

# Participatory action research in a poststructuralist vein

Jenny Cameron <sup>a,\*</sup>, Katherine Gibson <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> School of Environmental Planning, Griffith University, Nathan, QLD 4111, Australia

<sup>b</sup> Department of Human Geography, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University, Canberra, ACT 0200, Australia

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## Abstract

This paper introduces a participatory action research process that has been shaped by poststructuralist thought. We report on the stages and outcomes of a project conducted in the Latrobe Valley, Victoria, Australia, a resource region that has experienced downsizing and privatising of its major employer, the state-owned power industry. Through a participatory action research process involving community members, local Council and academic researchers the singular economic identity of the region was challenged and a more enabling representation developed. Drawing on a discourse of the diverse economy and the asset-based approach to community development the project shed light on the wide range of economic activities residents were already engaged in and the multitude of abilities and ideas they possessed. This exercise produced a new representation of the economy of the Latrobe Valley that helped to shift the vision of what was possible in the region. In the final stage of the project this alternative vision was acted on as groups turned shared ideas into projects and those who were most used to being defined as economically dependent and victims of economic circumstances increasingly came to identify as active and contributing economic subjects in the diverse economy. The paper considers the role of subjectivity, representation and micropolitics in participatory action research and concludes with a reflection on the project's strengths and weaknesses.

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## 1. Introduction

The Latrobe Valley is a non-metropolitan region almost two hours to the east of Melbourne, the capital of Victoria. Throughout most of the twentieth century the Latrobe Valley was characterised by population expansion and economic boom as the region's brown coal reserves were developed to produce electricity for the State (Gibson, 2001). Over the last two decades, however, the State Government downsized and then privatised the mines and power stations of the State Electricity Commission of Victoria (or SEC as it was familiarly known). During this period, academics,

industry consultants and community organisations conducted numerous studies to monitor and analyse the impact of these changes. In the first instance much of this research predicted that workers who took redundancy packages as part of the downsizing process would be absorbed into other industries in the region, or be able to start their own small businesses with their packages. When this did not occur, <sup>1</sup> research shifted to documenting the devastating effects of the restructuring process, in

<sup>1</sup> Indeed, studies established that of the original 10,000 jobs in the SEC, 8000 were lost, and of these only 2000 were picked up by contractors (Homes and Foster, 1998). More recently it was estimated that 17,000 jobs were lost in the Latrobe Valley as a result of restructuring and its flow on effects (Baker, 2001). To put this figure into perspective, the 2001 population of the Latrobe Valley aged between 15 and 64 years was 43,194 (with a total population of 66,819) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001).

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [jenny.cameron@griffith.edu.au](mailto:jenny.cameron@griffith.edu.au) (J. Cameron), [katherine.gibson@anu.edu.au](mailto:katherine.gibson@anu.edu.au) (K. Gibson).

particular the rocketing rates of unemployment and the impact on individuals and families as they struggled to adjust to the changed world of the Latrobe Valley.

Given the role of research in underestimating the effects of the restructuring process in the Valley and then detailing their depressing extent, researchers are not thought of kindly. One local resident who was employed to work on the research project that is the focus of this paper aptly captured the perceptions of many in the Latrobe Valley:

I think people tend to put researchers up into the political categories—or any form of academics up into that category. “Here’s someone who’s got maybe the power or the intellect to do something but they’re not doing anything about it. All you want to do is research us. Ok we know these are what the problems are. We’re sick and tired of people telling us we’re like this.” Things like that. But I think too, where you’re living in a rural area and you present to people that you’re a researcher they really tend to associate it with the city. They really tend to see that we’ve come from the city. “And they’ve come down and they’re going to pick on us.” And it’s like “Haven’t you done enough already”.

(Interview, Leanne, 10 May 2000)

This quote parallels concerns within the academy that much social science research goes little beyond simply describing the world, producing few tangible benefits for those who are the subjects of research. As a result geographers and other social scientists have become interested in research that is more participatory and action-oriented (e.g. Kitchen, 2001; Kitchen and Hubbard, 1999; Pain, 2003; Pain and Francis, 2003).

Over time our research activities in the Latrobe Valley have evolved into a form of participatory action research (PAR). An initial project in 1997 used a focus group methodology to identify ways that regional communities narrate and deal with the effects of rapid social and economic change.<sup>2</sup> The focus group discussions covered the negative consequences of restructuring and could be seen as an example of another project that simply documented the situation, but as we noted at the time:

we were concerned not to leave the conversation at the point where an intimate knowledge of the ‘problems’ could become ossified and thereby gain more discursive purchase. In an attempt to elicit other stories of coping and strengths in the face of, at times, overwhelming despondency, we asked the participants to reflect on what the community had done well and what its success stories were.

(Gibson et al., 1999, p. 28)

<sup>2</sup> This project was funded by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) and included a study of the Goulburn Valley, an agricultural region in the north of Victoria, as well as the Latrobe Valley (Gibson et al., 1999).

This request was prompted by commitment to the view that social research is an explicitly political intervention that not only represents, but constitutes, reality (Gibson-Graham, 1994). Our question yielded surprising insights into the hidden economy of the Latrobe Valley. One participant, for example, likened the Valley to Florence during the Renaissance because of the creative energies that were driving various artist and artisan cooperatives and non-profit enterprises. Encouraged by such fleeting glimpses of other ways of seeing what constituted the economy, we decided to focus attention on the diverse economic practices that were largely invisible because of the defining economic role of the SEC in the Valley. Our next research intervention was to run a video-conference in 1998 on ‘Stories of success from rural and regional Australia’. Organisations from across non-metropolitan Australia (including the Latrobe Valley) presented the innovative economic projects they had developed (Gibson-Graham, 1999).<sup>3</sup> The aim was to build support for these economic projects and demonstrate the range of economic practices such as cooperatives and non-profits that could be fostered in the absence of a major employer like the SEC. As a consequence of these two initiatives we became interested in further research that would make a practical and active contribution to fostering alternative economic and community development in the Latrobe Valley. In 1999, in partnership with the Latrobe City Council, we embarked on the Community Partnering project. This pilot project had the specific aim of developing and testing a new approach to economic development, one focused on community-based economic projects built on the ideas, skills and input of those hardest hit by the SEC restructuring. This attempt to generate a “bottom-up” approach to economic development employed a participatory action research process in which academics, Council employees and community researchers formed a research team to work with residents of the Latrobe Valley.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> This project was funded as part of the Australian Research Council Large Grant A79703183 ‘Economic Citizenship and Regional Futures’.

<sup>4</sup> This project was funded by the Australian Research Council Strategic Partnerships with Industry-Research and Training Grant C 79927030, ‘Building sustainable regions: testing new models of community and council partnership’. Latrobe City Council was the Industry Partner and additional funding support was provided by two of the largest multinational companies in the Latrobe Valley—Australian Paper and Loy Yang Power. In claiming that the aim of the project was to promote development of community-based economic projects we are well aware of the problematic and contested nature of the term “community” (Gibson and Cameron, 2001). In this context we use the term community to invoke an active process whereby very different individuals come together to work collectively (with all the challenges this entails) to build various kinds of economic endeavours.

Alongside this growing interest in research that would make a tangible difference in an economically depressed region, our work has also been influenced by poststructuralist theory. This might seem a contradiction. PAR is characterised by some as an archetypal modernist political project concerned with liberating marginalised and exploited subjects; while poststructuralism is lampooned by its critics for abandoning politics and embracing the deconstruction of texts and images with little relevance to the “real world”.<sup>5</sup> For us, there is no necessary contradiction between the two, and the purpose of this paper is to introduce a PAR approach that has been shaped by poststructuralist thought.<sup>6</sup>

We are not alone in linking PAR and poststructuralism. Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury, editors of the 2001 *Handbook of Action Research*, discuss parallels between PAR and poststructuralism (p. 5–6). They claim that poststructuralism through its suspicion of overarching theories and paradigms recognises multiple knowledges, just as PAR values local and indigenous knowledges. Poststructuralism highlights the political nature of all knowledge-making, just as PAR appreciates that politics infuses every aspect of so-called objective and expert knowledge. Poststructuralism recognises that language constructs the world, just as PAR seeks to ensure that everyday knowledges are used to shape the lives of ordinary people. Going beyond the similarities between PAR and poststructuralist understandings of knowledge and its production that Reason and Bradbury note, this paper suggests ways PAR might be modified by drawing on poststructuralist insights. In the following section, we outline what we see as key elements of poststructuralism that are relevant to PAR and we then discuss how these elements were brought to bear on PAR in the Latrobe Valley.

## 2. Bringing poststructuralism to participatory action research

Writing in 1992, Michele Barrett characterised poststructuralism as ‘part of a broader sea change within contemporary social thought’ (p. 205). This ‘sea change’

has unsettled the certainties associated with modernist or Enlightenment thinking and has led to a rethinking of core social concepts such as knowledge, truth, language, politics and identity, with implications for conducting social research. According to a poststructuralist perspective the presumption that the social world can be accurately known, and truthfully and objectively represented in language is questionable; words are political tools that contribute to shaping the social world, relationships and subjects. Similarly poststructuralism has eroded confidence in determining social structures or systems; instead there are multiple and endless determinations none of which has precedence. In terms of PAR we identify three key implications of this ‘sea change’ that impact on understandings of: (1) identity and subjectivity; (2) language and representation; and (3) politics. In this section we elaborate these implications, contrasting them with the understandings that tend to prevail in PAR and highlighting their relevance in the context of the Latrobe Valley. In the following section we discuss how we designed and conducted a PAR project in the Latrobe Valley that was informed by aspects of poststructuralism.

### 2.1. Identity and Subjectivity

In most PAR the subject is understood as having a deep and pre-existing identity that is repressed or alienated by structures, like capitalism and patriarchy. With the right trigger—involvement in PAR—‘hitherto stifled thoughts and voices’ (de Roux, 1991, p. 44) and the ‘capacity to envision a freer world lying dormant in the oppressed consciousness of subjugated people’ (Park, 1993, p. 19) will be released, placing the subject on the road to emancipation and liberation. In poststructuralist thought there are no depths to plumb for the subject’s true essence or identity; rather the subject is understood as always in the process of becoming, of being shaped in a multitude of ways by various discourses and practices. In the Foucauldian version there are constitutive cultural narratives and practices that produce certain types of subjects. Foucault, for example, suggests that one important cultural construct associated with the West is the idea that the subject has a core identity. Certainly this produces subjects with a sense of having a deep, true and unalienated identity—a soul, if you like—but there is no actual soul or core to the subject (Foucault, 1979, p. 29–30). In the Lacanian version of poststructuralism the subject is understood as empty, and as being brought into being through acts of identification that produce momentary fixities we associate with a concrete subjectivity (Torfing, 1999, p. 306; Žižek, 1990). For example, through the act of taking the Eucharist one identifies with and “becomes” a Christian with a sense of a deep, inner soul. In terms of PAR, this means a shift away from knowledge about the social

<sup>5</sup> For example, Hamnett (2003, p. 2) claims that much contemporary poststructuralist human geography is ‘concerned more with deconstructing theory, the analysis of subjectivity and concepts of embodiment, and issues of representation than with major economic, political and social problems’. We, however, contend that the poststructuralist analysis of things such as subjectivity, embodiment and representation can provide strategies and avenues for responding to pressing social, economic and political concerns—this paper demonstrates one such avenue (see also Dempsey and Rowe, 2004; Graham et al., 2002).

<sup>6</sup> An earlier participatory action research endeavour in the coalfields of Central Queensland, Australia was also shaped by our commitment to poststructuralist thought (Gibson-Graham, 1994).

structures and power relationships that limit and constrain subjugated groups to knowledge about the multiple and often competing narratives, practices and actions that produce certain types of subjects.

This poststructuralist approach helps us understand the subject positions that are prevalent in the Latrobe Valley and some of the responses to the restructuring process. In an earlier paper on the region, Gibson (2001) shows how establishment and operation of the SEC drew upon contradictory discourses that variously positioned subjects as children, consumers and citizens, rather than workers. Many of the paternalistic practices of the SEC, for example how housing was provided and the workplace managed, constituted employees in a child-like subject position of obedience and dependence (p. 649; p. 655). Indeed, such were the working conditions at the SEC, that this acronym was often said to really stand for “Slow, Easy and Comfortable”. As organised members of a strong and militant union movement, however, worker-subjects could also be petulant and even outright disobedient. This was particularly evident during periods of industrial unrest, when there was coincidence between the subject position of the disobedient child and that of the exploited and victimized worker who needed to be adequately compensated for their contribution to the State’s economic development. With the loss of jobs and growing levels of unemployment these two subject positions have been heightened. There is an even stronger sense of exploitation and injustice with many ex-SEC workers and unionists seeing themselves as the expendable members of the reserve army of labour, while at the same time lamenting the loss of the SEC “parent” and their apparent abandonment by the larger State “family”.

In the poststructuralist analysis there is no single worker identity associated with capitalism, but a multitude of discourses and actions that produce and perpetuate various economic subject positions such as the SEC worker as “victim” of economic restructuring and “dependent” of the state. This process of becoming a subject has two sides. It is a creative and productive process whereby subjects come into being, but it also means being subject to particular norms, rules and modes of governing. In an important distinction with much PAR this means there are no subjects to be empowered and subsequently liberated—there are, instead, various forms of subjection, including that of empowerment and liberation (Cruikshank, 1999).

## 2.2. *Language and representation*

A second implication for PAR is raised by the poststructuralist understanding of language and representation. Reason and Bradbury (2001) highlight in their discussion of the parallels between poststructuralism

and PAR that both critique the assumption that knowledge and language are objective and politically impartial descriptive tools. But while poststructuralists are ‘suspicious of all overarching theories and paradigms’ (p. 6), PAR values local and indigenous knowledges of marginalised groups as a basis for actions that will improve people’s lives. For us, this characterisation of the poststructuralist understanding of language is only part of the picture. An important difference between poststructuralist and PAR accounts of language is the attention paid to the effects of different representations of the world. A poststructuralist approach involves carefully interrogating the potential effects of different languages and representations, and self-consciously selecting particular representations because of their potential political effects. Local or indigenous knowledges, for example, may replicate existing social and economic conditions, while “imported” or “outsider” knowledges (including expert knowledge) may offer new insights that challenge the current order and provide the basis for transformation. The poststructuralist approach also reminds us that there are multiple representations or knowledges each with their own power. Within the one community or group there may be multiple and conflicting local knowledges that need to be adjudicated. One strategy for doing this is to attend to the potential political and transformative effects of the different knowledges and representations. Similarly, individual subjects may also hold multiple knowledges about aspects of their lives and broader social, economic and environmental conditions, only some of which may be transformative. In other words, the poststructuralist approach advises that local knowledges and representations—so-called “authentic” understandings—be approached with a degree of caution, and not be blindly accepted at face value as inherently transformative.

In the Latrobe Valley interrogating the assumptions and potential effects of the prevalent locally-held representations and knowledges is crucial. The Latrobe Valley is generally understood (by those who live in the Valley and those “outside” the Valley) as a region with a single economic identity—a region of brown coal extraction and electricity generation.<sup>7</sup> One very material effect of this representation is that economic planning by government and businesses has focussed almost solely on developing the power industry. In the past the power industry was certainly seen to hold the key to the region’s fortune:

<sup>7</sup> As Gibson (2001) has highlighted, this knowledge was originally imposed in the 1920s by the State as it sought to establish its own electricity supply. In the process other local knowledges, included those of the original indigenous people, the Gurnai/Kurnai, were suppressed and replaced.

We were told by our economists and our forecast projectors of government that there were going to be 22 power stations down here, not 9. 365,000 people, and me being a bright little spark, I thought “I’ve got to get in on this”. So you took out some risks and stretched the old legs a bit and probably stretched everything to the max in a business sense. I think there is a lot of businesses that did that back then [but s]omething went awfully wrong, somebody was paid too much money to make a big mistake in this wrong advice.

(Local Businessperson, Latrobe Valley Focus Group, 19 June 1997)

During the 1960s, however, the limits of a singular economic identity based on the power industry were acknowledged and there was an effort to diversify economic activity. Interestingly, this occurred because the gendered nature of the power industry and economic opportunity was recognised:

[T]he participation rate of women lagged in the Latrobe Valley very heavily even during the boom times and there was quite an active program to generate jobs for women because they were missing out on the opportunities. Most of the jobs in the boom were male oriented, but there was a subtle change that went on towards the end of the boom. The female participation rate started to rise and in fact it’s gone on, the participation rate for women is relatively very good.

(Economic Planner, Latrobe Valley Focus Group, 19 June 1997)

With restructuring of the power industry the risks of building primarily on the representation of the Valley as having a single economic identity have become all too evident, with the region experiencing some of the highest levels of unemployment in Australia, particularly for men in the 25–34 and 35–44 age groups (Shaw and Munro, 2001, p. 1.) Nevertheless the representation of the region as the powerhouse of Victoria continues to shape regional planning. Economic development efforts involving a range of key players, including the local Council and unions, have largely concentrated on attempting to attract major employers with the enticement of cheap power—at one stage a magnesium smelter was touted, while an industry park with cheap power remains high on the development agenda. This emphasis on power has meant that efforts by “minor” players to build other economic activities, such as tourism, and artist and artisan-based businesses, are largely unsupported. One local knowledge of the Latrobe Valley prevails; while other local knowledges of economic diversity are sidelined.

The representation of the Latrobe Valley as having a singular economic identity has also impacted other responses to the restructuring process. With the demise

of the SEC the region and the community are seen as destroyed, as an economic planner and a local businessperson who participated in the focus groups highlighted:

Economic Planner: The power industry by comparison has been a world leader in terms of its international competitiveness. Why did this area have to be in order to make it more internationally competitive? One doesn’t say if you can do things better you shouldn’t do them better, obviously you should, but why the rush, why the need to the workforce and the community for an industry that was already internationally competitive, there was a degree of madness about it I mean really it’s disgraceful.

Local Businessperson: I agree it is totally disgraceful. For a long while we were being

we were promised in subtle ways by all different groups of the community that it’ll be ok.

(Latrobe Valley Focus Group, 19 June 1997, emphasis in the spoken text)

This representation of the area as decimated, plundered and pilfered has been used to urge State and Federal governments to develop special assistance packages for the Valley. Our concern is that this dominant and oft-repeated local representation of a destroyed Valley hides and even undermines the diverse range of economic activities that are practiced in the alternative sector, and that might be the basis for further economic development.

Perhaps even more concerning is that the constant repetition of the representation of a destroyed and decimated Valley fuels the despair and hopelessness felt by many. It robs residents of any sense of economic possibility other than to be dependent on special assistance packages from government or the benevolence of a yet-to-be-secured major employer. It reinforces the subject position of dependence prevalent during the days of the SEC and reinforces a sense of powerlessness and victimhood.

### 2.3. Politics

The final implication for PAR is raised by the post-structuralist understanding of politics, which builds on the idea that the subject is constituted through discourses, practices and actions. Politics in PAR is largely directed towards changing or challenging social structures and relationships so that oppression and exploitation might be overcome, and the true essence of a subject realised. This usually involves working with local people to develop a comprehensive knowledge of the current situation and then developing people’s capacity for organised and collective political action that responds to this knowledge. One theme that emerges in

the PAR literature is that feelings of discontent, resentment and anger are an important impetus for raising people's political consciousness and generating collective political action. For example, de Roux (1991, p. 38) claims 'indignation led to a predisposition to take action' see also (Swantz et al., 2001, p. 391–394). Poststructuralism, however, recognises that a micropolitics of self-transformation is an important part of a larger social change and macropolitical agenda (Connolly, 2002). This involves developing receptivity to a politics of becoming in which new forms of subjectivity might be cultivated (Connolly, 1999). Importantly, new subject positions are not necessarily known in advance or contained within a programmatic vision of how the world should be. New forms of subjectivity emerge through unexpected shifts in the visceral and affective registers that free embodied practices from their usual sedimented patterns, creating opportunities to act on other possibilities for being (Gibson-Graham, 2003). Micropolitical acts include tapping into positive affective and emotional registers that promote pleasure and creativity and enhance the likelihood for shifts in identification. This is not to say that creativity is not a tool already widely used in PAR. Expressive endeavours such as plays, musicals, poetry readings, story-telling, films, photographic and art exhibitions, street events and so on can be used to draw attention to the plight of people and communities, to explore current circumstances, to reflect local and indigenous knowledges and representations, and to build a sense of indignation and anger. We are, however, interested in harnessing the creativity of more everyday events that might inspire previously unknown possibilities and increase a willingness to explore different ways of being in the world.

We believed that in the Latrobe Valley micropolitical activity was going to be an important part of a change agenda. With the restructuring process sedimented practices associated with the economic subjectivity of workers in the Latrobe Valley had been interrupted. Ritual practices such as queuing each fortnight for "dole" (unemployment) payments or daily visits to the pub only partially replaced the repetitive subjection to the SEC that workers had once experienced. An opening or rupture had been produced in which new identities and economic subjectivities could be enacted (Gibson, 2001, p. 664). During the focus group discussions in the earlier research interventions we had recorded glimpses of emerging subjectivities that could be fostered, potentially countering the divisive political affiliations that had been in play during the restructuring process. For instance, while outlining in the voice of a rational economic subject the numerical calculations used to justify the downsizing and privatising of the SEC, an electricity industry worker suddenly broke down and went on to tell of how the health and well-being of workers and the broader community were ignored and have been

subsequently and perhaps irreversibly harmed. This was a powerful moment in the focus group discussion as the stalwart unionist tearfully expressed his doubts about the morality of rational calculation, and the rest of the group (including several small business people who were largely unsympathetic to the union movement) voiced similar concerns.<sup>8</sup> In this moment an ethic of care for others was expressed, raising the possibility of an economy and form of economic subjectivity based on interdependence and respect for fellow beings. Another opening for a revisioning of the self-occurred around discussion of the community response to the restructuring process, including union efforts to maximise each worker's redundancy package. Participants reflected on the limits of the individualised response and the potential for more concerted collective endeavours that take into account overall community health and well-being. At this moment a glimpse was caught of a nascent collective, rather than individual and competitive, economic subjectivity. These instances during the focus group discussions gave us confidence to think that, were we to initiate a PAR process, it might be possible to further prompt shifts in understanding and movement from entrenched positions so that new economic identities and forms of subjectivity might take shape.

In this section we have introduced what we see as three crucial poststructuralist insights, and have discussed the implications for rethinking PAR. We are suggesting a PAR approach that contributes to social and economic change by focussing on forms of identity and subjectivity. This involves attending to the role of language and representation in shaping identity and subjectivity, and being open to the shifts that can occur in the self.<sup>9</sup> In the next section we discuss how these elements of a poststructuralist PAR approach were incorporated into the design and conduct of the Latrobe Valley project.

<sup>8</sup> Some of the dynamics observed as part of this 2 h videoed session resonate with the subtle group processes Burgess et al. (1988) connect with in-depth small groups that meet a number of times or group analysis work (pp. 312–314). Perhaps it was because participants in the focus group had all experienced the crisis in the Valley, were somewhat "known" to each other in terms of their work roles and public identities and had not had the opportunity for a community "debriefing" that the interchange of views about economic change produced surprising moves, unusual affiliations and moments of intimacy that would normally be unlikely in a once-only group discussion (see also Goss and Leinbach, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> Space does not permit a more reflective discussion of the processes by which the identities and subjectivities of the academic as well as non-academic researchers shifted during the course of the project. For more on this topic from a parallel action research project conducted in the Connecticut Valley of Massachusetts, see Community Economies Collective (2001).

### 3. A poststructuralist PAR project in the Latrobe Valley

The Community Partnering project was designed around the classic research stages of PAR: documenting the current situation; contextualising the current situation; and working towards change.<sup>10</sup> In terms of the insights from poststructuralism discussed in the previous section, the first two stages were primarily concerned with exploring and challenging existing economic identities and representations of the Latrobe Valley and the third stage with imagining and enacting new subjectivities. Documenting the current situation in the first stage meant addressing the predominant representation of the Valley and providing opportunities for local knowledges of the restructuring process and its aftermath to be voiced. In the second stage these local representations and knowledges were set in a broader context; however, in this process familiar ways of thinking were challenged and extended rather than simply affirmed. We drew on bodies of work that uncovered and produced stories and understandings that were silenced, marginalised or simply unthinkable because of prevailing local knowledges. The final research stage reported on here then built on these new stories and representations to enable new economic subjectivities to take root.<sup>11</sup>

#### 3.1. Documenting the current situation

This first stage, which was conducted from March to May in 1999, involved documenting the current situation to make explicit the prevailing local representations and knowledges of the Latrobe Valley. It was also a way of tapping into people's feelings about the impact of the restructuring process. As discussed above, the core understanding was that the Valley had been decimated and destroyed; concomitantly the prevalent feelings were hopelessness and despair. We were interested in introducing a different knowledge that would highlight the diverse but hidden economic practices already existing in the Latrobe Valley. We also wanted to draw on a different set of emotions in which hope and possibility became associated with these diverse economic practices. However, in order to establish legitimacy and sup-

port for our endeavours it was essential to firstly acknowledge current representations and feelings.<sup>12</sup>

Given the low regard people in the Latrobe Valley had for academics and researchers, it was important that the initial public face of the project not be too readily associated with the University. Three local residents were employed as community researchers to work on the project and liaise with community members.<sup>13</sup> These researchers were selected through a recruitment process targeting groups hardest hit by the restructuring process. So along with the academic researchers (Jenny Cameron, Katherine Gibson and Arthur Veno) and a Latrobe City Council employee (whose primary role was to liaise with Latrobe City Council), three community researchers joined the Community Partnering research team: Steve, a 54-year old unemployed ex-SEC worker; Leanne, a 21-year old young person who was working part-time in a local video store; and Yvonne, a 34-year old sole parent with two school-aged daughters.<sup>14</sup> The community researchers were not already associated with any community groups or agencies but were selected because of their likely ability to connect and build relationships with others in a similar situation to themselves.<sup>15</sup>

It is important to outline the different roles and expertise of members of the action research team. In the Community Partnering project the academic researchers began with a specific agenda (to develop an alternative approach to economic development) that had arisen from established theoretical work and knowledge generated in prior research conversations in the region. The community researchers and Council liaison officer were introduced to this "expert" knowledge through a series of training workshops. The community researchers' "expertise" was their ability to relate to others who had been impacted by the SEC restructuring and this came into play once they were introduced to the

<sup>10</sup> A more detailed presentation of the research steps can be found in Cameron and Gibson (2004), in the project resource kit that is designed for a general audience (Cameron and Gibson, 2001) and a video, *It's in our hands: shaping community and economic futures*, which shows how the steps were adapted for a different locality.

<sup>11</sup> This paper does not report on what we could see as the subsequent "stages" of the project—the gradual withdrawal of university involvement and transition towards the community groups "going it alone", and the continuing history of the community projects that were formed.

<sup>12</sup> The importance of acknowledging the experiences of local communities and groups is also emphasised by the planning theorist John Forester. In a chapter entitled 'On not leaving your pain at the door', he argues that participatory processes are likely to fail if planners 'ignore and dismiss history and culture, the self-perceptions and deeply defining experiences, of the citizens involved' (1999, p. 245).

<sup>13</sup> There were other reasons for employing local residents, primarily ensuring that knowledge and skills developed through the project were retained in the community, and that the employment opportunities associated with the project benefited local residents.

<sup>14</sup> Anecdotally there is evidence of family breakdown and the growth of sole parent households because of the pressures of men's loss of economic identity as employed workers and familial identity as breadwinner. This is why sole parents were targeted along with ex-SEC workers and young unemployed people (many of whom, in the restructuring period, would have gone on to work in the SEC).

<sup>15</sup> In a similar fashion, Whitmore and McGee (2001) describe a PAR project to evaluate the service provided by a young person's homeless shelter. Six young people who used the shelter were employed to work as co-researchers with an outside evaluator and two shelter staff.

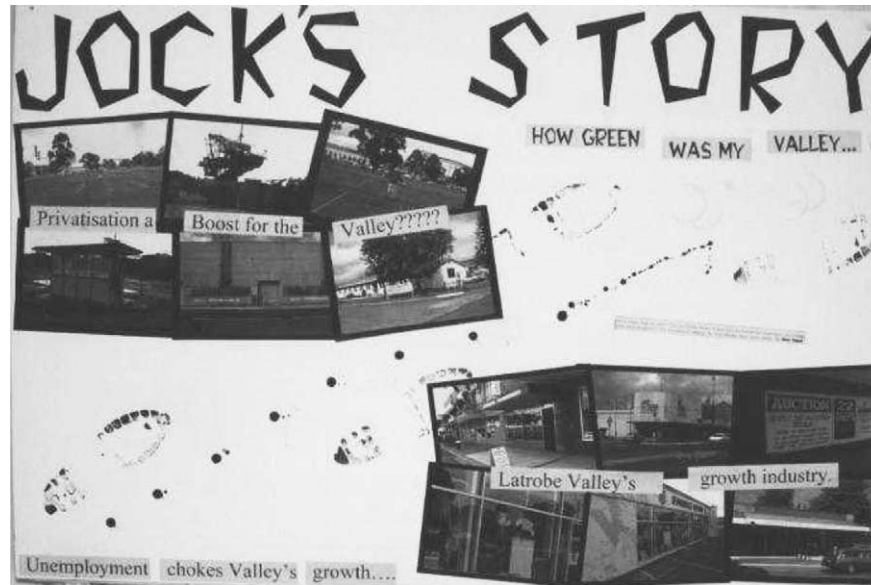


Fig. 1. Jock's Story.

conceptual framework and started working directly with marginalised groups in the Valley.<sup>16</sup>

The community researchers' first activity (which formed both part of their training and their initial foray into connecting with others in the community) was to work with friends and acquaintances to make photo-essays that told their stories of life in the Latrobe Valley.<sup>17</sup> The photo-essays were then used to open up conversations and build links with others. The photo-essay produced by Steve and another ex-SEC worker, "Jock's Story" (see Fig. 1), showed in one corner derelict industrial buildings, abandoned mining equipment, and empty carparks and vandalised bus shelters at old SEC worksites. In the lower corner there were the "growth" industries of thrift shops, pawn-brokers and vacant stores. The photo-essay made a powerful statement that tapped into the feelings of abandonment, loss and nostalgia for a secure and predictable past. A similar story was told in the photo-essay by a group of young people. It highlighted the everyday activities that engage many young people, such as drinking, smoking, playing pool, going to the pub, visiting Centrelink (the agency that

manages unemployment and other benefits) and appearing in Court. Like "Jock's Story" there was an overwhelming sense of abandonment, with young people depicting their lives in terms of an absence of jobs, opportunities and a future (see Fig. 2). Both these photo-essays were consistent with the prevailing local knowledge or representation of the Latrobe Valley as decimated and destroyed by restructuring.

A slightly different understanding is evident in the third photo-essay created by two sole parents (see Fig. 3). This photo-essay highlighted the difficulties and worries associated with juggling a multitude of tasks from paying the bills to securing child-care. Rather than a lack of activities to fill up the day, there was a lack of time for all the activities. From our perspective this photo-essay offered an insight into the myriad of hidden unpaid and voluntary economic activities that characterise any community or region. It was something we could build on to introduce the idea of the Latrobe Valley's diverse economy.

The photo-essays were taken by the community researchers on their regular visits to places where the economically marginalised "hung out", mostly involuntarily at the state's behest—at numeracy and literacy classes, men's anger management groups, neighbourhood houses, Work for the Dole programs and life skills courses. The photo-essays told a story that many could relate to, and they spoke to strong and persistent feelings of anger, bitterness and betrayal over the restructuring process. For the community researchers the photo-essays were an important tool for initiating conversation about the project and building a sense of connection with unemployed ex-SEC workers, unemployed young people, single parents and others. In the more

<sup>16</sup> This representation of academic and community researchers as both possessing expertise (and therefore power) is similar to Frank Fischer's call for environmental experts to be thought of as "specialised citizens" and community members as "local experts" (2000, pp. 41, 145). The "research" strategies employed—conversations, discussions, workshops, cooking activities and field trips—were devised and developed collaboratively by the whole research team and initially jointly administered with the community researchers taking on greater responsibility for all interactions as the project unfolded.

<sup>17</sup> Since completing the Latrobe Valley project we have become aware of other PAR projects that also use photos as a means of communicating stories and insights (e.g. Lykes, 2001; McIntyre, 2003; Wang, 1999).

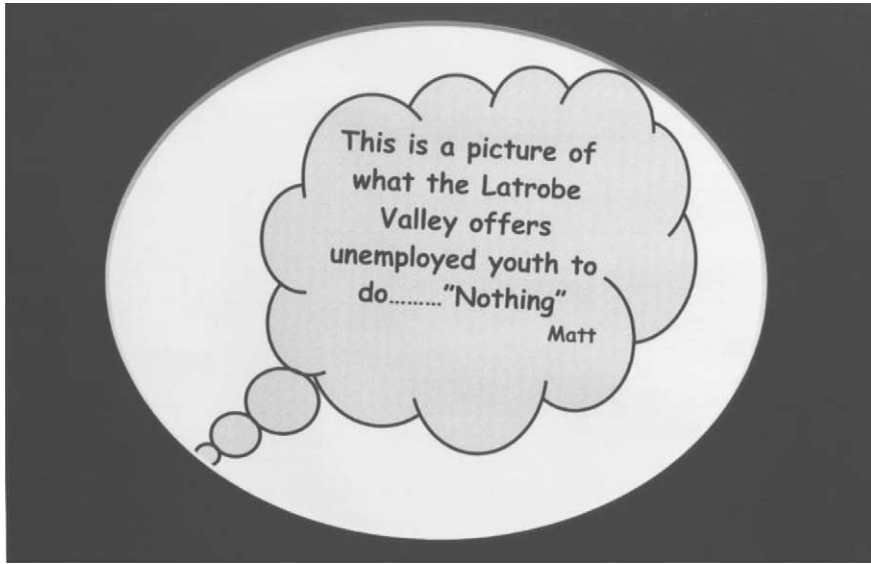


Fig. 2. The young Latrobe Valley (detail).



Fig. 3. A sole parent's story (detail).

familiar PAR approach the community researchers may have collected more stories and oral histories, and assembled these into a comprehensive account of the extent of social damage done to the Latrobe Valley. The photo-essays were, however, only a starting point. The

project did not rely on these feelings of pain and anger to provide a mobilising political force, rather these feelings were acknowledged and recognised in order to move on to other kinds of enabling and creative emotions.

### 3.2. Contextualising the current situation

The second stage of the Community Partnering project, which ran from May to August 1999, was concerned with offering another understanding of the situation in the Latrobe Valley. Certainly, one familiar way to contextualise the current situation would have been to introduce an analysis of the structural factors and power relationships that have given rise to the restructuring process. This would have meant introducing the neo-liberal political agenda (which has led to privatising state-owned assets such as the SEC) and development of global capitalism (which means there are capitalist corporations eager to snap-up these assets in any location across the globe). Parallels could have been made between the experiences of people in the Latrobe Valley and people in other parts of the globe who are also living with the legacies of privatisation. Understanding the global scale and extent of the situation may have been useful to strengthen the anger felt in the Latrobe Valley and an important strategy to mobilise people into collective political action. We were, however, interested in introducing an analysis that would tap into a very different emotional register, contribute to the widening of possibility for economic identities and enable subject positions other than those of dependence, powerlessness and victimhood to emerge.

The first body of knowledge we introduced was that of the diverse economy.<sup>18</sup> This involved building on Yvonne's photo-essay and identifying the range of hidden economic activities that could be found in the Latrobe Valley. Some of these economic activities were unpaid, such as housework or friends helping each other out with building and repair work; some involved non-market transactions, such as swapping childcare services or gifting clothes to relatives and neighbours; and some involved the voluntary sector, such as time donated to food banks or coaching childrens' sports. But some involved paid work and market transactions. To highlight this aspect of the diverse economy the community researchers were taken on a field trip to visit some of the Latrobe Valley's cooperatives and non-profit businesses. In response to a question about what had been learned after the field trip one community researcher wrote:

My understanding of the Valley community has changed somewhat because of the people I have met. People like Rob who is involved with [a non-profit woodworking business]. I now believe that the Latrobe Valley may have a life after the

SEC after seeing that there are people who are involved with alternative types of business.

This first-hand knowledge of the diverse economy highlighted to the community researchers ways of thinking about the economic present and future, other than that of the devastated and emptied region needing a replacement industry and special government assistance.

The second body of knowledge we introduced was that of the asset-based community development approach (ABCD) developed by John Kretzmann and John McKnight, primarily in the context of inner-city neighbourhoods in large North American cities. Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) argue that disadvantaged communities (like the Latrobe Valley) are thought of primarily in terms of needs and problems—unemployment, crime, violence, drug and alcohol abuse, gambling and so on. As a consequence expert assistance is sought to devise and implement programs and services that address the problems, thus positioning local residents as needy, dependent and lacking in the ability to formulate solutions. This needs-based approach, however, masks the multitude of assets that comprise any community. The assets are not just physical (disused buildings, vacant lots, empty shops, run-down parks and so on) or institutional (such as local schools, hospitals, councils), most importantly they include the abilities and skills, dreams and passions of those groups in the community who are most readily thought of in terms of needs (such as ex-SEC workers and unemployed young people). Starting with the assets of these supposedly needy and deficient groups means that community development efforts will position people as active and capable citizens.

Applied to the Latrobe Valley the community researchers could see that the prevailing representation was of a needy region made up of people with problems, and that this was reflected in community and economic development efforts. Social service agencies, for example, offered courses in life skills, and numeracy and literacy; health professionals provided support and rehabilitation groups; and development agencies sought to attract employers and investment from outside the region. The community researchers could also see that their local knowledge expressed through the photo-essays was consistent with the needs-based approach. An asset-based approach, in contrast, might highlight how it was possible that people could act on their skills and ideas to build community and economic projects. Taken together, the diverse economy and the asset-based approach offered enabling representations that had the potential to shift selves from dependent and powerless subject positions to capable, active and contributing economic actors.

To bring these insights into the ongoing conversations about community and economic development the research team adapted a Portrait of Gifts from Kretz-

<sup>18</sup> For an elaboration of the diverse economy framework see <http://www.communityeconomies.org/info.html#papers> or Cameron and Gibson-Graham (2003).

mann et al. (1997). Essentially the Portrait was a survey of the multitude of everyday skills that people have, as well as an inventory of their interests, ideas and passions, but it was not administered as an individualised survey. Instead, with permission from the facilitators of the existing groups and programs they were regularly visiting, the community researchers used it as a tool to stimulate group conversation and discussion about people's activities, ideas and dreams.<sup>19</sup> While detailed information about individuals was gathered, more importantly those who participated also found out about the skills and ideas of others in their groups. Invariably the process brought surprises as people had the opportunity to talk about aspects of their lives that previously had not been relevant to the various training programs and courses they were participating in. One of the community researchers, Yvonne, describes the process in the following way:

It was often, this sounds a bit strange, it was often those who you would think would have regarded themselves as not having anything to offer, who would say "Oh I've got something to offer" [like] Mark I suppose. People might say that he hasn't got necessarily much to offer, but he knows he's got heaps to offer. He knows that.

(Interview, 12 May 2000)

In other words, the emphasis shifted around from the things that people could not do—get a job, read the newspaper, write a resumé, use a computer, manage their anger and frustrations, and so on—to the things that they were already doing—such as mowing other people's lawns, helping out around their children's schools, fixing broken bicycles, sewing their own clothes, restoring old films and film equipment, setting up an emergency neighbourhood communication system and driving elderly neighbours to the shops. The process provided tangible "proof" that the Latrobe Valley was replete with people assets and an already active diverse economy. Moreover, it provided an important counter to the representation of the Latrobe Valley and its people as decimated and debilitated.<sup>20</sup>

In this stage of contextualising the current situation two bodies of work—that of the diverse economy

and the asset-based approach to community development—were drawn on to challenge the prevailing local representation and develop new insights into the Latrobe Valley and its people. Importantly, these fresh insights into the abilities and assets of those who had been hard hit by the restructuring process provided the foundation for new economic identities in the diverse economy and subjectivities in which the unemployed and others could see themselves as capable, active and contributing citizens. In the final stage, these nascent subject positions were built on and community and economic projects initiated.

### 3.3. *Working towards change*

The second stage of the project brought about a shift in perception and understanding (including self-understanding); the third stage utilised a series of activities designed to affirm people's growing sense of their own and others' capacities, and provide opportunities for people to act on that sense. This implementation stage of the Community Partnering project was the longest, starting in September 1999 and officially running until the funded project's formal conclusion in December 2000.<sup>21</sup> It started with a series of small workshops followed by a larger community workshop. At the small workshops groups from the same program such as the numeracy and literacy classes came together to examine and reflect upon the results of the Portraits of Gifts. These events were arranged to see if collective possibilities could be nurtured in an environment of fun, creativity, exploration and developing trust. Participants were invited to work together to prepare pizza or scones for everyone to eat and to brainstorm ideas for community and economic projects. These workshops generated high levels of enthusiasm and two groups formed almost immediately to explore their ideas for a community garden and car maintenance workshop further. A larger community workshop brought together all the groups who had been involved with Community Partnering for an expanded brainstorm of possible ideas. At this workshop over 60 ideas for community and economic projects were identified (see Table 1) and people started to think about which ones they would like to work on. All the workshops provided a space for re-visioning

<sup>19</sup> This was sometimes a struggle as the facilitators who "serviced" these groups were unfamiliar with the idea of action research and often suggested that copies of the Portrait questionnaire be left with them to distribute to their participants (or "clients") individually. This highlighted the importance of explaining the participatory and action oriented nature of the research not only to groups like the unemployed, but also to the social service providers.

<sup>20</sup> See Cameron and Gibson (2001) for how this information was visually documented for the community and distributed widely in brochure form.

<sup>21</sup> Beyond that point a form of Community Partnering continued: local residents continued to develop and manage the initiatives that started during the life of the project; two of the community researchers joined these initiatives as active members; and the academic researchers have conducted yearly visits to track what has happened and provide an opportunity for participants to reflect on the process that was begun in 1999.

Table 1  
Ideas for community and economic projects

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<i>Making and exchanging projects</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fixing old bikes</li> <li>• Tool recycling and lending library</li> <li>• Making wooden furniture without power tools (bodging)</li> <li>• Sharing boat building skills</li> <li>• Making bush furniture</li> <li>• Lawn mowing for elderly people</li> <li>• Fixing broken furniture</li> <li>• Furniture exchange</li> <li>• Half-used paint bank and exchange</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dress pattern exchange</li> <li>• Fibre and fabric bank</li> <li>• Sharing garden tools</li> <li>• Book binding</li> <li>• Learning exchange that utilizes “gray power”</li> <li>• Handyman assistance for the aged</li> <li>• Inventors’ resource centre</li> <li>• Community wood workshop</li> <li>• Inventory of skills</li> </ul>
<i>Cultural projects</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet café for youth in small towns</li> <li>• Community film making workshop</li> <li>• Photographic developing room</li> <li>• Youth newspaper</li> <li>• Matching social dancers with learners</li> <li>• Music festivals</li> <li>• Music workshops</li> <li>• Communal cooking kitchen</li> <li>• SEC recognition day</li> <li>• Community bush dances</li> <li>• Documenting family histories and personal stories</li> <li>• Music jam sessions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sheet music and or musical instrument exchange</li> <li>• Book reading</li> <li>• Matching people who play musical instruments with those who want to learn</li> <li>• Street parties</li> <li>• Collectors’ directory</li> <li>• Art and beautification projects</li> <li>• Christmas street decorations</li> <li>• Murals and painting spaces</li> <li>• Designing trees</li> <li>• Art celebrations between Christmas and New Year</li> </ul>
<i>Environmental projects</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fixing gardens for elderly or others in need of assistance</li> <li>• Wetland management</li> <li>• Public bushland care</li> <li>• Cleaning up waterways for children’s play</li> <li>• Revegetation projects</li> <li>• Backyard seed banks for native plants</li> <li>• Water recycling off roofs</li> <li>• Backyard tank yabbie and fish farming</li> <li>• Recycling demolition materials</li> <li>• Community chook yard</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Garden produce exchange</li> <li>• Community gardens</li> <li>• Teaching young people bush appreciation</li> <li>• Collection point for sawdust and manure for community composting</li> <li>• Register of public open space that could be used for community projects</li> <li>• Recycling centre for clean industrial waste to be used by pre-schools, primary schools etc. for art activities</li> </ul>
<i>Ideas for specific workshops</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How to set up a community garden</li> <li>• Cooperatives—how do they work?</li> <li>• How to set up a community toolshed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sleep workshop</li> <li>• Communication and networking workshop</li> <li>• Management options for community projects</li> </ul>

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selves and a collective context in which the process of becoming different subjects could begin.

A second activity involved several ‘How-To Workshops’ as a way of furthering the process of cultivating new subjects. At the first workshop those who were interested in the idea of a community garden came to find out more. One of the founding members of CERES, a community garden in inner Melbourne, spoke about their beginnings over 20 years ago on a seven-hectare land-fill site, and the progress they had made to become a non-profit organisation with an annual budget of over \$1.6 million and 25 full-time equivalent positions (see [www.ceres.org.au](http://www.ceres.org.au)). This presentation inspired the group and so a bus trip to CERES was quickly organised. This and subsequent bus trips to three other community gardens were pivotal in giving the group confidence that they could build a community garden. It was also the

activity that seemed to confirm a definite shift from the subject position of dependence and victimhood to that of capable and contributing citizen. It is worth considering accounts of the bus trip by two local residents involved in the project:

Jean: It floored me, CERES, with their chickens and their bees and their recycled water, and the excitement and the fun of the group [on the bus]. I really enjoyed the bus tour. You found yourself thinking. But what really got me was the crowd [on the bus]—it’s a mixed group of people they’re trying so hard to do something and we’re talking about for the whole community. You’re talking about elderly citzts, street kids, your drug addicts, correctional services, Work for the Dole.

Kathie: So on the trip, just explain, just try and describe, think back to sitting on the bus, you got on the bus and looked at all these strange people, what did you think, “What am I doing here?”.

Jean: *Laughs*. Yes I did. I sat up the back of the bus, knitting very quietly, trying to mind my own business, but Silvio kept yacking in my ear all day. *Laughs* They’re just a mixed group that if they’re trying to do so much work, trying to do something you’ve got to find where you fit, what they’re trying to do, if it’s such a good cause. To me it’s like a giant big social club. Forget the gardening!

(Interview, 10 May 2000)

Joe: And then the bus trip and when we got back it was like wow these definitely are the people on the bus trip that are going to be part of the community garden. It was different though, we were all just definitely unique, I thought that. And everyone got on friendly. And I’m certain that for a while after that trip everyone kept meeting and most of them are all still around. I know when I came after the bus trip I was saying to Jess, “I sat back with this lady and she was telling me all these things that are happening in her life.” [*turn tape over*] When we got there you could just tell that it was something more than just a bus trip for people. It was to start thinking and get ideas. And the whole thing was an opportunity for us to get to know each other a bit and you can hear what others are interested in.

(Interview, 12 May 2000)

As Jean and Joe intimate the bus trip provided the experiential basis for building connection and relationships in which trust and respect could become crucial dimensions.<sup>22</sup> Their accounts highlight what we see as three important micropolitical acts that the action research environment hoped to foster. One was the suspension of judgement that allows people who seem very different to take the opportunity to learn more about each other. A second was the connecting across difference through the positive affective register of pleasure and enjoyment. In their accounts Jean and Joe highlight the sense of fun, excitement and delight associated with the bus trip. To maintain the “buzz” of the bus trip and foster the process of relationship-building other fun events, like birthday picnics, combined bbqs and working bees on the garden site, and evenings at a local pizza bar, became part of the regular schedule of the group. Interestingly the process of collectively preparing and eating food that was used to such good effect in the smaller workshops continued to feature in this stage. The

<sup>22</sup> For another account of a bus trip that had the effect of shifting subjectivities and generating identification with new economic identities see *Community Economies Collective* (2001).

third micropolitical act was exploring new ideas and new ways of approaching issues and challenges. For the garden group, the bus trip to CERES appeared to activate micro shifts in visceral and affective registers that stimulated new becomings. The experience demonstrated that a community garden was possible and it fuelled people’s imaginations about what might be created in the Latrobe Valley. Through these acts of mobilisation we see the process of a group forming and collectively creating ideas about a potential future. This seemed a contrast from the more familiar version of political mobilisation in which collective action is oriented towards a programmatic vision of the way the world should be.

In October 1999 some of the workshop participants formed the Latrobe Valley Community Environmental Gardens (LVCEG) with a Committee of Management made up of community people some of whom were unemployed, retired, from non-English speaking backgrounds, of varying ages and with intellectual and physical disabilities. Council allocated a disused three-hectare caravan site that it had once managed to the group and they set to to turn the derelict site into a community and environmental garden. For most members this meant a major shift in their subject position, with people who were more used to seeing themselves as welfare recipients taking on new roles as managers, fund-raisers, publicists and decision-makers. Reflecting on this process, Leanne, one of the community researchers, says:

The people who are getting involved are getting new skills. And I’ve watched especially the young kids grow, and they’ve matured and they’ve become more professional in themselves.

Kathie: Can you give an example?

Leanne: I guess the crunch came the other week when we took Claire and Paul over to [the launch of the new Youth Centre] and they’d go up to people and they’d say “I’m from Latrobe Valley Community Environmental Gardens”, cause they had their name badges on. And they were just out there and they were proud to say “I’m involved in this community group and this community group is important” and they weren’t scared or intimidated by the politicians who were there. They were just dressed in their street clothes, they weren’t dressed up or anything. I was just really impressed by them to me they’ve always been—what’s the word—confident kids, but that confidence really shone and it was a really proud confidence to say “I’m part of this, and we’ve just come from the sausage sizzle and we’re raising money”.

(Interview, 10 May 2000)

Through the Community Partnering process many community members assumed additional economic subject

positions associated with the diverse economy. Those who took up these positions and found them personally ‘empowering’ were to find that they were not free of subjection, or of forms of governing. They encountered the challenges of new rules and procedures to follow, meetings to attend, forms to complete, funds to manage, and other people to attend to, listen to and cooperate with. A sense of empowerment came not from a putative “freedom from subjection” but from growth of a collective appreciation of the value attached to these alternative identities and their new selves.

Activities like the workshops and bus trips mobilised desires for new initiatives and engendered connections between people interested in realising these desires. By the end of 1999 three other projects had commenced. The first was Santa’s Workshop, which initially operated in 1999 from October to December, but for the past four years has been open two days a week throughout the year to make large outdoor Christmas decorations. The decorations are sold to private businesses and town committees, and “profits” used to purchase timber and paint for local residents to make their own domestic decorations closer to Christmas. The Council provides the premises—a disused pre-school building—and covers the cost of electricity and public liability insurance. The driving force behind the workshop is an ex-SEC worker who had been making decorations for his own house for many years, but now manages Santa’s Workshop and teaches other people how to make their own decorations.

A second project, Latrobe Community Workshed at Newborough, provides tools, equipment and a workspace in a disused shop-front in the Valley town of Newborough. Local and regional residents use the Workshed to restore broken furniture and make products commercially, like Christmas hamper boxes, to support its operations. A retiree and a disabled mother and daughter primarily manage the Workshed.

Latrobe Cyber Circus started with a one-day circus workshop that drew a range of young people including a group of unemployed young people already active in the techno-electronica music scene and interested in combining this with more traditional circus skills (hence the name Cyber Circus). The level of interest was so strong that funding was attained through the State Health Department for a one-week workshop during which a group trained in all aspects of circus and prepared a performance for schools based on a Dr Seuss story.

By December 2000 and completion of the formally funded Community Partnering project four initiatives had been started that drew on the creative ideas and energies of local residents. In two years Community Partnering had built strong connections with local residents, brought about a shift in the vision of what was possible in the Latrobe Valley and worked with groups

to act on this vision. People who had never imagined themselves as able to make a major contribution to their community had come together and developed innovative projects for the Latrobe Valley. At a combined workshop and social event to mark the end of funding and withdrawal of university support, participants looked back with both surprise and pride at what had been achieved.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The Community Partnering process highlights what poststructuralism can add to PAR. It demonstrates the limits of relying too-heavily on familiar local knowledges and shows the value of introducing new languages and representations to shift entrenched understandings and open up new and previously unthinkable possibilities. The focus on representation also means attending to the ways in which subjects are discursively constituted. This involves moving away from a narrow focus on single identities that are associated with structures like capitalism to interrogating the diversity economic, social, cultural and political subjectivities that comprise any one subject. The intention here is to identify how subjects are constituted in ways that limit their possibilities but more importantly to detect glimmers of new forms of subjectivity that offer enabling futures. These glimmers are built on by activities that engage emotional and visceral registers and tap into pre-cognitive states. This approach does not exclude collective political action more usually associated with PAR, but draws attention to another micropolitical dimension that is part of the process of transforming subjects.

In the three years since the project formally ended the four initiatives have followed different pathways. The Latrobe Cyber Circus folded in mid-2001, after a series of conflicts between some of the young people in the group. Santa’s Workshop and the Latrobe Community Workshed at Newborough are continuing on a steady course. The biggest and most ambitious project, the Latrobe Valley Community and Environmental Gardens, continued until November 2003 and achieved a remarkable amount in that time. Members of the management committee obtained training in a variety of arenas from occupational health and safety procedures to grant proposal writing and community development, the old caravan site was cleared and fenced (a condition of planning permission), a landscape design commissioned, numerous working bees held to implement the plan, and two crops of vegetables produced. In mid-2003 the project was destabilised when the Chairperson resigned and rumours circulated that the site was to become the focus of a development application with the result that the management committee decided to disband the project (although there were members keen to keep working

on the site). From these outcomes we can begin to discern the factors that might contribute to the longer-term success of projects that are initiated through this type of PAR. This learning is crucial as we continue to build on the PAR approach developed in the Latrobe Valley in South-East Queensland, Indonesia and the Philippines.

The attempt to develop a different economic knowledge of the Latrobe Valley was a strength of the project that we are finding is readily replicable in different research localities, each with their own unique diverse economies. Local residents readily embraced the representation of the Latrobe Valley as already economically diverse and its people as already capable and active economic subjects. In particular the distinction between the needs-based and asset-based approaches resonated, with many able to identify how they were serviced as needy subjects in a way that denied their many capacities. This shift in understanding and self-understanding was strengthened by involvement in events designed to mobilise desires for community based economic projects and resulted in participants forming strong friendships and bonds, even across the unlikeliest of connections. This in turn created a context in which people enjoyed working with each other and were therefore willing to commit time, energy and passion to developing their projects after Community Partnering had formally come to a close. In sum, the project demonstrated that economic identities and forms of subjectivity associated with the diverse economy could be shaped through a focus on representation and micropolitical activities.

A less successful aspect of the project was the process of working with our industry partner, the local Council. The research was initially conceived as a collaboration between university researchers and Council representatives and staff to pioneer a pilot project that could, if successful, be expanded in situ and replicated elsewhere. Soon after the project started, however, the political ground shifted and the Council-university relationship was undermined with the key Council worker being redirected to work on other projects (and indeed leaving the employ of Council before the project was completed).<sup>23</sup> Council fulfilled its obligations under the funding agreement (such as providing a liaison officer, office space and administrative support for university and community researchers), but the initial commitment to provide ongoing support for initiatives piloted during the life of Community Partnering was no longer there. As a result the initiatives were largely left to fend for themselves

once the project formally wound up in 2000. During the two years of the pilot Community Partnering project considerable progress was made towards the aim of developing and testing an approach to economic development that focused on community-based economic projects and involved those hardest hit by the restructuring process. It is therefore disappointing that Council did not carry the project forward and continue to provide a model for the other agencies in Australia and elsewhere that are following the steps outlined in the online project resource kit (Cameron and Gibson, 2001).

On reflection we can see that we underestimated the level of sedimented resistance within the institution to a change in thinking and the difficulty of shifting institutional actors into forms of governing that are based on a different set of presuppositions. For example, when a report was released identifying the most disadvantaged communities in Victoria and New South Wales (Vinson, 1999), there was disbelief and outrage from some in Council that towns in the Latrobe Valley were not at the bottom of the Victorian list. Calls for special State and Federal government funding and assistance were premised on the claim that the Latrobe Valley had the nation's most disadvantaged communities—a representation that was somewhat challenged by the whole approach we were taking in the Community Partnering project. There was a marked contrast between on one hand local residents' rejection of the needs-based approach and their willingness to explore new possibilities involving different communities in the Valley working together, and on the other Council's investment in the needs-based approach and some councilors' refusal to relinquish their local *neighbourhood* allegiances in the interests of *regional* community economic development. For us this highlights the critical importance of focusing more effort on transforming resistant subjects within the institutions that have the power to support and scale up local initiatives.

To undertake the project of working with institutions and trying to build institutional support for PAR projects such as Community Partnering a whole set of meso-level political strategies need to be developed. In hindsight our toolbox was limited to the one strategy of connecting with one key Council employee. Learning from other PAR projects (e.g. Reardon et al., 1993) we can see that gaining the support of and working in conjunction with a range of long-term community players like non-government organisations, churches and unions is an important meso-political strategy. In our current PAR projects we are therefore working with a number of non-government agencies as well as state agencies to ensure that the research approach is well-understood and responsibility shared between government and non-government players. Our aim is to build on the lessons from the Latrobe Valley poststructuralist PAR project as we continue to work with local

<sup>23</sup> It must be noted that the then Latrobe Shire (later Latrobe City) had only recently been formed from an amalgamation of primarily four local government areas and the Council was the first governing body to be elected since State-appointed administrators had assumed control of local government operations in 1994. Councillors were unused to operating for and on behalf of the whole region and tended to be preoccupied with parochial concerns.

communities in a range of locations to bring about social, economic and political transformations.

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