequate income in retirement (or permit a choice to retire). In terms of its wider social effects, the construction and celebration of "feminine flexibility" functioned to institutionalise the gender segmentation of the labour market, reproducing gendered structures of disadvantage.

#### Foregrounding and backgrounding

Texts can be constituted through a range of choices involving the exclusion or inclusion, foregrounding or backgrounding, of various topics, actors, and themes (Fairclough, 1995; van Leeuwen, 1993). In the collective sensemaking processes of the inquiry (Brown, 2000), the foregrounding of male versions of older worker identity contributed to the marginalisation of the flexible female: the older unemployed man was constructed as the "subject" of the inquiry. Yet such foregrounding was achieved through complex and interrelated discursive processes. These included a recurrent focus on retrenchment and the loss of full-time work for men, the construction of women in domestic roles in relation to men, legitimization of domestic violence towards women, and a reassertion of traditional gender and work-related identities.

The preoccupation with retrenchment and the loss of full-time work foregrounded the experience of older men because older women were far less likely to have had the continuous careers and long-term employment from which to be retrenched. Older women appeared in these scenarios defined by marital and parental roles in relation to a central male protagonist-- the husband and father who has lost his job. Unemployment was constructed as having clearly gendered effects--the loss of work was "emasculating" and destabilized the masculine identity of the "modern industrial worker" (Pateman, 1989; du Gay, 1996). Women's entry into the workforce was constructed as a function of their husband's unemployment and as contributing to the emasculation of these older men. Thus, both male unemployment and female employment destabilized traditional gender identities.

While the retrenchment of older men was foregrounded, domestic violence towards women was legitimated (Acker, 1998) and normalized in the inquiry through repetition, humour, and implied causality between events--it was constructed as a "normal" consequence of (male)

unemployment:

Mr. Dyke (witness): I think a lot of older workers who have been in a job for a while do not think about...the implications of being an older unemployed person. Just talking about the sorts of things that happen when you are unemployed could help—for example, you start to get aches and pains where you did not before, you start to feel sick, you start to kick the cat and bash up the wife, and you get angry with politicians.

Dr. EMERSON (Committee): That's normal!

CHAIR (Committee): For the purpose of the record, we should make it clear that Mr. Dyke loves his cat and has a very good relationship with his wife.

Ms. GAMBARO (Committee): And loves politicians! (House of Representatives, 1999d, p. 205).

Older women who expressed an intention to leave their unemployed husbands were constructed as "abandoning" them (House of Representatives, 1999b, pp. 153-154) and, judging by the extent of discussion and questions devoted to these issues, this had far more impact than references to instances of domestic violence. Thus, through complex discursive moves, the decline of the "male breadwinner", that is, the loss of work for older men, became the dominant subject of the inquiry, sympathy was elicited for the central male protagonist, and traditional gendered identities in relation to the work and domestic divide were re-asserted.

Applying a range of discourse analytic methods enabled the complexity of the processes of construction and suppression of identity and its implications to be examined. In the inquiry, recognition of older male workers as a disadvantaged group was achieved through complex and interrelated discursive processes and achieved at the expense of older women workers, who were rendered invisible - a form of cultural "non-recognition" (Fraser, 1995). These struggles for recognition had complex political effects for both older female and older male workers. Because of their discursive suppression or invisibility, older women workers were neglected in the final report and recommendations of the inquiry. But once the flexible female identity was discursively constructed in the inquiry setting, it also became a discursive resource used to develop policies targeted at affecting behavioural and attitudinal change in older unemployed men.

CONCLUSION. REFLECTION ON

DISCOURSE RESEARCH

This current study on older worker identity illustrates the potential of discourse research to contribute to broader debates about unemployment, struggles for identity recognition, and other current issues of socioeconomic and political importance, such as concern over aging populations and the distribution of work. More specifically, it highlights the connections between the discursive construction of social identity, the processes of policy development and their potential effects on outcomes for different groups, connections which have yet to be fully explored in discourse research.

Discourse analysis has some inherent challenges, but the current study has shown that these are not insurmountable, although the strategies adopted will vary according to the particular characteristics of the research site, textual data, and research questions (Phillips & Hardy, forthcoming). Consistent with broader traditions of discourse analysis, the current study adopted reflexive and interpretive styles of analysis (Burman & Parker, 1993), while attempting to systematically manage the collection and analysis of textual data. While discourse research has been criticised for a lack of systematic empirical studies and a lack of rigor (Burman & Parker

1993; Phillips & Hardy, forthcoming), to become "too systematic, too mechanical, undermines the very basis of discourse analysis and induces the reification of concepts and objects that it seeks to avoid (Burman & Parker 1993)" (Phillips & Hardy, forthcoming).

Accordingly, the research design of the current project attempted to combine elements of the planned and the emergent in its staged approach to data analysis, whereby experimentation with different methods and initial findings from the pilot study were used to inform a second, larger-scale stage of analysis. In hindsight, the sampling approach used in the pilot study (comparing early and final inquiry texts) was critical in managing the analysis of a large volume of texts and generating some illustrative findings which could be used to focus later analysis. The pilot study also led to an examination of an under-researched area of discourse analysis-it was not only the discursive construction of identity that was studied, but also the suppression of identity in discourse and its implications.

The variety of discourse analytic methods may appear bewildering to those considering discourse research. Yet in this project, this variety constituted a key strength: applying a range of methods produced a fuller understanding of the complexity of processes of social construction. In the analysis, I was able to show that the textual outcome of the suppression of the flexible female identity resulted from interrelated and converging discursive processes such as argumentation strategies, condensation, and foregrounding male versions of identity.

The critical orientation of the research was also central in exploring the implication such discursive processes of construction and suppression of identity had for different groups, and for the development of policy within this specific institutional context. These implications were not immediately apparent. The ultimate labelling of older male workers as a disadvantaged group was a prime example of the way in which close textual analysis, combined with a critical orientation, permitted greater understanding of the complex effects of struggles for recognition. By competitively juxtaposing male and female versions of older worker identity, older women were rendered "invisible" and considered less worthy of public attention and government assistance, but older men were also targeted for re-education in the "new realities" of the flexible, uncertain labour market.

Overall, the research aims to illustrate on a small-scale van Dijk's (1997a) suggestion that a consideration of different methods and approaches to discourse analysis can be worthwhile if it contributes to an improved, understanding of the role of discourse in society. The study also attempts to foreshadow one of the key future directions of discourse analysis - to develop its status as an autonomous discipline where researchers can study grammars, social interaction and social structures, analyse context and cognition, not as "totally different things, but simply different aspects of one, complex scholarly enterprise, namely to describe and explain discourse" (van Dijk, 1997a, p. 29).

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