

Action Research and Transformation: Lessons from Three Decades of Practice

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Abstract

In this paper I look back over three decades of doing participatory action research and extract some lessons that bear upon the pressing issues of our time—namely, how to act in the face of unsustainable socio-economic growth trajectories and cascading environmental degradation. I start with my circuitous journey into action research and to the importance of human subjectivity to transformation processes. I then trace the thinking that shaped a postmodern feminist social research agenda. Next follows an account of developing a research design for poststructuralist participatory action research (PPAR) that foregrounds understanding ‘ways of living’ in place. Drawing on actual action research projects, the lessons that emerge concern the importance of 1) inventory and bearing witness to difference; 2) new techniques of resubjectivation that encourage transformation; and 3) shifting the action focus from human subjects to socio-technical assemblages in which humans, material infrastructures, habits and experimentation are interwoven. Throughout my three decades of involvement with action research I have learnt about the limits to the durability of subjectivity change and the need to work on support from wider ecosystems of governance, infrastructure, health and social expectation.

Keywords: subjectivity; inventory; economic difference; resubjectivation; poststructuralist; socio-technical assemblage

Resum. *Investigació-acció i transformació: lliçons de tres dècades de pràctica*

En aquest article repasso tres dècades de recerca-acció participativa i n'extrec alguns ensenyaments que tenen a veure amb els problemes urgents del nostre temps: com actuar davant de trajectòries de creixement socioeconòmic insostenibles i una degradació ambiental en cascada. Començo amb el meu tortuós viatge cap a la investigació-acció i la importància de la subjectivitat humana en els processos de transformació. A continuació, traço el pensament que va donar forma a una agenda de recerca social feminista postmoderna. A continuació, exposo el desenvolupament d'un disseny de recerca per a la investigació-acció participativa postestructuralista (IAPP) que posa l'accent en la comprensió de les «formes de vida» en el lloc. A partir de projectes reals de recerca-acció, les lliçons que se'n desprenen fan referència a la importància de 1) inventariar i donar testimoni de la diferència, 2) noves tècniques de resubjectivació que fomentin la transformació i 3) desplaçar el centre d'atenció de l'acció dels subjectes humans als conjunts sociotècnics en què s'entrellacen els éssers humans, les infraestructures materials, els hàbits i l'experimentació. Al llarg de les meves tres dècades de participació en la investigació-acció, he après sobre els límits en la durabilitat del canvi de subjectivitat i la necessitat de treballar en el suport d'ecosistemes més amplis de governança, infraestructura, salut i expectativa social.

Paraules clau: subjectivitat; inventari; diferència econòmica; resubjectivació; postestructuralista; assemblatge sociotècnic

Resumen. *Investigación-acción y transformación: lecciones de tres décadas de práctica*

En este artículo repaso tres décadas de investigación-acción participativa y extraigo algunas enseñanzas que tienen que ver con los problemas acuciantes de nuestro tiempo: cómo actuar ante trayectorias de crecimiento socioeconómico insostenibles y una degradación ambiental en cascada. Comienzo con mi tortuoso viaje hacia la investigación-acción y la importancia de la subjetividad humana en los procesos de transformación. A continuación, trazo el pensamiento que dio forma a una agenda de investigación social feminista posmoderna. A continuación, expongo el desarrollo de un diseño de investigación para la investigación-acción participativa posestructuralista (IAPP) que hace hincapié en la comprensión de las «formas de vida» en el lugar. A partir de proyectos reales de investigación-acción, las lecciones que se desprenden se refieren a la importancia de 1) inventariar y dar testimonio de la diferencia, 2) nuevas técnicas de resubjetivación que fomenten la transformación y 3) desplazar el centro de atención de la acción de los sujetos humanos a los conjuntos sociotécnicos en los que se entrelazan los seres humanos, las infraestructuras materiales, los hábitos y la experimentación. A lo largo de mis tres décadas de participación en la investigación-acción he aprendido acerca de los límites en la durabilidad del cambio de subjetividad y la necesidad de trabajar en el apoyo de ecosistemas más amplios de gobernanza, infraestructura, salud y expectativa social.

Palabras clave: subjetividad; inventario; diferencia económica; resubjetivación; posestructuralista; ensamblaje sociotécnico

Résumé. *Recherche-action et transformation : Leçons tirées de trois décennies de pratique*

Dans cet article, je passe en revue trois décennies de recherche-action participative et j'en tire quelques leçons qui se rapportent aux questions urgentes de notre époque : comment agir face à des trajectoires de croissance socio-économique insoutenable et à une dégradation environnementale en cascade. Je commence par évoquer mon parcours tortueux dans la recherche-action et l'importance de la subjectivité humaine dans les processus de

transformation. Je retrace ensuite la pensée qui a façonné un programme de recherche sociale féministe postmoderne. J'expose ensuite le développement d'un modèle de recherche pour la recherche-action participative poststructuraliste (RAP) qui met l'accent sur la compréhension des "modes de vie" sur place. S'inspirant de projets de recherche-action réels, les leçons qui en ressortent concernent l'importance 1) d'inventorier et de témoigner de la différence, 2) de nouvelles techniques de resubjectivation qui favorisent la transformation, et 3) de déplacer le centre d'intérêt de l'action des sujets humains vers les assemblages socio-techniques dans lesquels les humains, les infrastructures matérielles, les habitudes et l'expérimentation sont entrelacés. Au cours de mes trois décennies d'implication dans la recherche-action, j'ai appris les limites de la durabilité du changement de subjectivité et la nécessité de travailler en soutien à des écosystèmes plus larges de gouvernance, d'infrastructure, de santé et d'attentes sociales.

Mots-clés : subjectivité ; inventaire ; différence économique ; resubjectivation ; post-structuraliste ; assemblage sociotechnique ; assemblage sociotechnique

Summary

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| 1. Introduction | 5. Action research in a poststructuralist vein—reimagining The Economy |
| 2. Pre-history: from 'researching on' to 'researching with' human subjects | 6. Action research, commoning and transition design |
| 3. Postmodern feminist social research: co-researching ways of living | 7. Conclusion |
| 4. Evolving a research design for poststructuralist participatory action research (PPAR) | Bibliographical references |

1. Introduction

In the first action research project I ever worked on there was a community researcher whom I'll call Lila, who frustratingly answered in response to any question posed to her: 'Stuffed if I know.' The emphasis was on the 'I'. And in Australian slang this phrase indicated that she had no idea. It was a kneejerk reaction to being placed on the spot and asked for an opinion on something that perhaps she had no formulated thoughts ready to expound. It was apparent that Lila refused to play the game of the social research process, which relies on the fiction of a centred, knowing subject who can report on feelings, opinions or action at the drop of a hat or the upward inflection of the interviewer's voice. As our training workshop for community researchers proceeded, I discovered that this initial response was just an opening. In fact, Lila knew a great deal, but the process of research needed to allow time and space for knowledge to be put into words and voiced (Gibson-Graham, 1994). After a while, and with encouraging prompts from others, she readily shared her thoughts and feelings. Lila helped to give shape to what 'I' came to refer to as *post-modern feminist social research*

and ‘*action research in a poststructuralist vein*’, an approach that I pioneered in the early 1990s.¹

This response from Lila sprang to mind when I was asked to address the Danish Action Research Network’s annual conference in early 2021, where the theme was “The role of action research in the Great Transition”. The questions the conference organizers posed to me were:

1. How can we (as action researchers) democratically renew our way of living and the social- and nature-relations it implies?
2. How do we act upon root-causes rather than symptoms of plural crisis?
3. How can critical research and exemplary practices jointly nurture sustainable futures?

I could assume that attendees at this conference all agreed that action research, as one of the pedagogies of the oppressed, democratizes and decolonizes research, speaks truth to power and makes sure that non-experts have a say in what is studied. But it seemed from the questions being posed that there was some uncertainty about where this radical research positioning stands today in the face of voracious socio-economic growth trajectories and cascading environmental degradation. The Great Transition referenced in the conference title refers to what is needed if we take seriously growing income inequality, racial injustice, gender violence, environmental destruction and health threats associated with the Great Acceleration (Steffen et al., 2015). I was being asked what could a poststructuralist approach to participatory action research (PPAR)—that is, an approach that challenges dominant monocultural knowledge systems and accepts the decentered nature of subjectivity and the power of not knowing—contribute?

After an initial ‘Stuffed if I know!’ reaction, these questions became a provocation to reflect on *my* style of action research. In this paper I look back over three decades of doing participatory action research, and I extract some lessons that bear upon these questions in turn.

Reader beware! I am not aiming for any kind of systematic overview here, but merely to explore in retrospect what my experience of action research might contribute to the urgent calls to transform our way of living on this planet. The paper starts with my circuitous journey into action research and to the importance of human subjectivity to transformation processes. It then traces the thinking that shaped a postmodern feminist social research agenda. Next follows an account of developing a research design for PPAR that foregrounded understanding ‘ways of living’ in place—in this case, ones shaped by undemocratic social relations and extractive environmental relations. The

1. The quotes around I signify that this process of development took place in conversation with key others, specifically Julie Graham, with whom from 1992 I shared a joint authorial name, J.K. Gibson-Graham, and Jenny Cameron, who co-designed and ran my second main PPAR project and helped to clarify this approach (Cameron and Gibson, 2005a).

action research project examined here engaged critically with the status quo and raised the question of how to renew the ways of living of shift workers and their families. Lessons learnt about the importance of inventory and bearing witness to difference are relevant to question 1, about how we can democratically renew our way of living and the social- and nature-relations it implies.

The next discussion centres on a project that began in the ruins of deindustrialization and decline, where existing ways of living had been destroyed and where there was some appetite to act upon the deep causes of regional crisis. Bearing on question 2 about how to act upon root-causes rather than symptoms of plural crisis, there are lessons to be learnt about new techniques of resubjectivation that encourage transformation, and other lessons about limits to the durability of subjectivity change without support from wider ecosystems of governance, infrastructure, health and social expectation. Finally, the last project engages with transition design and processes of commoning to nurture sustainable futures (question 3) by shifting the action focus from human subjects to socio-technical assemblages in which humans, material infrastructures, habits and experimentation are interwoven in built environments that are under pressure to change. The lessons are still emerging from this project, in which new ways of living with each other and with rising urban heat must be developed as a matter of survival.

2. Pre-history: from ‘researching on’ to ‘researching with’ human subjects

I started as an undergraduate researcher with a training in survey design and questionnaire-based social research, but gravitated towards qualitative methods including historical and participatory research. My honours thesis research on a remnant working-class community in Glebe, a rapidly gentrifying area of inner Sydney, involved using electoral rolls to seek out long-term residents of more than 40 years and contacting them to talk about the changes they had seen in the neighbourhood over their lifetimes (Gibson, 1975). I joined a social group of elderly residents who went on monthly bus trips to Sydney’s environs to spend the day together enjoying lunch and companionship. I learnt to crochet from one bus tripper, and I visited another wheelchair-bound resident in between day trips. As a resident in the area I was researching, I learnt to see the urban environment from the perspective of now-retired working-class people for whom Glebe had once been a tightly connected Anglo-Celtic community with distinct zones differentiated by income and occupation.

Soon after finishing this research, I came under the powerful spell of Marxist political economy and cast aside my interest in human subjects, their perceptions and life stories. At that time, it seemed that radical urban political economy had no need for the thoughts and feelings of people. The rent books and records of banks and building societies were all that was needed to grasp the exploitative dynamics of disinvestment and reinvestment in the city. Research for my PhD thesis (Gibson, 1981) was theoretical (on how to think about crisis and variation *within* the capitalist mode of production) and his-

torical (on the restructuring of the Australian coal industry from its inception as a convict-run state enterprise in 1828 to a rapidly globalizing sector in the late 1970s). Thinking back, it was executed in the historical materialist mode of Marx's method, as laid out in *Capital*, and drew on archives, company records and newspaper reports. Perhaps it was from Marx's three volumes that I gained a suspicion of subjects and their false consciousness, not to be trusted as sources of insight into the structure of the capitalist world.

It took a good decade for me to accept that talking to real, live people about their experiences of economic and social change might be useful to the research process. This realization was linked to the desire to be more involved in political change and the process of organization and 'conscientization'. My research on new forms of indentured labour, in the form of international contract labour migration, led me to talk to workers from the Philippines who had travelled to the Middle East as construction labourers, or to Hong Kong as domestic servants (Gibson and Graham, 1986). Their harrowing experiences of loss of any control over their lives stayed with me as I later came to recognize that the 'capitalist system' hosted slave class processes in the midst of a modern construction industry and within global cities. The insights into this new global workforce, with its distinctive motivations and tolerances, had implications for working-class unity and the hoped-for global mobilization that was advocated by radical social scientists as a vehicle of change. In a world where millions of people were signing up to indenture (or time-limited slavery) as a way of making ends meet for their families, a centred, working-class subject was hard to find.

Returning to face-to-face research still seemed kind of weak and unimportant. Especially when it was revealing the disorganization of a global working class. It was at this stage in my intellectual evolution that I was relieved from a host of dilemmas by poststructuralist philosophy, anti-essentialist Marxism and 'postmodern' feminism. I was attracted to the idea of a decentred subject, of a self who occupied multiple subject positions, of a subject who participated in more than one class process and thus had contradictory 'class interests'. This provoked a rethinking of what class politics might be, and more generally what transformation in a society where multiple class processes coexisted might involve.

My interest in working *with* people in the research process, not *on* people, had drawn me to participatory action research as a method. Of course, this approach as developed by politicized educators working in the Global South (such as Paolo Friere and Fals Borda) had strong connections with liberation theology and Marxian thinking. Working with marginalized people to name, understand and confront their exploitation, that is, to develop a pedagogy of the oppressed, this was a pathway towards liberation from oppression. But it seemed that this approach relied on the possibility of activating a radical political subjectivity and awakening a centred subject of resistance.

How could this approach cope with the idea of decentred subjects and multiple political subjectivities? Feminist research pointed to the very differ-

ent interests of men and women in the same living situation, and the possible suppression of women's concerns within a working-class-focused program of change. These were problems that needed to be addressed if participatory action research was to be conducted 'in a poststructuralist vein'. These questions about subjectivity and social transformation accompanied me on my journey to rethink action research.

3. Postmodern feminist social research: co-researching ways of living

The opportunity to experiment with a different mode of action research was provoked by an issue that was raising concerned interest in the coal mining towns of Central Queensland in the early 1990s. These townships had been built by global mining companies to house workers associated with huge open cut coal mines producing coking and steaming coal for export to the rapidly growing economies in Asia (Gibson, 1990, 1991). Many towns were built from scratch close to their mine, while others took existing small settlements and expanded them into small-sized towns by appending large clusters of company-owned residences. A distinctive feature of the housing supplied was that the hierarchy of the mine site was replicated in the housing styles, with managers and technicians in 'high set' houses up off the ground and workers in 'low set' houses. With each municipality in Central Queensland wanting their 'own' mining town and each corporation interested in maintaining maximum control over 'their' workforce, the Queensland State Government allowed multiple small towns to be built, rather than one or two medium-sized towns servicing different mining operations. This decentralized town infrastructure was subsequently to become a regional development disaster, but in the early 1990s these communities were thriving, despite being small and with only limited services. Much of the social life of the community revolved around sporting activities on the weekends, when families would come together to participate or watch team sports, with the regulation BBQ to follow.

A matter of concern that significantly affected livelihoods in these communities arose in the early 1990s. A change in work arrangements was introduced by the companies to increase productivity. It involved miners working a seven-day roster which, in effect, destroyed the temporality of social activity in the towns. This roster meant that miners worked through the weekend and were 'off work' on only one weekend every month. The implications for families were keenly felt by those with children. Wives could no longer rely on some respite from childcare and other household tasks on the weekend. The implications for townships were dire. Social and sporting clubs could no longer rely on patronage, with two thirds of the workforce working on the weekend at any one time. It was not long before it became known as the 'divorce roster'.

The decision to accept the new roster had been supported by many miners as it meant an increase in pay. While many workers had previously done overtime work at double pay on some weekends, it was now a mandated part of the work contract. Women, however, had not been consulted about this change,

as they were not members of the mineworkers' union and were not included in any company-initiated roundtables. They were, in effect, locked out of a decision that had huge implications for their workload in the household and community. They had not raised their voices in any organized opposition.

This issue that my research had stumbled across revealed a significant flaw in a class-based politics focused on the workplace (Gibson, 1992a). In older (mainly underground mining) coal mining communities, wives of miners often belonged to organizations that were companions to the union, the Miner's Women's Auxiliaries. These organisations came to the fore especially at times of crisis, for example where mine closures caused unemployment, or a mine disaster occurred. Women came together to support the miners and their families, providing food, clothing, emergency accommodation and other assistance. They also took to the streets in demonstrations alongside their menfolk during strikes or other forms of political action. Women were expected to align their economic interests with their partners.

In the case of the seven-day roster, there was no easy alignment of interests between miners and their partners. The identity and interests of the miner's wife was challenged. The action research started from a recognition that women were not centred subjects. There was no collective subject to awaken by breaking the oppressive chains of false consciousness. Women occupied multiple economic and social subject positions. They were miners' wives, yes, but they were also mothers, homeworkers, carers and community volunteers, or had previously been employees in other occupations before moving to the mining region, where employment for women was almost non-existent. These women lived heterogeneous lives, laboured in diverse ways, identified with multiple images of womanhood. So, was it possible to conceive of a collective action to improve livelihoods led by women in these towns? This question was the motivation behind my experiment in post-modern feminist action research.

4. Evolving a research design for poststructuralist participatory action research (PPAR)

Central to the design of action research is the involvement of research subjects in the research process itself. In this case my focus was on women and how they could be more influential over processes in the mine site that affected them. I made the decision to work only with women, and to employ them as 'Community Researchers' (CRs). The lack of paid employment opportunities for women in these remote, single industry towns meant that most were confined to the home. Expending the project funds to train and pay women as researchers was a political act in itself—it was one way of addressing the economic power imbalance of these towns. It also meant that recruitment was relatively easy. I was assisted in the process of CR selection by a regional social worker who lived at some distance from the towns selected for study. There were few requirements for selection. Women had to be living in a household with a miner on the seven-day roster and they had to be able to

attend a two-day and two-night training session away from home in another town, separate from their own.

The research was sited in four different mining towns. Three women from each town were recruited as CRs. The plan was that they would be trained to conduct interviews with women in their social circle about the impact the roster was having on their lives. To get the perspectives of women at different stages of the life course, I recruited one woman from each town with preschool children, one with school-age children, and one with no children at home. The project thus enrolled individuals in a process of both first-person research (whereby women were invited to adopt an inquiring approach to their own lives) and second-person research (whereby the CRs were invited into a cooperative inquiry with each other to explore a matter of mutual concern). In the process they reached out to others in their circle of connection to gather information and conduct conversations.

Once recruitment had been completed, we began a first cycle of research, which involved a training workshop facilitated by my colleague, the regional social worker, and myself. This involved the women traveling to Tieri, another mining town, where research was not being conducted. The reasons for this were multiple. I was interested to see if it would be possible to build solidarity between women across places. I was conscious that by taking people out of their familiar comfort zone and inviting all the CRs to come together away from their homes would instil a certain freedom, and perhaps curiosity.

The training process and the women's reactions to it *was* the research in many ways. Ostensibly the task was to get familiar with the interview schedule, ground test the questions and learn interviewing skills. The interview questions aimed to develop an inventory of the workload of women and men in the household and the timetable of this work over a 24-hour period and over a week.

During the introductions at the outset of the training many women had pointed to differences that set them aside from others (as not affected by the roster change, having a cooperative husband, being strong enough to 'manage'). However, as the training proceeded and concrete experiences were shared, there developed more of a sense of recognition of similarity and connection. Training involved learning how to conduct and record an interview. Inexperience with this kind of activity brought everyone to the same level. Listening and prompting skills were developed. The community researchers practiced on each other, and suggested modifications to the interview schedule. This constituted one cycle of action-reflection-modification focused on method.

The event was significant for the participants—it provided time and space for individual self-inquiry and the beginnings of group reflection, as familiarity and trust started to build. After some nervousness at the outset, it increasingly became a social success. The workshops were held in a community centre and the women were put up in a nearby motel, with all expenses paid. Staying away from home and family, having all the food provisioning and travel arrangements done for them, preparing meals together in a big kitchen and eating together, hanging out as a group of motivated and adventurous women:

all these factors contributed to making the training a rather festive event. I remember observing and participating in pleasures shared, as well as serious and sometimes confronting exploration.

After the two-day training the community researchers returned to their towns and were tasked with interviewing five women in their social circle who were at a similar stage of the family life course as themselves. In this second cycle of the research process, in depth interviews were recorded. Completed survey schedules were mailed to me for compilation and analysis. A second meet-up was planned, for the group to report on the process, review their findings and discuss possible future actions.

This third cycle of research, reflection and action took place over two days and one night. The 12 women from four towns reviewed the information they had gathered about how women in similar situations were coping with the new roster arrangement. This produced insights into how the household division of labour between women and men was affected, how children were coping with less access to their fathers on weekends, and how each town's social life was impacted. The community researchers discovered the depth of (up to this time unspoken) concern that women had about how their family and their own lives had been negatively affected. Some came across coercive situations where women felt unable to speak up about the impact because of an overbearing husband. They reported a sense of incredulity at the conditions in which some women were living. There was some brainstorming about possible actions that could be taken based on their findings. The community researchers wanted their research to be put in front of their husbands, other miners and company management. They suggested interventions such as more access to childcare for families, especially on weekends when fathers were no longer present.

The research was written up in a formal report (Gibson, 1992b) and in a small booklet in which the findings and quotes from the interviews were illustrated in cartoons (Gibson, 1993) (see Figures 1 and 2). The United Mine-workers, Queensland District Branch contributed funds for 500 copies of the booklet to be printed. In a last cycle of the research third-person action research took place whereby we attempted to bring wider circles of people into a community of inquiry. The community researchers agreed to take the booklet and talk to people in their communities about the findings. The miners' union circulated the booklets to their membership. I travelled around to the mining towns where the women had come from to disseminate the research results and meet up with the community researchers to find out how involvement in the research had impacted their lives.

Stepping back from the process to conduct theoretical reflection, I found myself viewing the research as an exercise in 'discursive destabilization' of the constraining identities of 'miner's wives' and 'mining town women'. Through the postmodern social research process which spanned months, the women assumed the collective identity of 'shift workers' wives'—a new subject position borne of the context. My tentative hope was that by creating a discourse of

Figure 1. Cover of the cartoon version of the report for dissemination in communities



DIFFERENT MERRY-GO- ROUNDS

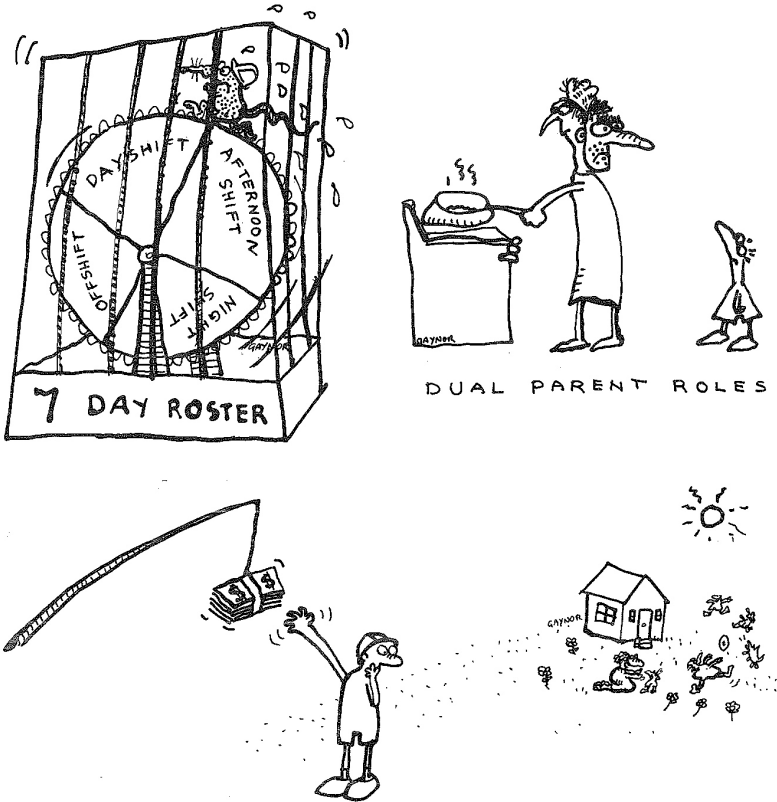
FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES AND THE 7-DAY ROSTER

Katherine Gibson

Source: Gibson (1993).

the mining shift worker's wife, the women could be empowered to step into industrial policy making, or at least able to intervene in their partners' workplace politics. But the research design did not include a time frame and budget to support a public action phase. Some women did indeed take individual actions in this role. One woman who was interviewed asked the community researcher for the recording and played it to her husband. This helped her to talk about her concerns and broach issues she had not been able to before. The CR reported that the couple were 'like a pair of newlyweds now'. Other CRs reported that they had become more motivated around community issues and begun to take a role where previously they had sat back. In one community this resulted in lobbying for a childcare centre and its subsequent building. Another CR was encouraged by the experience to return to higher degree study. Private change took place, but not public transformation.

Figure 2. A selection of images from the booklet. Graphics drawn by Gaynor Cardew



Source: Gibson (1993).

We had achieved a great deal by naming the ‘problem’ of the seven-day roster and reflecting the ‘problem’ back to men, to the union and to the companies. The ‘problem’ was that company profitability and men’s desire for higher income and more time off were being valued more highly than family dynamics and community well-being. The research revealed the fiction that increased monetary income is correlated with a better life. It revealed the injustice of families and communities in remote regions on the resource frontier having no say in decisions that greatly affected their quality of life. These important revelations stopped short, however, of informing a concerted intervention at an industry- or region-wide level. As such, this project marked for me the limits of what might be achieved from ‘outside the tent’. The research had been conducted by women and placed in the lap of the companies and the union. But the power to act collectively on the results was not in the reach of the women themselves.

A year or two after completing this research I was contacted by a miner and his wife from one of the smaller mining towns. He told me that the company was introducing a 12-hour shift, with a work cycle that allowed miners to live on the coast and commute to work, living in barracks when they were at the mine. This miner and his wife could see that this meant the potential end to the town where they had raised their family and where they had intended to stay in retirement. He was anxious to see if my research could be used to inform the debate and help shore up the argument of those who wanted to maintain viable communities. As it turned out our community-based research was indeed too insignificant in the scheme of things—the powerful coal mining industry pushed ahead with the 12-hour shift, with support from the workforce and the fly-in, fly-out (FI-FO) model of working became increasingly prevalent. Some 30 years later, the mining towns of Central Queensland are very changed places, with outsourced contract labour doing most of the mining (Dahlgren, 2019).

This postmodern social research worked with women who wanted a better life for their families *within* the confines of an extractive capitalist regional economy. The action research did not broach the consequences of rampant capitalist coal growth and corporate greed, it did not ask participants to take heed of the environmental degradation caused by coal mining—whether global atmospheric impacts or more local impacts on coral bleaching on the Great Barrier Reef, or on water tables in the mining basins—it did not ask them to question ‘The Economy’. They were already part of it, benefiting from the high incomes it afforded their households. They had no reason to abandon the system—except for the fact that daily life was hard, emotionally demanding and socially isolated. It was possible to enroll postmodern feminist participatory action research in co-producing new subjectivities, but more would be required to make other worlds possible.

Lesson 1: Implications for “democratically renewing our way of living and the social- and nature-relations it implies” (Question 1)

We need to take further steps within action research processes to provoke the desire to democratically renew ‘ways of living’ and engage critically with the status quo. The shiftwork research showed how PPAR could enroll actors and shift subjectivity but in the context of the Great Transition more collectively transformative action is needed. We took up this challenge some time later when writing *Take Back the Economy* (Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy, 2013). The gendered workloads that informed the cartoon on the cover of the booklet (see Figure 1) showed the different work rhythms of miners and households. This research gave inspiration for the 24-hour clock exercise in *Take Back*, in which the inventory of work is juxtaposed with 1) a self-assessment of various aspects of individual wellbeing and 2) the ecological footprint of the way of living described by this work/life profile. This tool links an inventory of human labour with an analysis of consumption of earth’s resources, and

exposes what the global community impact of individual ‘choices’ to live well are. It encapsulates the ethical decisions and ecological negotiations that cluster around a work profile. Within an action research context this tool lends itself to taking a group approach to ways of living, so that the idea of lifestyle options can be collectivized and responsibility can be shared.

5. Action research in a poststructuralist vein—reimagining The Economy

My work in Central Queensland predated the writing of *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy* (Gibson-Graham, 1996). To a large extent, this research contributed to the theoretical and political rupture that gave rise to that book. The difficulty of working within the constraints of ‘traditional working-class’ politics had become blatantly clear. Coal companies wanted to expand their production to meet growing global demand, with little concern for the environments they destroyed or the families they impacted. Union members earning six-figure salaries by excavating coal justified their acceptance of more unhealthy shifts by saying they were doing it ‘for their families’. Solidarity with workers meant, at the end of the 20th century, condoning a growth-at-any-expense model of economy. In Australia, mining unions and unions associated with manufacturing were eager to see their membership not be disadvantaged by globalization. It was at this time that the economic ‘bottom line’ was frequently referred to as the determining rationale for all policy and action. ‘The Economy’ was to be kowtowed to lest it smite us all down. There was, it appeared, no alternative.

This forced a rethinking of participatory action research. The ‘oppressed’ working class subject was interested in betterment and in addressing the ‘symptoms’ of crisis such as retrenchment, unemployment and lack of opportunity, not necessarily in the social transformation needed to change ways of life. How could action research ignite the desire for something different? It was at this point that I turned my attention to people and places that were being bypassed by capitalist growth and globalization. The method of conducting postmodern social research with CRs that I had developed in Central Queensland was transferred first to areas of deindustrialization where there was little hope of capitalist revitalization (in the Latrobe Valley in Victoria, Australia east of Melbourne where I was then working, and in the Pioneer Valley of western Massachusetts in the USA where Julie Graham was working), and then to rural communities in Asia (in the Philippines and Indonesia) lacking capitalist economic development except as exporters of contract labour migrants.

In all cases there were those in the community who wanted to see economic ‘development’ take place, so the opportunity arose for a conversation around *what kind* of development and an opening to think beyond capitalist growth as the only acceptable or viable form of development. The choice of sites was determined somewhat by happenstance. As noted above, the places in Australia and the US were close to where the two of us who comprised JK Gibson-Graham lived. We were each familiar with the dominant neoliberal narratives

that were beginning to dominate discussions about regional development in each place. We were eager to insert a discourse of a diverse economy into each scene and to experiment with processes of re-subjectivation that awakened the potential for new kinds of non-capitalist subjectivity. In the Australian context, where Katherine was situated, the Latrobe Valley east of Melbourne was a place where thousands of brown coal miners and electricity workers had lost their jobs when the Victorian State Government privatized the State Electricity Commission by selling off their power station assets to global operators (Gibson, 2001). In the Pioneer Valley of western Massachusetts, where Julie Graham was, there was long term unemployment dating from the exit of manufacturers in the 1970s-80s to greenfield sites in the US South or overseas. Councils in both locations were being courted by businesses who wanted significant financial and regulatory incentives to relocate or set up in each region.²

In the Latrobe Valley, forced council amalgamations had seen the formation of a regional Latrobe Shire Council, which incorporated many of the coal mining towns of the valley that had once had their own municipal government. A new set of councillors appeared to be interested in engaging grass roots opinions and charting a more community focused pathway for social and economic development. One councillor had come across Asset-Based Community Development, as developed by Jodie Kretzmann and John McKnight in the US, and he agreed to back an action research project to see if this new approach to regional development could be fostered.

With funding procured from the Australian Research Council and with input from research partners the Latrobe Shire and Energy company, in 1999 Jenny Cameron and I embarked on a three-year participatory action research project (Cameron and Gibson, 2005b). This funding meant that we were able to recruit three community researchers (CRs) for a much longer duration than in the Central Queensland project. In this project the aim was to enrol retrenched industrial workers, unemployed young people and women who were largely excluded from the dominantly male regional employment profile into a conversation about what kind of pathways for development they were interested in seeing eventuate. Accordingly, we recruited a retrenched crane driver in his 50s, an unemployed young woman in her 20s (doing study) and a single mother with two children in her 30s as our community researchers. For each person the project offered part time employment initially for six months. Jenny Cameron was employed full time as project leader, and she moved to the Latrobe Valley to live in the community. My visits were of a week at a time at certain junctures, as travel was somewhat complicated by my having taken up a new job interstate in Canberra, some 600 kms away.

The project began with great enthusiasm, especially given the support we initially enjoyed from the Shire Council. Office space was allocated to the project and council officers facilitated access to other resources as needed. We were

2. For more on the Pioneer Valley Rethinking Economy Project see Community Economies Collective (2001).

still focused on shifting subjectivity of people who felt they had no role in ‘The Economy’ but we operated from a standpoint that imagined a diverse economy in which they were actors, not outsiders. We designed a raft of strategies to bring people together, and to help them reframe their economic identity and begin to see themselves as contributing to a diverse more-than-capitalist economy (Gibson-Graham, 2006: chapter 6). Photo essays made by the CRs about their inherited economic identities were put on public display to prompt reflection. CRs visited little known community initiatives—a saw milling operation, a cooperative pub (hotel), a craft network—that ran according to people-centred, not profit-centred, logics. The CRs visited neighbourhood centres and employment hubs to talk to valley residents, inviting them to document their gifts of the hands, head and heart, and to reframe self-identity. The people assets of the Valley were documented. Community members were invited to pizza-making events to attract interest in economic experimentation. These strategies are documented in the training manual *Shifting Focus: Alternative Pathways for Development* (Cameron and Gibson, 2001; see also Gibson-Graham, 2006).

Unlike in the Central Queensland research, this project had the capacity to generate a wider community conversation about what an economy could be, and then to experiment with actual interventions in building a people-centred economy. Four initiatives were settled on as potential projects: a Santa’s workshop, a youth circus training group, a community garden and a reuse and repair shed. At the time in 2000, community (or social) enterprises were largely unknown in the Valley, and the community garden revolution that was soon to take over all urban areas in Australia had yet to materialize. Men’s sheds were known about but there were none in the Valley.

The CRs enrolled community members who were interested to volunteer and experiment with the initiatives they had suggested. The research team offered support to expand their understanding of what was possible. For example, for those interested in a community garden, a field trip to Melbourne was organized to visit a pioneering community garden occupying an old tip site in inner city Brunswick (CERES). Representatives of other initiatives were invited to come and talk about what they did and how they did it.

There were many challenges to surmount in setting up these initiatives and the Council, our research partner, was initially a great help. They identified underutilized public assets which could be made available and repurposed. An abandoned public caravan park became the site of the community garden, a closed pre-school building was converted into Santa’s workshop, a relatively new but no longer functional factory space was repurposed as a reuse and repair shed. All these assets were accessed free of charge, in that the Council allocated use rights to these sites. Each site was unutilized property, owned by the public sector (the Council), but no longer servicing the community. The community groups that formed around each initiative were able to ‘common’ these resources. They became those who had access to and the right to use the site. They were the ones to care for the site and benefit from its repurposing. They endeavoured to take responsibility for the management of the site—but

this was difficult given the lack of experience in group governance, lack of independent financial resources and ultimately lack of legal property right to the site. The council as the formal owner had to be called in to reconnect water, remove rubbish, fence the sites, remove concrete caravan settings, secure the premises etc. These were small things, but they produced a lot of delays and undermined the enthusiasm of people not skilled in waiting or building slowly.

One of the lessons of this phase of the participatory action research was that group social and governance skills take time to develop (Cameron and Gibson, 2005a). Most participants had not been involved in collective activities prior to this project. They may have been church goers or members of unions, but their roles had been largely passive and certainly had not involved democratic group problem solving and dispute resolution. Assuming new economic subjectivities in a diverse community economy was one thing, but initiating a community venture involved a difficult learning curve around things such as meeting procedure, record-keeping, honouring differences of opinion, maintaining focus, coping with delays, keeping spirits up. There were some wonderful highs in the early stages of development and the energy people gained from their involvement in the projects was palpable. But it was also a strain to be involved in something so new, especially on those with mental health concerns and financial worries. The timeline for learning collective practice was very short, and at the end of the project, when financing for Jenny's position as Project Manager ended, the groups were left to cope on their own.

It was at this stage that we had hoped that the Council might step in to offer occasional support to the community initiatives. Unfortunately, a change of leadership at the mayoral level saw a diminution of enthusiasm for Community Partnering. Added to that, competition between elected officials associated with different wards (areas of the shire) filtered down to the enterprises, leading to undermining of the projects in sites without strong political patronage. Lurking in the shadows was the belief that these projects were not really needed, or not really 'economic solutions' to the Valley's woes. A negative pragmatism was voiced when, for example, councillors argued that a community garden was not needed in a region where everyone had 'their own garden'. This kind of intervention was fine for inner city Melbourne, where people live in apartments or didn't have much backyard space, they intimated, but in the suburban context of Valley towns, this kind of initiative seemed needless.

These judgements were internalized by some of the gardeners, and they started to have doubts about their venture. Delays were caused by a decision to employ a landscape designer to make a masterplan for the garden site and replicate what they had seen at CERES. Rather than starting with what they had at hand to get growing, time was wasted waiting for elements of the design to be implemented that they could not do themselves. In hindsight, some gardeners reflected that they might have been better off cultivating collective plots of vegetables for the local food bank, rather than sticking to the individual allotments and aesthetic features of the original plan. The garden project folded after three years.

The project that lasted the longest (ten years) was Santa's workshop. This was an initiative that was spearheaded by a retrenched electricity industry worker who had a personal interest in designing and making large Christmas-themed garden installations with lighting attached. Keith's front yard was well known in the Valley as a place to visit with kids at Christmas, to see his displays. He offered to teach others how to make these wooden cut outs, and the Santa's Workshop was set up a few weeks before the Christmas of 2000. Keith teamed up with Carmen, a businesswoman who came to the workshop one year and stayed on to help organize and fundraise. With Carmen's organizational skills and Keith's creative and practical skills, the workshop continued to thrive for ten years, until sadly Keith passed away. Over time they provided a context for many people to learn new skills, produce low-cost decorations, and connect with others in the process of doing purposeful work.³

Our action research project aimed to gain credibility for a different imaginary of economy—one focused on people as the primary resource in the Latrobe Valley and on for-purpose community enterprises that could support the wellbeing of people and the planet directly. The project demonstrated the potential for new subjects of a post-extractive post-capitalist economy to emerge and take collective action. But left to their own devices, without support in the wider region from local government and State institutions the advances made by small community associations were vulnerable.

Lesson 2: Implications for “How to act on root causes rather than symptoms of plural crisis?” (Question 2)

Poststructuralist participatory action research (PPAR) processes can work with participants on resubjectivation to develop non-capitalist ways of living, sharing wealth and caring for country. By working in the cracks to generate new economic identities associated with democratic wealth generation and collective approaches to property ownership, PPAR addresses the ‘root causes’ of capitalist crisis. But what will contribute to the durability of these experiments? And how do practitioners respond to those who attribute any failure for community economies to thrive as indications of the superior nature of capitalist power? In my experience it was the absence of an ecosystem of support that led to the demise of the experiments our action research initiated, not any form of co-option by a ‘capitalist system’.

Some 20 years later the support ecosystem is much more developed. Social enterprises are now seen as strong actors in local economies—not just welfare supports. Today the Latrobe City now has a Community Gardens Policy that states that community gardening contributes “to public health and wellbeing, learning, amenity of the municipality social connections and can improve

3. The PPAR method developed in the La Trobe Valley Project was replicated and further developed in two rural municipalities in the Philippines (see <www.communitypartnering.info> and Gibson, Cahill and McKay, 2010).

local food security.” A further change is the heightened degree of community mobilization around transition away from coal. In 2014 an out-of-control fire at the Hazelwood mine polluted the environment for 46 days. A community organization called Voices of the Valley formed to address questions of transition and health, and has successfully lobbied the State Government for assistance. The Valley hosts the active and high profile Earthworker worker-owned cooperative formed in 2013, for which one of my graduate students is the secretary. Perhaps the LTV Community Partnering Project helped to prepare the ground for these developments.

6. Action research, commoning and transition design

My most recent venture into action research is one that is informed by transition design and the process of commoning.⁴ These represent two different approaches to transformation. Transition design activates relationships at the intersections of human and more-than-human concerns. It shifts focus away from the human subject alone and pays attention to the material ‘element’ of social practices, that is on the durable infrastructures that channel and nudge human behaviour. Transition design has an eye for “long horizons of time and visions of sustainable futures” (Irwin, Kossoff and Tonkinwise, 2015: 3). It attempts to relieve people of having to make conscious decisions as part of everyday practice. The emphasis is less on shifting subjectivity directly and more on providing contexts in which new social practices can emerge. Commoning, on the other hand, is the name for collective actions that make and share community by orchestrating access to, use of, responsibility for, benefit from, and care for a commons—a property that is crucial to livelihood and wellbeing. How a property, whether tangible such as land or intangible such as knowledge, is commoned is an ongoing outcome of deliberation and negotiation. So, by bringing commoning and transition design together we are working at an interface where human subjectivity, more-than-human community and material assemblages meet.

This project focuses on urban heating and the challenges of living with rising temperatures without exacerbating global warming by increased reliance on expensive and heat-releasing air-conditioning during summer months. The research participants are community housing provider organizations and residents living in social housing (publicly owned housing rented at low cost) in Sydney’s west, where the impact of global warming and climate change is affecting liveability. The residents are people who have low incomes or live on social benefits—the ‘left behind’ in terms of a housing market in which home-ownership is privileged and increasingly out of reach of many middle

4. The research project is led by Stephen Healy and Abby Mellick-Lopes and comprises a multi-disciplinary team of economic, social and urban geographers, design practitioners, urban planners, a landscape architect and community housing providers (Mellick Lopes et al., 2020; Mellick Lopes and Healy, 2023).

to low income households. As the COVID pandemic highlighted, those living in Western Sydney are often ‘essential workers’ keeping the health, aged care, transport and goods distributions systems going. This region is also where public housing has traditionally played a role in housing the most vulnerable—those on health or disability pensions, long term unemployed, aged or infirm.

Pilot research on the topic involved interviews with residents of Western Sydney to find out how they coped when the temperatures rose during summer. We found that younger residents had few strategies for keeping cool other than staying indoors with the blinds down and the air-con on or visiting the local shopping mall and hanging out in McDonalds, for as long as the management would tolerate. In contrast, we found that older residents retained a repertoire of cooling strategies that they had ‘grown up with’ and still relied upon. These included carefully orchestrated opening and closing of windows to catch cool breezes, strategic placement of wet sheets across doorways to cool the breeze, affixing outdoor window blinds, and cultivating garden plantings to maximize shade during hot summer day. For those whose houses had air conditioning, there was careful switching of the power on and off to make the most of off-peak and thus more affordable prices. Clearly there was tacit cooling ‘know-how’ possessed by the older generation of residents, which involved the manipulation of the immediate infrastructural environment.

This initial research alerted us to the fact that the many ways of keeping cool in urban settings had been reduced to just one technologically dependent practice—switching on the air-con. The once common knowledge of how to produce low energy ‘coolth’ was not being passed on generationally. Meanwhile the ecological impacts of this energy-guzzling practice were hidden, as were the physical bodily impacts of normalizing the 22-degree indoor comfort standard. Modern bodies are losing the ability to regulate their temperature and adjust to colder or hotter weather. Comfort is defined as *not* having to experience cold noses poking out from under blankets on a sleeping verandah (as in my mother’s childhood in the 1920s), or hot houses where babies were placed under tables covered by wet sheets with the fan on to make a cooler interior microclimate (as in some of the stories of life in Penrith a few decades ago).

The premise of our action research is that this kind of know-how can be shared between generations and between groups from different cultural backgrounds, or it can be learnt anew, and that learning to become part of a cooling commons assemblage will be an important way of living with global warming and ‘nurturing sustainable futures’ (Question 3). Of course, this is not to displace the urgent need to curb temperature rises; but for residents who are at some distance from the political process where decision-making takes place, we are focusing on what can be done with what’s at hand.

The research agenda includes inventorying heat profiles in households and the practices of residents during urban heat events. At follow-up workshops, residents, housing providers and technicians will devise experiments to curb heat rises and increase coolth. This might include retrofits in the individual household or collective adaptations in the environs of the housing. These

experiments will be one context where action research will provoke shifts in subjectivity as residents learn to become part of a cooling commons assemblage. The present of housing providers who will be involved in future builds is crucially important if these cooling assemblages are to become embedded in future built environments.

Lesson 3: Implications for “How critical research and exemplary practices can jointly nurture sustainable futures?” (Question 3)

This project is not trying to reshape the economy directly, but is aimed at intervening in how buildings and cities are designed and thus how lives are lived. The starting point is a critical analysis of the problem of urban heating and its connection to global warming on one hand, and on the other, the private housing market that puts profits before liveability in growing urban areas. Action research with community housing providers who are focused on housing as a human right and a social good is focused on protecting and restoring a living environment (including both social and natural ecosystems) that affords comfort and wellbeing. Insofar as design can influence contexts that live on beyond the time span of a single action research project, connections can be forged between local interventions that offer new ways of living together and larger visions of transition. Embedding design solutions in plans, policies, regulations, buildings and other infrastructures is a way of amplifying what was at one time a vulnerable, emergent, grassroots experiment. Design can transform something that was ephemeral into something that has durability.

7. Conclusion

I started this paper with the story of Lila and her knee-jerk negative reaction to any question that put her on the spot. She pleaded a lack of knowledge and then proceeded to reveal fragments of understanding that were invaluable. If her story has a parallel here, then the fragments of understanding that have emerged from this very personal review look something like this.

I am convinced that poststructuralist participatory action research (PPAR) has the power to enrol people in processes of resubjectivation, and that subjectivity change is a necessary step towards marshalling the people power we need to make any transformation of our way of living to meet the current dire crises. Is this enough? Probably not. Design theorist Clive Dilnot warns us that design “is everywhere seen and everywhere remains invisible” (1998: 22). Others, such as Tony Fry, warn that if design designs, then we are both the designers and the designed, and thus we have inherited a world that has designed us as complicit in ‘the unsustainability’ (Fry, 2018: 204; see also Fry, Dilnot and Stewart, 2015).

Action research has a role to play in cracking open this nut to reveal the discourses and infrastructures that invisibly channel our actions and thoughts. Practices of inventory and collective reflection are invaluable tools

for making the invisible visible, for differentiating the world, for revealing the stark outlines of un-liveability and unsustainability, and provoking a shift in subjectivity.

Clearly action research cannot rely only on human subjects changing without drawing in the supportive ecosystems that surround any community of actors to ensure the durability of a shift in subjectivity. If the ontological power of design resides in its capacity to achieve ubiquity and to ‘disappear’ into the culture at large, then action research must delve into that culture to identify what infrastructures of support need to be alerted and activated, and what institutions can be enrolled in transformational practice. If we are to contribute to the Great Transition our action research must enrol institutional actors as well as fellow citizens.

The intractability of infrastructures such as laws, regulations, built forms, powerful barriers and walls, both figurative and material, cannot be underestimated. What we know is that the ethical force of design means that designed things have the power to alter the condition and behaviour of other things (Mellick Lopes et al., 2018; Scarry, 1985: 307). So, experimenting with new ways of living and the infrastructures of support that enable these ways will have its own creative momentum. Today the ‘economic common sense’ of modernity, of The Great Acceleration, of the capitalist era, the unsustainability, (call it what you will), is starting to fragment. It is no longer, if it ever was, unquestioned. PPAR has a play to a role in The Great Transition by experimenting with new designs and testing and prototyping different ways of living that might become invisible in another possible world.

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