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**Abstract:** Life history methodology has undergone a major revival in the last two decades but its impact on economic theory has been minimal. The dominance of quantitative methodologies within economics has precluded the contribution which qualitative approaches, such as life history method, can make to questions of human agency and individual decision making. Three case studies of working-class women in a local labour market are used to explore these themes, and to argue for the importance of incorporating social and historical contexts into our analysis of economic processes.

## **LIFE HISTORY MEETS ECONOMIC THEORY: THE EXPERIENCES OF THREE WORKING-CLASS WOMEN IN A LOCAL LABOUR MARKET**

Ian Watson

### **Introduction**

The experiences of women at work in Australia have been examined by economists, historians and sociologists. Economists have concentrated on women in the labour market, focusing on the extreme sex-segregation which characterises the occupational structure (Power 1975; Mumford 1989); the dramatic rise in female participation rates (Gregory *et al.* 1983; Eccles 1982); and the effect of the Equal Pay decisions on women's employment (Gregory and Duncan 1981; McGavin 1983). Sociologists have focused on both the labour market (O'Donnell 1984) and the labour process (Game and Pringle 1983; Pringle 1988); while historians have explored industrial relations, particularly the long struggle against discrimination (Ryan and Conlon 1975; Bevege *et al.* 1982); the social context for women's labour (Aveling and Damousi 1991); and the role of women in the labour movement (Frances and Scates 1991). The interdisciplinary nature of much feminist scholarship in this area has been evident in collections such as *All Her Labours* (Women and Labour Publications Collective 1984).

The difference in approach between economists and sociologists/historians has been profound. The latter have largely drawn on qualitative methods, particularly historical records and interview-based

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materials, and have benefited considerably from the recent revival of life history method and the new enthusiasm for oral history. On the other hand, economists have moved even further along the road to quantification, and the current orthodoxy of neo-classical economics<sup>1</sup> is particularly enamoured of positivism.<sup>2</sup> Within this field, human capital theory has assumed a dominant role in analysing people's labour market experiences, with regression analysis of earnings functions at the centre of empirical research. The re-introduction of tertiary fees in Australia during the late 1980s, for example, drew heavily on this approach (see Chapman and Chia 1989). Thus while 'economic rationalism' (the popular label for neo-classical economics) has come under increasing public attack in the last few years (Fitzgerald 1990; Pusey 1991; Horne 1992), it has remained dominant within university economic faculties and within the state bureaucracy, and human capital theory remains ascendant in analyses of the labour market (Marginson 1989).

### **Human Capital Theory and Its Critics**

The dominance of human capital theory is only a recent achievement, owing much to the pioneering work of Gary Becker in the 1960s (Becker 1962). In the United States, human capital theory contributed significantly to the debates around public funding of education, and it also underpinned much of the policy formulations for the 1960s 'war on poverty' (Levin 1977). Its recent endorsement by the OECD (1987), and Becker's receipt of a Nobel Prize, highlight the continuing high standing in which human capital theory is held in conservative ranks. However, in the 1970s and early 1980s human capital theory came under attack from two directions. The proponents of screening theory (Berg 1971) argued strongly that education was basically a credentialling process, rather than a process of investment in human capital. From this perspective, education did not enhance productivity but merely signalled differences in potential productivity between individuals. Despite its attraction for sociologists, screening theory failed to satisfy those economists who tested it using econometric models (Layard and Psacharopoulos 1974).

The most formidable challenge to human capital theory came from the Marxist theory of segmented labour markets (referred to hereafter as SLM theory).<sup>3</sup> In the early 1970s a number of American Marxists reworked dual labour market theory into a more coherent and historically based theory of segmentation (Edwards *et al.* 1973; Reich *et al.* 1973). In contrast to human capital theory, with its conception of a unitary and competitive labour market, SLM theorists argued that each of the segments which they identified behaved very differently, with the equilibrium tendencies of neo-classical economics only operative in the

secondary labour market (Victorisz and Harrison 1973). Moreover, mobility between the segments was highly 'circumscribed' (Reich 1984), rendering deficient the neo-classical view that wage levels provided a mechanism for allocating labour supply to different areas of employment across the economy. SLM thus offered a structural explanation for discrimination in the labour market: women, blacks and migrants, for example, faced formidable barriers in trying to move from the secondary labour market into the primary. A major debate over SLM theory ensued over the next decade, with mainstream economists focusing on the statistical weaknesses in the early formulation of SLM (Cain 1976; Joll *et al.* 1983) and SLM theorists responding by increasingly supplementing their sociological analysis with econometrics (Reich 1984).

The contrast between human capital theory and SLM theory is profound. Where human capital theory is preoccupied with the characteristics of labour supply, such as level of schooling and years of training or experience, SLM theory is intent on highlighting the differentiated demand for labour arising from different sectors of the economy. In other words, SLM theory focuses on why some jobs are inherently better or worse than other jobs, irrespective of the job's incumbent. While it might be expected that human capital theory would prove inadequate in explaining women's occupational segregation (England 1982), SLM theory has also struggled to deal with the issue effectively. As Dex has argued, SLM theory has failed to deal with the specific characteristics of women's experiences in the labour market, and has tended to treat women as homogeneous (Dex 1985:136).

While both human capital theory and screening theory stayed within the orbit of supply-oriented economics, SLM theory was decisively demand-oriented. It seems obvious that any coherent account of the labour market should incorporate both supply and demand factors, so it is quite remarkable that each camp has stayed locked within such partial visions. At stake are political considerations, with human capital theory providing an apology for capitalism, and SLM theory representing a forceful condemnation of it. But there are also important sociological divisions at stake. As an inherently individualistic methodology, human capital theory is strongly attached to a notion of human agency. The naivety of this conception of agency will be one of the major issues discussed in this article, but at least its presence is firmly registered. By contrast, the Marxist analysis of capitalism which inspires SLM theory is heavily deterministic and leaves little scope for human agency at all. 'Capitalism' is invariably the historical subject, and even when the activities of the working-class, particularly through trade union struggles, are seen as co-determining (Gordon *et al.* 1982; Edwards 1979), SLM theory still fails to offer an adequate account of human agency. I would suggest that we must go beyond simply stressing the material constraints

which individuals confront as a result of how labour demand has been structured under capitalism. While such constraints are a crucial part of any sociological account, they are only part of the picture. We also need to understand how individuals make decisions about the use of their labour power; that is, how they contribute to labour supply.

This is not to say that neo-classical economics has dealt adequately with the issue: far from it. Human capital theory, for example, has been dominated by an extremely narrow conception of human subjectivity and motivation, and it has pursued its analysis with a methodology of similar narrowness. At the heart of this theory, and implicit within neo-classical economics as a whole, is a Hobbesian conception of the individual and society, in which subjectivity is seen as unitary, calculating and egoistic: 'The liberal economic subject's economic practices are based on a sequence of rational calculations designed to maximise utility' (Marginson 1988: 108). Similarly, society is often viewed as no more than aggregated individuals. Criticisms of these assumptions have been advanced within political economy since at least the mid 1970s (Wheelwright and Stilwell 1976). Similarly, the dominance of econometrics within a discipline which was once a *social science*, has been an enduring source of frustration for many political economists and sociologists. For such critics, econometric modelling – despite its increasing statistical sophistication – condemns economics to an extremely circumscribed methodological approach and, with it, an equally circumscribed model of human decision making processes. For example, in his study of low wage employment, Paul Miller constructed earnings equations in which ability and motivation were regarded as 'permanent unmeasured individual characteristics' (1989:128), assumptions no thoughtful sociologist would ever countenance.

Clearly, the time is long overdue for qualitative studies of labour market behaviour to be incorporated into economic analysis. Such studies would have great relevance for understanding economic processes, particularly those involving human subjectivity, and for exploring the effects of economic structures on human lives. In these respects, the approach termed 'life history method' offers itself as an exemplary candidate.

### **The Revival of Life History Method**

The revival of interest in life history method during the 1970s<sup>4</sup> witnessed a remarkable upsurge in field work activity by sociologists and oral historians, who took their tape recorders into new settings and collected detailed autobiographies of individuals, often in interviews lasting several hours. Unlike participant observation, this approach was generally restricted to gathering self-reports, rather than collecting observational notes

in an ethnographic fashion. Also, unlike survey approaches, the life history method used open-ended techniques of questioning, with minimal direction from the interviewer, and with a preference for long, self-reflective accounts from the interviewee. The kind of 'data' which emerged from such interviews was sometimes termed 'thick description', meaning that it was rich in detail about the concrete experiences of everyday life.<sup>5</sup>

During its revival, many of the advocates of life history method returned to its roots and began to locate themselves within a distinguished tradition dating back to the Chicago school of sociology of the inter-war years. Major classics, like Thomas and Znaniecki's monumental study *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, as well as a string of absorbing case studies on exotic individuals (often social 'deviants'), were regularly cited as part of this heritage (Plummer 1983; Bertaux 1981a). The 1970s revival shared with oral history a penchant for collecting tape-recorded interviews but tended towards small samples rather than single case studies. Despite some differences in how the life history method was practised in its heyday and how it has been practised in more recent times, there has been a definite continuity in focus. The defining element of the method remains its concern with understanding an individual's life history as an entry point into understanding society as a whole. Recently the term 'theorised life history' has also been used (Connell 1991:143) in order to emphasise more explicitly the importance of forging this link between an individual life and the social and economic structures which shape that life.

Acutely aware of their own marginalised position within the social sciences, the contemporary advocates of life history method have been keen to reclaim the respectability which the method enjoyed in the inter-war period. In their eyes, the eclipse of the life history method was not due to its shortcomings but, rather, resulted from an increasing positivism within sociology, fostered by the popularity of large-scale social surveys during the 1940s. By the 1960s the wheel had turned again and the shortcomings of social surveys were becoming apparent to many sociologists. The questionnaire's tick-the-box format often said more about the researchers' own world, than it did about that of their subjects. Cross-sectional surveys seemed to offer only a static, almost arid, account of social reality. In addition, the questionnaire approach itself failed to grasp the complexity of lived experiences. In Plummer's terms, surveys were high in reliability (the ability to be replicated), but low in validity (the ability to actually study their subject matter) (1983:101). In this new climate of doubt, sociologists returned to qualitative methods, with Glaser and Strauss's seminal work *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* marking a watershed in this development.

However, survey methodologies remained dominant within the social

sciences throughout the 1970s and 1980s, forcing the new disciples of life history method to defend their approach at every turn. Apart from an almost ritualistic denunciation of survey methodologies for their shortcomings, the advocates of life history method regularly stressed the virtues to be found within their approach. These included the ethnographic richness of their material (Camargo 1985; Shaw 1980); the access which such methods provided to the subjective reality of people's lives (Faraday and Plummer 1979; McCracken 1988; Ochberg 1988); the opportunity to understand social processes (Faraday and Plummer 1979; Dowsett 1991); and, most importantly, the access to domains of social and economic life which were not readily available with any other method. This last issue proved particularly important when the subject matter involved sexuality, intimate areas of family life, or realms outside 'mainstream' society, such as the informal economy.<sup>6</sup>

One indication of the long period of dominance by survey methodologies within the social sciences has been the 'guilty conscience' which qualitative researchers often exhibit when they undertake sampling procedures. The question which nags them the most is invariably: 'How many people do I need to interview for my results to be valid?' Unfortunately, a considerable amount of confusion surrounds the issue of sampling within life history method. Preoccupied with the issue of sample size, many practitioners neglect the issue of sample selection. In particular, they often fail to recognise that an equal probability selection method (epsem) is essential if they wish to generalise from their sample in statistically valid ways (Kalton 1983; Cochran 1977). In practice, a range of selection methods, ranging from personal contacts and volunteers through to (non-probability) quota sampling, have been commonly employed. Indeed, the demands of the life history method, relying as it does on lengthy tape recorded interviews, usually rule out conventional survey approaches to sampling where the interviewer is obliged to cajole his/her pre-selected subject into cooperation. For life history practitioners, the use of enthusiastic 'volunteers' is almost mandatory. As a consequence, the use of an epsem design to pre-select the subjects is often unworkable.<sup>7</sup>

When studies which do not employ an epsem design attempt to generalise in a quantitative fashion, they invariably – and often deservedly – bring down the wrath of their mainstream colleagues.<sup>8</sup> Such unwarranted quantification, as well as a kind of 'implicit quantification' (signalled in the language of 'many', 'most' or 'several'), are both methodological sins to which life history practitioners are all too prone. Fortunately, more recent theorising within the field has begun to grapple with this issue, with writers like Bertaux arguing forcefully that life history method should be used for analysing 'patterns of sociostructural relations', rather than attempting to quantify phenomena which are

located at the 'level of superficial description'. In Bertaux's example, if we want to know how a given population will vote, we turn to this superficial level, but if we want to understand 'how the practice of voting and choosing for whom to vote takes shape', then analysis of socio-structural relations is appropriate (Bertaux 1981a:37).

Within Australian sociology, some impressive studies have recently emerged which exemplify Bertaux's concern with using life history material for structural analysis (see, for example, Connell 1989 and 1991). But within economics, movement has been much slower. A recently edited collection of articles by Shirley Dex (1991), which attempts to bridge the gap between qualitative and quantitative methodologies, signals a new awareness of the potential of life history material for understanding the labour market. However, despite its welcome appearance, this collection also raises some fundamental problems. Are life history materials complementary to statistical analysis, or simply another source of data for it? Several of the studies in the Dex collection suggest statistical procedures can be applied to life history materials, and one article even discusses suitable computer packages for this purpose (Marsh and Gershuny 1991). However, for this approach to work satisfactorily, the life histories have to be in a form which makes them little different to the kind of in-depth survey questionnaires already used in longitudinal and panel data surveys. What seems to make the approach to life histories in the Dex collection different to traditional approaches like these is the reliance on retrospective reporting entailed in gathering life histories through a single interview. With this comes the problem of selective recall, a difficulty which leads one contributor, Sylvia Walby, to speculate on the feasibility of the whole procedure,

If we cannot collect data which has a direct correspondence to events in a person's past then should we abandon notions of scientific reliability and settle for a notion of life histories as rich ethnographic data instead? In this view life histories are not irrelevant, but they are not the kind of hard data which is appropriately analyzed with statistics and computers. Instead they give us memories of the past, which are interesting precisely because they are selective (Walby 1991:171).

However, this conclusion is one which Walby is not prepared to accept and she uses other research work reported in the collection to argue that some topics, primarily 'key life events', can be safely recalled and self-reported in ways that provide reliable 'hard' data. Yet in making this distinction between a subjective dimension and 'hard' data, Walby returns us to the traditional social science division between 'ethnographic' modes of inquiry and survey approaches. Walby's conclusions suggest that if it is indeed 'rich ethnographic data' which we seek, the quantified life-histories may not be worthwhile pursuing. If the kinds of data which can be safely quantified are the kinds of data that have always

been quantified, does the *ethnographic* life history method really have anything to offer students of the labour market?

I want to argue that it does. Once we eschew all pretensions to quantification, and seek instead to generalise from our case studies in terms of ‘patterns of sociostructural relations’ (to use Bertaux’s phrase) we find ourselves within a framework which is admirably suited for testing economic theories for their ‘real world’ validity (in Plummer’s sense). This entails testing their ontological assumptions against concrete lives located in social and historical contexts, and then developing new ways of understanding human decision making which go beyond the philosophical caricatures of the eighteenth century. This is my strategy in this article. After a brief introduction to their economic context, I introduce the life histories of three women who entered a local labour market during the 1940s. The analysis which accompanies each life history seeks to explore how far the theories of human capital and segmented labour markets take us in understanding the fortunes of these women. The analysis I offer does not rely on the ‘generalisability’ of my life history material in any quantifiable sense. Whether my subjects are ‘typical’ or not is not an issue. Rather, these lives represent ‘instances’ of social processes and therefore illustrate the way such processes emerge from particular structural relations.

### **Lithgow – a ‘stranded region’**

Lithgow, a town of about 14,000 people on the western edge of the Blue Mountains in New South Wales, was the birthplace of the Australian iron and steel industry. Beginning in a minor way at the end of the 19th century, iron making had, by the 1920s, become a viable local industry. Under the ownership of the Hoskins family, the blast furnaces and rolling mills of the Lithgow Valley were producing considerable volumes of iron and steel, much of it consumed by the railways. However, by the end of the 1920s, on the eve of the Great Depression, the Hoskins family moved the industry to Port Kembla on the South Coast. While other industries, such as coal, potteries and textiles, had also been significant contributors to Lithgow’s economy, the loss of the steel industry was a terminal blow. In the words of one commentator, ‘Lithgow had “fizzled out” into a premature old age after 1930’ (McInnes, in Colquhoun 1977:38) The only major revival in economic activity was due to the dramatic expansion of the government Small Arms Factory during the Second World War (Dobson and Howes 1943). This swelled Lithgow’s population to over 25,000, a figure never attained since.

Throughout its history Lithgow remained a solidly working-class industrial town and its industrial structure was heavily biased towards



mining and manufacturing, both of which underwent considerable post-war decline. Employment in mining, in particular, declined sharply from the 1950s onwards, as mine mechanisation got underway. Though sharing in the general post war expansion in tertiary sector employment, Lithgow remained heavily reliant on secondary industries well into the 1960s. It was defined by one economic geographer as a classic case of a 'stranded region', an area unable to maintain satisfactory levels of labour demand even in periods of prosperity (Manners, in Colquhoun 1977:1). Much of Lithgow's post-war economic history seemed to bear out this judgment. Old industries like coal mining and manufacturing steadily declined. New industries based on clothing and textiles opened, only to close again in recessionary periods. Amongst its attractions for new firms were Lithgow's pool of cheap female labour and occasional government assistance. Only in the 1970s, as new overseas coal markets opened up, did employment in mining recover. Manufacturing, however, remained depressed. Of the 13 manufacturers attracted to Lithgow by government assistance during the early 1960s, only six were still operating in the mid 1970s. In many respects, the existence of a 'branch plant economy' in Lithgow meant that 'much of the determination of the town's economic future is made by companies not directly interested in the town's prosperity' (Colquhoun 1977:68). This showed up in the greater susceptibility of Lithgow branch plants to cyclical downturns, with significant factory closures occurring from the 1950s through to the 1970s. In addition, employment in Lithgow for administrative and professional workers remained well below the state average, since most of the planning and administrative work was done at the head office of these large companies.

### **Wendy Jones**

Wendy Jones' father, a drop hammer forger, moved to Lithgow during the Second World War to work in the Small Arms Factory. Rejected for military service because of high blood pressure, the Small Arms job was his way of contributing to the war effort. Wendy's mother, who had worked in a flour mill as a young woman, never returned to the workforce after her marriage. As Wendy recalled, her father 'didn't believe in women working'. As the time to leave school approached, Wendy's family situation pushed her one way, her schooling pushed her the other. Despite not being in the highest class in her year, Wendy had won first place academically in her third year and her teachers held high hopes for her. But at home,

dad was sick a lot, he seemed to have one thing after another, he had gall trouble and all sorts of other things wrong with him. And they didn't have

much money. So I had the chance to get this job with the mining company. . . . So I took it, much to the disgust of the headmaster. . . .

In one sense it was a decision dictated by the circumstances of a working-class family's economic hardship. Yet, at a personal level, it was more complex than this. In her final year at school Wendy had become increasingly serious in her relationship with an older boy who was studying dentistry at university. In a half-understood kind of way, Wendy linked his future to hers and concluded, 'probably because he was doing dentistry . . . I wouldn't need to have that sort of career.' Yet after the decision was made, after the entry into a life of office work got underway, came the regrets: 'I was always sorry afterwards. I mean, I always enjoyed my work that I did. But, deep down, I really would have liked to have been a teacher.'

After several years working for the coal mining company, Wendy left the workforce to raise her children. She hadn't married the dentist, she'd married a man she'd met through work, a local miner. Wendy's return to the workforce – by now it was the 1960s – was in several stages. Her daughters were at school and part-time work was feasible. Her office skills, particularly typing, helped her gain a morning job with a government welfare department, an experience which proved 'a real eye-opener . . . I didn't know how the other half lived . . . the single mothers, and the deserted wives. The terrible conditions sometimes that the children lived under'.

Wendy eventually left this job to have her third child, a son. Her next return to the workforce was far less fulfilling: 'I got a couple of days a week at Woolworths which I hated, absolutely hated it . . . But I did it for a little while. I enjoyed the extra money because we didn't have very much then, and every little bit helped'. Wendy's decision to stick with the job was shaped by her family's economic situation, itself the outcome of her husband Jack's unpredictable working life in a town like Lithgow:

When we were first married, he was in and out of jobs at the pits, because at that stage they were putting them off and then putting a few on, and then putting them off again. You know, it was when the coal mining industry was having its ups and downs. Then he started work on the construction at the power house . . .

He was a rigger. He went to Tech and got his rigger's certificate. And went to Tech and got his oxy and electric welding certificate, which was good. And he's a very good welder. Then the time that was hardest was when the construction work finished at Wallerawang and he was without a job, or just picking up work that didn't pay very well. And I remember he used to bring the money home and I used to sit here with envelopes, and I used to put so much a week away for the electricity, so much for our house payments . . . so much for the rates. You know, I used to have everything just worked out.

Until coal mining revived in the Lithgow area in the 1970s, employment prospects for men like Jack were bleak indeed. Wendy's family sat

down and wondered: should they, like some of their friends, move from Lithgow to where the work was? But they had seen those friends sell their house at a loss, and they knew, in the current climate, that they too would have trouble selling up. So they stayed. Fortunately, coal mining boomed and Jack found himself with twenty years of continuous work at one of the new collieries.

Wendy left the Woolworth's job when her office skills again opened doors for her. The offer of a few weeks' work at the local hospital turned into several years of stable employment. When this finished, she moved on, and also back. Twenty five years after leaving the classroom Wendy was back at Lithgow high school, working in the office. Her reasons for staying in the workforce during this period – the early 1970s – were more than just economic:

I just felt as if I needed to do something else. I felt as if there was more to life than stopping home looking after children all the time. Well, when they weren't at home anyway, when they were at school, it just seemed to leave a big gap.

What Wendy valued most in her job were the social relations with her fellow-workers and her contact with the children. It reminded her of her youthful ambitions to be a school teacher. In reminiscing, Wendy mused 'it would have been nice to have been a teacher . . . I know I would have enjoyed it. I would have had all the nice working conditions, which I enjoy now anyway, but for twice as much pay as I get now'.

Throughout Wendy's working life, family decisions and workforce decisions were inextricably bound. Whether it was her parent's household, or that of herself and her husband, each personal decision about work was also a collective decision about survival for a working-class family.

### *Analysis*

In terms of human capital theory, Wendy's life throws up several challenges. The 'investment decisions' in her life were not made by herself. Abandoning the human capital accumulated at school was the product of illness in a working-class family and her status as the oldest daughter. This example highlights for us the importance of the 'acculturated individual', as opposed to the 'possessive individual' (Macpherson 1964) at the heart of human capital theory. Wendy's subjectivity is neither unitary nor self-interested but, rather, constructed around the critical social relations in her life. Thus the sacrifice of her schooling to the family's well-being follows remorselessly from the patriarchal character of a working-class family. Similarly, her identification with her first fiancé's career – the dentist – and the subsequent logic of her decision making – 'I wouldn't need to have that sort of

career' – exemplify the historical construction of femininity during the 1950s. We do witness Wendy developing personal strategies, and exploiting her office skills, but these are always within an historically variable social context. Personal strategies are always 'contextual strategies'.

The other challenge which Wendy's life throws up for human capital theory is the significance of a local labour market. Her own opportunities for better-paid and more rewarding work – her access to the rewards of the human capital embodied in her office skills – depended not on the private sector, but on government employment in the non-market sectors of the Lithgow economy. In terms of the private sector, most of the firms attracted to Lithgow by decentralisation grants came seeking cheap female labour, not female human capital. As for Wendy's husband, the worth of his investments in human capital (his tech courses) hinged critically on labour demand, proving useless for long periods of time when he was 'just picking up work that didn't pay very well'.

Both Wendy and her husband challenge the notions of labour mobility implicit in human capital theory. As SLM theory has shown, in the real world labour mobility is tightly constrained between and within labour market segments. Where neo-classical economics assumes that markets will clear because 'factors of production' are mobile, working-class families like Wendy and Jack had to contend with their own immobility. The costs of moving, of selling their house at a loss, outweighed the possible gains. Similarly, Wendy's mobility between segments was curtailed by the credentialism which locked early school leavers like herself out of professional jobs for the rest of her life.

## June Harding

Like Wendy, June Harding's family background centred on the wages of a male labourer, a blacksmith. The same pressures to leave school were evident in her reflections: '... there was never the money around. Like my parents never had the money to have kept me at school till fifth form. ... You more or less had to get out and start earning a little bit of money, even if it was only a small amount'. Unlike Wendy, though, June's academic experiences had been less reassuring. A love of science and an elder brother who 'gave me the lowdown on how to do all the diagrams', did not compensate for the struggle found with other subjects, particularly maths where she saw herself as just a 'plodder'. June ruled out continuing past the Intermediate Certificate: 'I didn't rate myself as being brainy enough to have gone on to fifth form'.

The job June did settle on, shop assistant in the Co-op pharmacy, was the closest she came to pursuing her school day love of science:

I wanted to get into the pharmacy. I thought that was the nearest I'd probably get to being with the science, you know. And I used to love to get back in the dispensary, like, even just to wash up the things in the dispensary . . . I used to love doing that. I think now, why? That would be one of the lowliest jobs, wouldn't it, washing up? And I used to love just being in there. Watching them with the big beakers, the test tubes and that. It was great.

With her marriage, to the baker working at the Co-op bakery, June withdrew from the labour market. Her first move back into the workforce was less formal than Wendy's. The family moved to Portland to run their own bakery and to the chores of wife and mother were added those of small business person. But it was a way of life that could not last. This was the 1960s and the large city bakeries were expanding into the bush. Like all the other small bakeries in the Lithgow region, June and Ray's bakery could not survive against the competition from 'those big combines' and Ray and June closed down and moved back into Lithgow. As June reflected, 'that really was the end of the baking trade around here.'

With his trade gone, Ray moved into labouring work at the local power station, and June entered the Small Arms Factory. However, as a government employer, the Small Arms Factory still practised institutionalised discrimination against women and June was compelled to resign after twelve months. She could re-apply for her job, but only for another twelve months. The system ensured married women could not build up continuity of service. But the job was a worthwhile one. The older men welcomed her presence, teaching her the metal working skills needed for finishing rifles. As for the work itself:

I'd never worked in anything like that before. Only been behind a counter with pharmacy work, which is a lot different to metal work. The gloves and the goggles and the headgear, you know [laughing].

Did you enjoy the work?

I enjoyed it. You know, and I enjoyed the company and it was lovely to do something different than just housework all the time. And after rearing your kiddies, it was good to start on something else.

The next two jobs were also factory work. A twelve-month stint in a tile factory which had just started up saw June and the other workers putting their health at risk for the sake of employment: 'there was lead glaze floating around everywhere . . . and the drains were chucked up with all this glaze . . .'. As it was, the factory closed down before their guarantee of health checks could be honoured. By contrast, June's next job packing sweets in a confectionery factory lasted thirteen years: 'That was an interesting thing at first and then, of course, after years it just becomes like everything else, a bit monotonous. But, it's what you make it.' In reminiscing on her working life, June made it clear that the emotional realm of her life revolved around her family:

Just watching them grow up and when they got a bit bigger, going to the school socials. I was just as excited as they were, you know. Then, in the sport, all the sport they played. I used to go round and watch them all the time. At the swimming carnivals. Because they were very involved, you know. I think all my time was taken up chauffeuring everyone round to sports . . . when they went away, nursing and that, and went away from Lithgow, that was the worst part. Yes that was the worst part. . . . We had this verandah open then see, and I was sitting here and I was crying away and [this neighbour] said, 'Oh what's the matter?' And I said, 'Well Ray's dug all my shrubs out of my garden and cut them trees down, and all the girls are going away from Lithgow.' She said, 'That poor woman up there, she's crying cause she's lost her daughters and her shrubs' [laughs] . . .

### *Analysis*

With June's life history we witness graphically the vagaries of the capitalist economy as it impinged on Lithgow's working-class families. The town's economic history – characterised by the arrival and flight of industrial capital; the expansion, decline and later revival of coal mining; and the creation of a pool of cheap female labour – constantly intersected with the fortunes of working-class families like June's. In the post-war period, Lithgow's industrial infrastructure (coal mines, quarries, railways) and its workforce remained in place, but industrial capital remained scarce and had to be seduced to return by the attractions of cheap female labour and government decentralisation subsidies. June's last two employers (the confectionery factory and the pottery) were both in this category. In terms of individual lives, the opportunities for livelihood – and the exploitation that went with low paid, unhealthy work – were contingent upon the historical movements of industrial capital. Nowhere is this clearer than in June's life history: it was competition from the large city-based bread companies which destroyed the livelihood of her husband and herself. For her husband, Ray, his human capital was devalued in that process and he found himself in a labour market no longer requiring his trade skills. The general labouring work which filled the rest of his working life made a mockery of his earlier investments in human capital.

SLM theory seems to offer better insights into the gendered aspects of the Lithgow labour market than does human capital theory. The branch plant structure of its economy introduced particularly skewed gender biases into the local labour market. The underdeveloped professional and administrative sector meant that there was only limited demand for skilled female labour (particularly, skilled clerical workers). By contrast, the Small Arms Factory, the railways and (after mechanisation) the coal mines all offered considerable opportunities for skilled trades work to young men. For young women like June, the demand for their labour was in low-paid factory and shop assistant work. Unlike the young men

entering apprenticeships, there was little opportunity here for them to augment their human capital<sup>9</sup>. In fact, as June found in the Small Arms Factory, the institutionalised discrimination of the skilled trades ensured men would never face competition from 'intermittent workers' like June.

Human capital theory does address married women's experiences in the labour market (Mincer 1980; Mincer and Polachek 1980; Mincer and Ofek 1982), but it relies on the 'utility maximising' economic (family) decision-maker as the centrepiece of its logic. In the case of both Wendy and June there is little doubt that maximising the family's combined income was an important factor in their deliberations about returning to work. But this concern with economic returns was not an eternal feature of the family's decision making but shifted according to the vagaries of working-class hardship. As noted earlier, human capital theorists like Miller (1989) assume both ability and motivation remain static over time. In reality, for both Wendy and June their motivations changed over time, being intermittently determined by economic considerations and by their relationships with their children. In this respect, we find that human capital theory's weakness in the area of gendered subjectivity is also exposed. The identification which June feels with her growing daughters is not captured in human capital terms as it might be for a man. She is not devaluing her human capital for the sake of her children (Mincer and Polachek 1980:170, 230), building the hope that her ambitions might be lived through their career successes (the classic pattern explored for male working-class men by Sennett and Cobb 1973). Rather, June's vicarious aspirations were not for the 'achievements' of her daughters, but for the companionship and love they provided.

Motivation really is a conundrum for human capital theory. The 'irrationality' of June's decisions to endure dead-end work defies explanation in terms of 'maximising utility'. We are better placed to understand these decisions with concepts like 'strategies of desire' – which suggest how washing bottles in a pharmacy could be a surrogate for a career in science – and 'strategies of accommodation' – which suggest how the monotony of the sweet factory could be endured without bitterness.

### **Mary Chambers**

Like June, Mary Chambers' working life involved working in a pharmacy. But that was the limit of their commonality, because in many other respects Mary's world was very different to that of both June and Wendy. Mary finished her secondary school, completing the Leaving Certificate in 1946. But her goal in life – to be an archaeologist – had already been lost: 'they told me, in high school, that there was no opportunity at all for anybody, in Australia, to be an archaeologist. It crushed me, it really

did.' Mary's Leaving Certificate results were not good enough for a scholarship to university. Her father, a tailor, was not prepared to assist financially: 'Dad thought education was wasted on girls. "Oh, you'll only get married," . . . Dad said, "No, you can't go to uni." Because he didn't have the money. "If you go, the others should have their chance." They never wanted to go, but that was another thing. I saw all my friends trot off to uni . . . '

Mary found herself in a labour market vacuum. She was over-qualified for much of the local work, two years too late in the race for the jobs that went to the early school leavers, and with none of the practical skills which the girls doing the commercial or domestic streams at school had gained.

How were you seeing things at the end of high school?

Despair, desperation. I didn't know what to do with myself. I'd gone that far, and nothing. I tried everywhere to get a job, and couldn't . . . we went out to the factories, like Berleis. That would have been a dreadful job, but you know, in those days, the work ethic was you got a job, you didn't sit around . . . They just weren't interested in us . . . they wanted people, machinists, who already knew how to do the job. They didn't want to train a couple of ignorant kids how to use the machines . . . I was a fish out of water, because I was overtrained. And not trained for anything practical.

In an attempt to salvage some direction, Mary took up nurse training at the local hospital. But that didn't last. The 'barracks life' ('I was a homebody, I used to sneak out and go home and get into trouble from the sister') and the feeling that she wasn't learning anything, pushed Mary to seize the chance of a real job, working in a local pharmacy. She was to remain there for 43 years.

For the first year, Mary enjoyed the excitement and the challenge of the dispensary. Deciphering the doctors' handwriting ('part of my archaeological skills'), mixing the ingredients and working out the dosages, all were 'marvellous, I loved that.' But as it slowly dawned on her that this daily routine might become her life, Mary's urge to pursue her dream resurfaced and she started to prepare to resit her matriculation.

I don't know but when I found I was stuck in these dead end jobs. Panic, panic, let's get out of this . . . I realised after I left school that I'd let the opportunity slip. I could have spent my life blaming everybody else, as some of my friends did, for blocking them off from things they wanted to do. And I realised it was me, and that's why I tried to do the Leaving again, and get a good matriculation . . . [But] the sheer volume of the work defeated me. Coming home from work at night, and you'd be tired because you were expected to work hard, and you did. You put in a full day's work. And to sit down at night and write it, even though you knew the work, even just to write it out, I was getting further and further behind. I had to give it up . . .

When she first went to the pharmacy, Mary felt she couldn't back out: 'I thought I'd made a mistake but I'll have to stick to it. You know, "What



will dad say.” I can’t leave it.’ With few other opportunities in Lithgow, Mary considered leaving for Sydney. But, ‘that was daunting. I think underneath it all, I probably didn’t want – I wanted to, but I didn’t want to, you know what I mean. It was all terrifying, out in the big world. We lived very sheltered lives, in the 1940s, very sheltered.’

Marriage was out of the question (‘I was determined I was never going to be married’) and so Mary’s working life settled into a pattern in which her domestic world (her garden became her ‘little bit of paradise’) and her personal philosophy (Buddhism) sustained her spirit. But the sorrow that came from years of low wages, poor working conditions and lost hope could never be fully compensated, even by her rhododendrons in flower. Her retirement, after 43 years with the one business but with three different employers (‘I got handed on. I think I was one of the assets [laughing] . . . I knew all the running . . .’), was graced with the princely sum of a thousand dollars. No long service leave. No superannuation. The only legacy of her working life were her varicose veins: ‘We stood up, all day, everyday. Conditions, in any shop, they’re appalling conditions. They expected you to be doing something for every single moment for every single day. In fact, I was told, you know, if you actually haven’t got anything to do, you must look busy’.

### *Analysis*

Mary’s life history is a challenge for both human capital theory and SLM theory. Of the three working-class women presented in this article, she had the greatest investment in human capital, and probably reaped the least rewards. On the other hand, SLM theory is also struggling to explain how material constraints determined her life. Theoretically, as a woman with a Leaving Certificate in the 1940s, Mary had open to her a professional career (as a teacher, for example), a life away from Lithgow or an ‘upwardly mobile’ marriage. She turned her back on all of these, and the answer lies not only in material constraints, but also in psychological ones.

In explaining her rejection of each of these options, Mary resorted to a particular set of self-images. She saw herself and her family as ‘outsiders’ in the local community. She felt uneasy relating to men, and to babies (‘smelly little things’). A close-knit home, and a garden, were the main sources of emotional security for her (she saw herself as a ‘homebody’). In one sense, in turning away from these choices, in choosing not to marry for example, Mary was exercising control over one of the few aspects in her life which she could control. As she commented during the interview, ‘I resented that [my life being controlled], as I suppose most women do. But you’ve got to knuckle under to most of it . . . Yes, I think any woman worth her salt resents male domination.’

In another sense, however, these early decisions undermined Mary's control over her future life. We need to recognise that psychological constraints emerge from the repercussions of choice. As Connell has argued, 'To make a choice is to walk into a future defined by the consequences of that choice' (Connell 1987:211). Having retreated into the pharmacy, Mary found it harder, with each passing year, to leave. The weight of inertia pressed harder as she grew older, at the same time as her real world options for employment shrank. Structural constraints do indeed issue from human choice. These linkages between personal and social, between present and ongoing, between freedom and constraint, are the hallmark of life history method. This dialect throws up a severe challenge to the neo-classical ontology of the free-floating individual, whose intentions and motives operate in a historical vacuum, and whose semblance of 'freedom' is only possible because of that vacuum. In human capital theory, for example, we find the implicit assumption that each day is a new beginning. In the same way that capitalists in the finance sector can reassess their investment plans each morning, so too should human capital investors enjoy the freedom to rearrange their own investment 'portfolio'. But of course, in reality, that investment is embodied in human beings and, as Marx noted a century ago, labour power is a commodity like no other (1976). As Mary's life history makes clear, each day grows out of the former and while this still leaves scope for human agency, the psychological baggage to be carried forward makes that a formidable project. Psychological constraints do, moreover, merge with material constraints to cement inertia. There is no doubt, for example, that Mary's thwarted efforts to resit her matriculation had to contend with overwhelming material pressures: 'The sheer volume of the work defeated me'.

## **Conclusion**

I suggested earlier that the value of life history method lies in its challenge to the ontological assumptions embedded in economic theory. In the case of this article, I have focused on neo-classical economics, particularly as it emerges in human capital theory. By way of conclusion, I will briefly overview three of the main flaws in that ontology: the presumed universalism of the neo-classical economic subject; the atomised concept of the individual; and the notion of a unitary consciousness.

In her study of the 17th and 18th century contract theorists, Carol Pateman argued that the original 'social contract' between free and equal individuals is premised on a hidden sexual contract, in which women are subordinated to men. In exploring this subordination, Pateman not only analysed the separation of civil society into private and public spheres,

but also the way in which the construction of the individual was implicated: 'What it means to be an "individual", maker of contracts and civilly free, is revealed by the subjection of women within the private sphere' (1988:11). She went on to argue that the presumed 'universal' individualism to be found in the writings of contract theorists like Locke was in fact a 'masculine' individualism (1988:21). Pateman's arguments echo other feminist accounts of subjectivity, in which the presumed universalism of the male subject is exposed for its sexually differentiated partiality (see, for example, Game's account of new French feminism 1991).

Within neo-classical economics a similar assumption of 'universalism' lurks inside the model of the rational, utility-maximising individual. On closer inspection, it becomes clear that econometric models of decision-making reflect only partial realities – realities which are, moreover, premised on the interests of specific groups of individuals. Human capital theory, for example, most closely reflects and, in turn, validates, the life experiences of new middle-class males (such as economists themselves) whose decision making occurs in a context where the competitive accumulation of intellectual investments is invariably rewarded with career advancement and higher income. Pretensions to universality serve as an ideological device which hides partial interests, naturalises what is social, and makes timeless what is historically variable. Yet, as the life histories above make clear, the social arrangements embedded within working-class culture, and the historical changes occurring within the local economy, were both critically formative of the kinds of economic subjects which emerged from these working-class families.

The atomised individual, with 'his' unitary consciousness, has been a regular target of criticism by Marxists who have highlighted the significance of collective subjectivity, expressed through working-class cultural forms and embodied in the institutions of the labour movement (Clarke *et al.* 1979). While neo-classical economists regard trade unions as a 'rigidity' in the labour market, their significance from the point of view of economic subjectivity is far more profound. Trade unions represent the historical embodiment of the refusal by workers to accept the atomised individualism of the capitalist employment contract, a contract in which they can never be true equals. Only as collective subjects can workers muster sufficient power to protect their interests within the labour market. Far from being the meeting place for equals, the labour market is a 'structure of power', in which the 'basis of the bargain struck between labour and capital is the power of groups of bargainers to successfully pursue their interests' (O'Donnell 1984:6).

The other collective subjectivity, and the one more visible in this paper, is that of women as 'family subjects'. As argued earlier, when Wendy and June left school early to support their families, these were not

individual decisions in which 'natural' self-interest was swamped by altruism. These terms only make sense if we begin with the assumption that (male) unitary self-interest is natural. Rather, these women's identities as daughters, and later as wives and mothers, constructed their 'self-interest' within particular social forms. The collective subjectivity which emerged was evident in many of their labour market decisions. This should not be read as an apology for the very restrictive 'life projects' (Connell 1987) possible for women of their generation, but rather as a recognition that 'self-interest' is neither disembodied nor fixed, as presumed by neo-classical economics.

In recent years a more radical challenge to the unitary subject has emerged from within feminist theory. In reworking Lacan's theory of the unconscious, feminists like Kristeva have explored how the entry of the subject into culture is premised on the fracturing or splitting of the self (Kristeva 1981; Burniston and Weedon 1977; Weedon 1987; Game 1991). The implications of this argument are beyond the scope of this article, and probably beyond the scope of the life history method as well. While it is possible to explore the presence of the unconscious using life history methods, as Dollard's modified psychoanalytic technique showed (1957), there are real limits in analysing life history material in such ways. The invitation to speculation is too great; the prospects for corroboration too small.

In this article I have argued that one of the key contributions which life history method offers to economics is its capacity to raise critical questions about individual decision making within social and historical contexts, questions which are not often pursued using more conventional methodologies. While at times certain forms of 'utility maximising' behaviour do emerge in people's lives, these are the product of a particular combination of social and historical structures, not the invariant properties of human beings. The great strength of working with life history materials is that they encourage us to examine in greater detail just what combination of conditions produces those kinds of subjectivities which economists either take for granted, or ignore.

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## Notes

1. Neo-classical economics can be defined as that body of economic theory which places the concept of competitive markets at the centre of its model of the economy. The dynamics of this model are based on movements toward market equilibrium, situations where the market clears, and 'optimum' outcomes are achieved. Restrictions which stop markets working effectively (such as minimum wage laws and trade unions) are regarded as undesirable 'rigidities' in the labour market.
2. By 'positivism' I mean the theory which argues that the social sciences must emulate the methods of the natural sciences if they are to produce valid knowledge. This leads to a particularly strong emphasis on quantification and on the use of the hypothetico-deductive model of research. However, not all advocates of the 'naturalist thesis' (the idea of a unity between the natural and social sciences) are positivists (see, for example, the work of critical realists – Bhaskar 1978 and 1989). For a useful distinction between positivism and realism, see Keat and Urry (1975).
3. It is important to note that non-Marxist theories of segmented labour markets have also been used to explore women's labour market experiences. See, for example, Mumford's discussion of institutional theories of segmentation (1989).
4. Useful overviews of this revival can be found in Plummer 1983; and in the pages of the bilingual journal *Life Stories/Recits de vie*.
5. A term originally coined by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz. See Shaw, 1980:232.
6. Some of Bob Connell's work on masculinity (1991) typifies this focus on non-mainstream society, as does much of the AIDs related life history research on sexual practices (Dowsett 1991) and drug taking. Similarly, in a collection of European studies on prostitution, street gangs and drug taking, several of the studies relied on this methodology (Cain 1989). An oral history study of prostitution in Sydney observed: 'sex work . . . is one social milieu where the voices of the prostitutes, so often silenced or ignored in conventional studies, are essential for a more complete understanding' (Perkins 1992:172).
7. Sample size is, nevertheless, still a critical issue. Even if an epsem design were employed effectively for life history sampling, achieving the kind of respectable sample size (e.g. 1200) which surveys usually aim for, would be prohibitive in terms of cost and time (for both interviewing and transcribing).
8. See, for example Erikson and Goldthorpe's (1988) curt dismissal of Leiulfsrud and Woodward's (1987) qualitative study of 30 cross-class families. While this criticism is well founded, the rather severe rejection of the value of qualitative research by Erikson and Goldthorpe is unwarranted.
9. While Becker (1980) does concede that 'opportunities' play a role in determining earnings, he restricts his analysis to considering only differences in supply of funds which different individuals have access to. While this may be appropriate to the private education sector in the United States, it has little

relevance to the Australian setting where the opportunities to gain technical training have been traditionally circumscribed by non-monetary factors (particularly, gender).

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