Subjects of inquiry:
Statistics, stories, and the production of knowledge

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Abstract

Statistics and stories are often equated with different types of knowledge in contemporary Western societies: statistics are associated more with the authority of objective, disinterested experts while stories are able to encapsulate subjective, personal experience. In this paper, we explore how both genres were used to produce knowledge in the context of a public inquiry on the problems facing older workers in securing and maintaining employment. Drawing on the concept of power/knowledge relations we examine how statistics and stories were used in different inquiry texts and trace their use across texts over time. Our findings show that to establish their authority as a valid form of knowledge representing the subject of inquiry, statistics and stories both had to be embedded in the appropriate discursive conventions. In the case of statistics, knowledge had to be expressed through discursive conventions that conveyed distance from the subject of inquiry i.e., independent, objective

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research. In contrast, stories produced knowledge through discursive conventions that established proximity to the older worker – by being or knowing an older worker. The study shows the effects of these discursive conventions on how knowledge is institutionalized through processes of textual re-inscription, as well as the way in which they constructed a marginalized older worker subject.

Keywords
Knowledge, Power/Knowledge, Public Inquiries, Discursive Conventions, Epistemic Subjects

Introduction
Public inquiries and hearings are ‘ceremonial events’ (Gephart, 1993, p. 1474) where governments assemble people deemed knowledgeable to make sense of a particular event or social problem and to produce authoritative forms of knowledge that can guide subsequent government action (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2008, 2009; Brown, 2000; Brown, Ainsworth & Grant, 2012; Gephart, 1993; Spicer, 2005; Topal, 2009). These knowledge production processes rely on experts and laypeople and, in so doing, make use of both statistics and stories in their attempt to represent and understand social reality (Boudes & Laroche, 2009; Brown, 2004; Brown, Stacey & Nandhakumar, 2008; Gephart, 1993; Topol, 2009). We examine the use of statistics and stories during an Australian parliamentary inquiry set up to investigate ‘the social, economic and industrial issues specific to workers over 45 years of age seeking employment, or establishing a business, following unemployment’ (Age Counts, 2000). We use the concept of power/knowledge relations to explore how statistics and stories produced knowledge about the subject of the inquiry – the older worker – by examining their use in different inquiry texts, as well as by tracing their use across texts over time.

Our findings show that to establish their authority as a valid form of knowledge
representing the subject of inquiry, statistics and stories had to be embedded in the appropriate discursive conventions. In the case of statistics, knowledge had to be expressed through discursive conventions that conveyed distance from the subject of inquiry i.e., independent, objective research. In contrast, stories produced knowledge through discursive conventions that established proximity to the older worker – by being or knowing an older worker. The findings also show that, when embedded in the appropriate discursive conventions, knowledge produced through statistics was institutionalized by being re-inscribed in different inquiry texts without losing their original meaning or provenance. However, stories – as well as statistics that were not embedded in the appropriate discursive conventions – did not have the same protection and, as a result, meanings could be more easily changed by other actors. Finally, the study found that the use of these discursive conventions served to construct a marginalized older worker subject who was dependent on other actors for avoiding or ending unemployment; who was relegated to only being a storyteller rather than an expert; and whose stories were at risk of being appropriated by other actors. The study makes a number of contributions. First, it shows how discursive conventions shape the different ways in which knowledge is institutionalized through processes of textual re-inscription. Second, it shows how particular discursive conventions can have major implications for the construction of the epistemic subject. Finally, the study illustrates the multiple ways in which power permeates hearings and inquiries: through resources, processes, meaning and, importantly, power/knowledge relations.

The paper is organized as follows. We first examine the production of knowledge in public inquiries, the concept of power/knowledge relations and the role of statistics and stories in the production of knowledge. We then present our case study and explain how we collected and analyzed the data. Third, we present our findings. Finally, we discuss the contributions and implications of our study.
Public Inquiries and the Production of Knowledge

Public inquiries and hearings constitute important forums in contemporary liberal democracies for discussion about issues of public interest, such as the aftermath of a disaster or pressing social problems (e.g., Ainsworth & Hardy, 2008, 2009; Brown, 2000; Gephart, 1993; Spicer, 2005; Topal, 2009). As exercises in collective sensemaking (Brown, 2000, 2004), they produce shared accounts and explanations. This does not imply, however, that they are the outcome of consensus between equal parties. On the contrary, studies have shown that power is exercised in the development of shared accounts as the views of some actors are privileged over others (e.g., Boudes & Laroche, 2009; Brown, et al., 2012).

Public inquiries, and the reports they produce, may... be described as exercises in power, where power is defined as the capacity to extend hegemonic reach by suppressing or overwhelming competing accounts such that one’s own interpretation dominates (Brown, 2000, p. 48).

Public inquiries and hearings also create legitimacy for existing institutions (Boudes & Laroche, 2009; Brown, 2000), which is derived not only from the inquiry outcomes – its decision, recommendations, or final report – but also from processes of discussion and deliberation, where evidence is weighed and evaluated in a public forum (Topal, 2009). In this way, public inquiries help to support a particular political order’s claim to be recognized as legitimate (Topal, 2009). These sensemaking and legitimating functions are not only connected to power; they are also intrinsically linked to the way in which the inquiry or hearing produces and sanctions certain forms of knowledge.

Public inquiries and hearings are thus linked to both the production of authoritative knowledge and to power. Accordingly, our focus is on Foucault’s conceptualization of power/knowledge relations, which examines how knowledge is intricately and inevitably bound up with power.

The exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power (Foucault, 1980, p. 52).
According to this view, knowledge is not ‘discovered’ but produced by those constructed as authoritative figures, and as a result of conforming to accepted procedures and protocols (Alvesson, 2001; Marshall & Rollinson, 2004).

[Power] produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production (Foucault 1979, p. 194).

As a result, what comes to constitute knowledge, as well as those who are deemed to be knowledgeable subjects, are inextricably wrapped up with power.

Public inquiries and hearings draw on both objective and subjective forms of knowledge (Boudes & Laroche, 2009; Brown, 2000, 2004; Brown, Stacey & Nandhakumar, 2008; Gephart, 1993; Topol, 2009). In order to construct an authoritative account of the subject under investigation, inquiries are expected to rely on scientific expertise and expert witnesses, but they also involve the public, including those who have direct experience of the issue under consideration. Thus a public inquiry relies on different forms of knowledge – expertise that is typically associated with objective, quantitative research and personal experience that is often presented in the form of stories (see Gabriel, 2004) – in claims to represent reality and attempts to produce knowledge.

**Statistics and Stories in the Production of Knowledge**

Statistics – the use of numbers, fractions, ratios, percentages, distributions, etc. and the analysis or research from which these signifiers are derived – play an important role in the production of knowledge in modern society (Carlon, Downs & Wert-Gray, 2006; Schultze, 2000). The central place of statistics stems from the development of modern bureaucracy and the liberal democratic state (Daston, 1992; Poovey, 1993; Porter, 1991, 1992, 1995), as measurement is used to enact and express the values and concerns of particular communities (e.g. Cline Cohen, 1982; Kula, 1986). This form of knowledge, which takes the form of ‘hard data, codified procedures, universal principles’ (Nonaka, 1991, p. 96) is, in the context of
modernity, assumed to establish facts and the ‘truth’ about reality through the application of the scientific method (Knorr-Cetina, 1981). The numbers that emanate from such research are assumed to provide ‘precision’, ‘rigour’, ‘accuracy’ and ‘objectivity’ (Robson, 1992).

The importance of objectivity in eliminating ‘individual idiosyncrasies’ (Daston, 1992, p. 599) emerged in the context of the demands for public knowledge in 19th century liberal democratic governments (Porter, 1992). To be seen as legitimate, governments needed to be seen to be making decisions that were in the public interest, rather than for the benefit of particular individuals. Numbers and statistics produced by ‘disinterested experts’ (Porter, 1991, p. 252) served to convey the requisite impersonality and distance. In this way, numbers often assist in depoliticizing decisions and outcomes that may well be highly political (Denis, et al., 2006). They are a resource that helps to ‘persuade readers about textual truths’ (Gephart, 2006, p. 429). They can also be easily conveyed through images, graphs and numbers; and with the expectation that they will be understood in similar ways by different individuals through the ‘application of a universal disinterested scientific method’ (Mercer, 2002, p. 207).

Stories or narratives\(^2\) also play an important role in producing knowledge (Berry, 2001; Currie & Brown, 2003; Lanzara & Patriotta, 2001; Tsoukas & Hatch, 2001). Stories are accounts of events or experiences (Phillips, 1995) that involve ‘someone telling someone else that something happened’ (Hernstein Smith, 1981, p. 232) and may or may not be autobiographical. They provide a ‘holistic account of a set of events and contain a mixture of beliefs, intentions, actions and contextual details that are temporally ordered and have an implied “plot” that connects them in terms of causality’ (Bartel & Garud, 2003, p. 327). In this ‘narrative mode of knowing’, events are integrated into a plot that makes sense in the particular context and, in so doing, exhibits an explanation (Czarniawska, 1997, p. 19).

\(^{2}\) The two terms are used interchangeably.
Knowledge is thus produced as individuals participate in the narration process, interpret the implications of a particular story, retell the story to guide action, and recount their experiences (Bartel & Garud, 2003).

Such stories are not “just fictions”, nor are they mere chronologies or reports of events as they happened. Instead, they represent poetic elaborations of narrative raw material, aiming to articulate and communicate facts as experience, not facts as information … Drawing connections, highlighting what is important and unimportant, expressing emotion, commenting on what is bad and what is good, what is accidental and what is typical, attributing motives and emotions, these are all elements of story work (or poetic labour), the work that goes into generating a story that both carries meaning and claims to represent reality (Gabriel, 2004, p. 170-1).

Accordingly, stories help to make sense of events, set forth truth claims, define problems, and establish solutions and strategies (Fenton & Langley, 2011; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Orr, 2006). For example, Newman (2004) recounts instances where individual and personal maternal stories of child accidents and illness carried more weight than the statistical evidence that contradicted it and led to large-scale change in safety regulations and medical protocols.

There is a tendency to differentiate ‘hard quantification’ and ‘soft qualification’ (Carlon, et al., 2006; Schulze, 2000). The former emphasizes objectivity and is associated with ‘representation that corresponds to an external reality and freedom from the distorting perceptual bias of the individual thinking agent.’ The latter signifies the idiosyncratic aspects of knowledge, which ‘originate and exist within the observer’s mind, and which are impossible to check directly’ (Schultze, 2000, p. 6). However, Poovey (1993) reminds us how numerical representation and explanatory narrative are often combined in practice. Even in the struggle to institutionalize statistics as a ‘science’ in 1830s Britain, proponents of statistics, such as William Cooke Taylor (1835), still used stories:

On the one hand, he worries that readers may find numerical representation fanciful or even deceitful – a “kind of conjurer’s juggle” not worth serious debate. On the other hand, he suggests that a “dull, dry parade of stupid figures” may lull legislators to sleep, especially when the “stupid figures” have
to compete with novelistic anecdotes. These two antithetical fantasies point to Taylor’s own indecision about statistics: is this discourse too imaginative, in the sense that numbers can conjure any meaning out of scant evidence? Or is it so denuded of imagination that it will stupefy, if not remain altogether unreadable? As if to underscore his own uncertainty, Taylor most frequently presents statistical tables when he wants to make conclusive arguments, but he turns to “a few anecdotes” when he wants to “prove” his central polemical point (Poovey, 1993, p. 260).

In other words, we cannot completely separate statistics and stories: both are used in processes of knowledge production and to produce convincing accounts of social problems that become the basis for public deliberation, decision-making and action in public inquiries.

The combined use of statistics and stories in the context of public inquiries does, however, raise certain questions. First, the conceptualization of power/knowledge relations draws our attention to the way in which truth is ‘a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation, and operation of statements’ (Foucault, 1980, p. 133). In other words, knowledge is the outcome of particular social practices through which the world is represented (Tsoukas & Mylonopoulos, 2004). These practices – or, as we refer to them, discursive conventions – allow actors to make statements that claim the status of truth. In the case of objective knowledge and the use of statistics, the discursive conventions that confer the status of knowledge are widely known and shared across different settings (e.g., Aitkin, 2009; Denis, Langley & Rouleau, 2006; Gephart, 2006; Topol, 2009). Subjective knowledge also has to be articulated in a way consistent with a community’s expectations (Schulze, 2000) if it is to attain the status of truth, but these conventions are far less institutionalized and, accordingly, might be expected to vary considerably according to the particular setting. In addition, the discursive conventions associated with subjective knowledge such as stories are likely to be quite different from those associated with statistics. We are therefore interested in the tensions and complementaries that arise when both are used in the same setting. Accordingly, our first research question is: how does the use of statistics and stories in public inquiries produce authoritative knowledge?
Second, power/knowledge relations involve the production of the individual subject. Knowledge invests actors with particular meanings and constructs relations among them (Marshall & Rollinson, 2004). Consequently, identities are ‘constituted through correlative elements of power and knowledge’ (Townley, 1993, p. 522). These processes involve the ways in which individuals construct themselves as distinct kinds of subjects through self knowledge (Alvesson, 2001; Brown & Jones, 2000); thereby ‘govern[ing] themselves and others toward what they believe to be the truth, toward the right way to be’ (Skålén, Fellesson & Fougère, 2006, p. 277). In addition, power/knowledge relations constitute those subjects who are – and who are not – authoritative (Fox, 1992). Some subjects are conferred with rights to speak and act, increasing the likelihood that the texts they produce will be seen as constituting knowledge, and taken up and acted upon by other actors. In other cases, subjects may be locked into marginalized identities, making it difficult for them to make truth claims (Hardy & Phillips, 1999). Our interest is therefore in how stories and statistics intersect to produce subjects. Accordingly, our second research question is: how does the use of statistics and stories in public inquiries construct the subject of inquiry?

**Methods**

The research site was an Australian parliamentary inquiry instigated by the House of Representatives’ Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Workplace Relations into the barriers facing older unemployed workers in securing and maintaining employment. It was conducted by a Committee consisting of 12 Members of Parliament (MPs), and commenced in early March 1999 with a call for written submissions from interested organizations and individuals. On the basis of 210 written submissions, 20 public hearings were held throughout the country. A final report was released in August 2000, entitled *Age Counts: An Inquiry into Issues Specific to Mature-Age Workers*.

We selected this research site because the inquiry constituted a set of knowledge
production processes – in this case about the older worker – and, as the Committee Chair had made clear, both statistics and stories were to feature in these processes.

CHAIR [COMMITTEE] … our inquiry will cover a whole range of things from individual anecdotal stories, most of which are quite poignant and moving, right through to a whole lot of statistical analyses and things like that (Public Hearing, 15 July 1999, Sydney, p. 27).

Thus we identified an opportunity to examine the functions of, and tensions between, uses of statistics and stories in different kinds of publicly available texts – submissions, hearings and final report – authored by different actors during the course of the inquiry, as well as track the ways in which statistics and stories presented in one text were re-inscribed in subsequent texts.

Data Collection and Analysis

We collected all texts lodged on the official Parliamentary website (www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/edt/Owk/index.htm) set up in 1999. They included: (a) 210 publicly available written submissions made by a range of actors – categorized by the inquiry as: private individuals; service providers; government departments; lobby groups; employers and industry associations; academics; area consultative committees; professional bodies; trade unions; consultants; educational and training institutions; and politicians; \(^3\) (b) Hansard transcripts of the oral testimony given by these same groupings of actor in 20 public hearings, amounting to over 1,000 verbatim, unedited pages of text; and (c) the 264-page final report.

The texts were analysed for uses of statistics and stories. An incidence of the use of statistics was identified as discussions of numerical signifiers, such as numbers, statistics, ratios and percentages, tables, graphs etc. to represent knowledge about older workers. An incidence of a story was identified where a participant represented knowledge about older

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\(^3\) Private individuals were primarily older workers or their partners; a service provider is an organization that is funded by the federal government to deliver labour market services to the unemployed; lobby groups also refers to community, interest, welfare and support groups; employers and industry associations have been combined in the analysis; area consultative committees are tripartite groups established by the federal government to advise on unemployment in a particular region or area.
workers in story-form, i.e. in a way that personally involved the narrator. This might involve a private individual, who identified him/herself as an older worker, telling their life story or a participant telling a story of their personal contact with an older worker. Each incidence of statistics or stories in the written submissions and public hearings was identified according to the categorization of actor adopted by the inquiry. Table 1 summarizes the use of statistics and stories in submissions and hearings by different actors. The final report contained 135 instances of the use of statistics, compared to 11 uses of stories, which consisted of five partial stories (i.e., excerpts from longer narratives told in the public hearings) and six references to stories, where the report noted that a story had been told but did not re-tell it.

— Table 1 near here —

In the next stage, a more interpretive analysis was undertaken to ascertain the ways in which statistics and stories were presented and the particular discursive conventions that were drawn upon in the submissions and the final report, as well as in the verbal interactions among actors during the hearings. In the case of statistics, we noted differences in patterns in how they were presented (e.g., the amount of sourcing and referencing), as well as in the reactions to the use of statistics by different groups of actors (e.g., interchanges between witnesses and Committee members in the hearings). In the case of stories, we examined the patterns in how they were told and, as discussed in the findings, identified the predominance of regression narratives, i.e. stories about deterioration or decline (Gergen, 1994). We also examined exchanges with witnesses during the hearings prior to and following the telling of stories.

Third, further analysis was conducted to interpret the meaning of the particular statistic or story by examining the accompanying verbal interactions or written material

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4 The final report was divided into short, numbered paragraphs. Coding was therefore undertaken at the level of paragraph i.e., multiple references to statistics in the same paragraph were coded as a single use of statistics.
surrounding its use. In this way we identified and differentiated between ‘positive’ and
‘negative’ instances. For example, an actor might use statistics in order to prove a point,
emphasizing their validity as a source of knowledge about the older worker. We refer to this
as a positive use of statistics. However, actors may also refer to statistics in a negative way –
as part of an argument that statistics do not constitute a legitimate source of knowledge about
older workers, which we defined as negative. We noted some variation in these negative
references and we therefore conducted further interpretive analysis to identify two patterns:
(a) instances where the negative reference revolved around the available statistics being
incomplete in some way; and (b) instances where the negative reference referred to statistics
being fundamentally flawed as a valid way of knowing about the older worker (Table 2).

We conducted the same analysis for stories insofar as an actor might refer to a story in
order to convey knowledge about older workers; or individuals might refer to stories as being
an inadequate means of understanding this phenomenon. Most references to stories were
positive i.e., they supported the validity of stories as a way of knowing about the older
worker. Only two negative references to stories were found in the form of a fundamental
critique i.e., that stories were subjective and did not, therefore, constitute valid knowledge
(see Table 2). We then followed up on these criticisms to ascertain any consequences.

Finally, we examined whether and how statistics and stories presented in one text were
re-inscribed in different texts produced over the course of inquiry. We conducted this analysis
by starting with all the incidences of statistics and stories identified in the final report and
working “backwards” to identify their original source – in the hearings and/or submissions.
We compared the incidences across the different texts and, conducting an interpretive analysis
of changes in how the story or statistic was presented, came to a conclusion about whether the
meaning had changed, as discussed in our findings.
Findings

We present our findings concerning the tensions and contradictions in how statistics and stories produced knowledge about the older worker in the inquiry.

Discursive Conventions: Distance and Proximity

Actors regularly asserted that it was possible to know the reality of older workers – their identity, experience of unemployment and labour market position through statistics.

D.O.M.E. [SERVICE PROVIDER] There is also a firm view that neither the government nor the community appear to be aware of the extent of mature unemployment as a major issue. ABS [Australian Bureau of Statistics] figures show that:

Those aged 45+ made up 21.8% of all unemployed people,

Those aged 40+ make up 32.3% of all unemployed people,

Those aged 35+ make up 42.5% of all unemployed people,

And yet there is an overwhelming focus solely on youth unemployment (Submission 36, p. 2).

Statistics were used to convey the dimensions and prevalence of the problem, typically in formally structured, densely written research reports by government departments, academics, lobby groups and service providers, although some private individuals also used statistics.

Uses of statistics were typically deeply embedded in familiar discursive conventions associated with the scientific method. In this way, their status as knowledge was bolstered through the creation of distance between the actor who wrote the submission or appeared at the hearings and the subject of the inquiry – the older worker – through citations of work by other experts, references to studies in other settings, and the use of formal, technical language.

These discursive conventions also served to render statistical knowledge as material – statistics were ‘real’ and ‘hard’.

Ms Heycox [GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENT] There is a lot of quite hard research that needs to be done (Hearing 14 July, 1999, Sydney, p. 19).
Chair [ COMMITTEE ] … To destroy some of those myths we actually need some hard data (Hearing, 9 September 1999, Ringwood, p. 216).

As statistics took on a material existence, the problem of individual (mis)interpretation was obviated: statistical data were constructed as having the agency to communicate directly. For example, in the following quotes, this type of data is constructed as speaking or ‘telling us’ about the problem of older unemployment:

Ms Rolland [ SERVICE PROVIDER ] Absolutely. I think the ABS data tells us that 20 per cent of people have less than a day’s notice of redundancy—that in itself speaks a thousand words (Hearing, 21 March 2000, Canberra, p. 1018).


In ‘showing’, ‘revealing’, and ‘proving’ the truth about older workers, statistics distanced the experts who carried out the research even further from their subject: it was the statistics – not those who presented them – that spoke about the older worker to the inquiry.

In instances where stories were used to construct knowledge of the subject of the inquiry, proximity to the subject was established. The most proximal relationship arose when the author was an older worker, or the partner of one.

Mr Hudson [ PRIVATE INDIVIDUAL ] I wish to make a personal submission to the above enquiry based on my own experience. I pre-empt my comments with a brief CV… this history… qualifies me, with experience from the sharp end, to comment (Submission 72, p. 1).

However, proximity could also be established by knowing an older worker professionally.

Ms Whish [ SERVICE PROVIDER ] I will never forget a fellow who came in to seek emergency assistance last year: a married couple with three children; I do not quite know his employment history but he was out of work… (Hearing, 16 September, Adelaide, p. 396).

Consequently, the authorship of stories about the older worker was not confined to those actors who identified as being older workers or members of their families.

In the same way as uses of statistics were embedded in certain discursive conventions, so too were stories. Specifically, stories tended to start in the present by providing personal details of
the older worker in question and their situation, as well as their recent experience in seeking employment. Stories then returned to the past to explain when and how the older worker had become unemployed.

Ms MacIver [PRIVATE INDIVIDUAL] I should probably go back 10 years to when I was a tenured academic at the University of Technology, Sydney, and my husband was a project manager … We lived in the electorate of Bradfield. We had a Californian bungalow which we owned outright and which we had renovated lovingly over 15 years. We were actually very comfortable. We had two children who had just completed high school and a daughter who was just going into high school … things started to go amiss when the whole notion of privatization of Telstra came about … and so he [my husband] was forced to take a package (Hearing, 10 February 2000, Sydney, p. 987).

Accordingly most stories by and about older workers were characterized by regression narratives, where the pattern of plot development suggests deterioration or decline (Gergen, 1994). Regression did not, however, take the form of a steady decline, as depicted by Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998). Instead, stories were characterized by a radical disjuncture caused by unemployment. Before this disjuncture, life had been good; after it, life had changed immeasurably for the worse.

These narratives emphasized the personal, emotional impact of unemployment through the trajectory of the story, the comparison between the ‘before’ and ‘after’ and the use of highly evocative language.

Ms Archibald [PRIVATE INDIVIDUAL] On 3 December 1996 – a date etched in my mind—as CEO and director of nursing of the most cost-effective and efficient public hospital in this state I was given my deliverance. Standing in the street at the back of the hospital, flanked by two loyal members of my staff and a security guard, I knew that my life had changed forever … and I was a casualty caught up in the rationalisation of public health care services in this state (Hearing, 9 September 1999, Ringwood, p. 221).

However, the widespread use of regression narratives tended to construct older workers as helpless in the face of events beyond their control. This effect was compounded when ‘success’ stories were told in which the regression was arrested by the intervention of a service provider.

Ms Boyne [AREA CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE] … For 11 years I have been working directly with unemployed people at the grassroots level in
training and case management. I have seen, heard and felt the human misery and suffering that unemployment has inflicted upon people. … To illustrate this, I would like to introduce you to one of the clients from the Mature Workers Program ... She is 48 years of age, unemployed for 2½ years, it is 14 years since she left her profession of nursing and she is a sole parent. Her barriers to employment: sole parent; one teenage son expelled from high school; family problems; recent broken marriage; no car license and not able to drive; 14 years since leaving her nursing profession; suicidal behaviour; taking medication … She has no money, no confidence and low self-esteem … How the Mature Workers Program assisted her over two years: built trust, rapport and confidence through a lot of active listening; referred her for counselling; identified her strengths, desires, fears, opportunities and prospects for employment and training; developed her resume; found someone to teach her to drive; organised voluntary work experience; identified training where a client could update skills … In those two years, the client successfully obtained full-time employment. She is now a very happy person (Hearing, 25 November, 1999, Canberra, p. 871).

This story first establishes the proximity of the witness – a service provider employee – to older workers generally, and then to a particular individual. Initially, the story conforms to a regression narrative emphasizing the effect of unemployment in highly emotional terms. Its language portrays older workers as passive – unemployment is ‘inflicted’ on them; they ‘become’ traumatized. As the subsequent success story is told, the language changes to a more neutral discussion of the services that were provided. Thus the addition of a progressive narrative served to highlight the helplessness of the older worker: rendered suicidal by unemployment, the client was then made ‘happy’, but only through expert intervention.

**Subjects: Experts and Storytellers**

The discursive conventions described above were necessary to establish individuals’ rights to speak (Hardy & Phillips, 1999) in the inquiry. The discursive conventions associated with statistics helped to construct those who presented them as ‘experts’, possessing expertise and objectivity which, in turn, meant that they were bona fide producers of such knowledge. Individuals were legitimated as ‘story tellers’ through their familiarity with the subject of the inquiry. Many categories of actor were able to claim both expertise and experience – to use statistics and tell stories. However, as we show here, the subject of the inquiry – older
workers – were constrained from being experts in two ways: they were directed to tell stories; and their use of statistics was challenged.

First, in the hearings, private individuals found it difficult to use statistics because they were encouraged – or even directed – into story-telling. When private individuals appeared before the Committee, the Chair was most likely to ask them to confirm that they were appearing in a private capacity and to ask them directly to tell their story. In contrast, other categories of actor were most commonly asked to give an ‘overview’ or ‘précis’ of their submission and the capacity in which they were appearing was not questioned. For example, in hearings in Perth on 15 September 1999, the three individuals appearing in a private capacity were all explicitly asked to recount their ‘experiences’ (once) or ‘story’ (twice); and two of the three were asked about the capacity in which they were appearing i.e., as a private individual. In contrast, in four out of five sessions with service providers and lobby groups, witnesses were asked to give a précis of their submission. None of the eight individuals representing these organizations was asked about the capacity in which they were appearing. This was a very common pattern. At another hearing in Canberra on 22 November 1999, union representatives, service providers and an academic were all asked by the Chair to give ‘overviews’. The first private individual to appear was initially asked for an ‘overview’ but soon after, the Chair came to the point: ‘You were made redundant in 1989. Can you tell us what happened to you?’ In this way, the identity of private individuals was marked out and these actors were led into story-telling.

Second, when private individuals did try to use statistics, they were far more likely to be challenged by Committee members than other actors.

Mrs Drazil [PRIVATE INDIVIDUAL] I think NEIS [New Enterprise Initiative Scheme for Small Business] is restrictive. I think it is a numbers game. I hate to say that but, having experienced the process to a certain degree, I worked it out to thirds. A third will be great businesspeople who will benefit tremendously by the program, who will be very successful in the future. A third are just so determined and dedicated to making their business work that
they will work at it until they drop so that it does work eventually. Then there is the third group sitting there, using the system so they do not have to look for work while they are training …

Mr Barresi [COMMITTEE] I am a bit confused about some of the figures you mentioned. You are saying a third, a third, a third. In here you also mention something about a third failing to complete the course.

Mrs Drazil Yes.

Mr Barresi That seems to be contrary to some evidence we have received from others about the success of NEIS. They are claiming somewhere between a 75 to 85 per cent success rate. Are they doing something which the ones you have been exposed to are not doing? Are we being snowed with incorrect figures?

Mrs Drazil Yes, I am speaking just from my observation. I know that when I was working for the managing agents we were running at an 87.7 per cent success rate initially … The figures I am telling you are figures that I picked up through my experience (Hearing, 16 September 1999, Adelaide, p. 421).

In this excerpt, the Committee member directly challenged the individual’s use of statistics, resulting in the witness referring back to her ‘experience’, rather than her ‘expertise’. In contrast, when other actors made use of statistics, their expertise was often legitimated and reinforced, as Committee members asked questions of – and deferred to – these witnesses.

Chair [COMMITTEE] This is just a technical matter. In the third paragraph from the bottom on page 4 of your submission, you state: “It is estimated, for example, that an individual on average earnings employed for one year at age 45 faces a 3 per cent reduction in available net expenditure after age 45 …” Can you explain that to me? Excuse my ignorance, but I do not quite understand what it means.

Mr Gallagher [GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENT] – Essentially, that is a per year reduction. It is an attempt to abstract from the case studies presented and to show the overall effect of cumulative years of employment. As it says … (Hearing, 30 September 1999, Canberra, p. 486).

Thus, inquiry processes during the hearings made it hard for private individuals to be experts, whereas other actors who used statistics were not precluded from also making use of stories: as long as they could demonstrate direct experience of older workers, they could claim the right to speak on their behalf in the inquiry.
Institutionalizing Knowledge: Durablity and Fragility

In this section, we examine differences in how statistical and narrative knowledge was institutionalized and show how statistics were more durable than stories – as long as they were embedded in the appropriate discursive conventions. To do so, we first examine the effect of negative criticism and, second, the effects of re-inscription.

Statistics were far more likely to receive negative criticism than stories (Table 2). Statistics were regularly condemned as a way of knowing about the older worker: unemployed people were not ‘just a number in a statistical survey’ (Mark Tindall, private individual, submission 47, p. 7).

Mr Sawford [COMMITTEE] … We can muck around with the figures how we like. The USA mucks around with them and says, ‘What a wonderful unemployment rate we have; it is four per cent’. But then they do not tell you that another four per cent are in gaol … that another four per cent exist on the streets in another economy … that four per cent are involved in petty crime. (Hearing, 15 July 1999, Sydney, p. 107).

However, when such criticism occurred, it was typically linked to the existence of insufficient or inadequate data; the solution to which was more and better statistics. The superiority of statistics as a way of knowing about the older worker was never fundamentally undermined as in the following excerpt, where a service provider criticizes ‘bland’ statistics, but then goes on to recommend the need for more statistical research:

Mr Carlon [SERVICE PROVIDER] … The problem with looking at bland statistics is that the statistics are pretty inconclusive … because the statistics do not go down to a detailed enough level we do not really understand what they really mean…. One of the recommendations is that … the Commonwealth should be doing more research into this area … (Hearing, 28 October 1999, Brisbane, p. 662).

At the end of the inquiry, the Committee expressed no doubt about the capacity of statistics to capture the reality of older unemployment.

Mr Sawford [COMMITTEE] … Consider the following: 700,000 people in this country are unemployed, 700,000 are underemployed and 700,000 are hidden unemployed; and there are 70,000 advertised job vacancies … The simple truth is, though, that I do not know how many there are, but the more
important point is nor does anyone else, and that is the nub of the problem. Accurate data, comparative data and longitudinal study references are not available to identify the whole problem of unemployment … This report offers a range of solutions and possible directions to address mature age unemployment. The best solution is not a solution at all. It is the deliberate long-term gathering of data through longitudinal studies (Tabling of the report in the House of Representatives, Parliamentary Votes and Proceedings 1998-1999-2000, 14 August 2000, p. 17246).

Whatever the problems with statistics, the solution was not to turn to alternative sources of knowledge; it was to acquire more statistics.

Despite far fewer incidences of criticism challenging the status of stories as a valid form of knowledge about the older worker (we identified only two), stories were far more fragile. For example, in one of these instances of criticism, a representative from an employer organization directly challenged the authority of stories.

Mr Barresi [COMMITTEE] … Witness after witness who comes in here tells us that they have been discriminated against. We are taking the opportunity, through this committee, of talking to individuals who have gone through the process, not just simply employer or employee groups.

Mr Paterson [INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION] I have no doubt that you will receive evidence before this committee that supports people who feel that that is what has occurred. The mere fact that they feel that way is not evidence that it has occurred (Hearing, 22 November 1999, Canberra, p. 857).

The attack led the Chair to refer to statistics in order to defend the use of stories.

Chair – But Mark, look at the Drake stuff. That says 81 per cent of the 500 employers surveyed said that they would recruit people 31 to 41 years of age, and 62 per cent said that they would target over-45s for redundancy. That is consistent with a lot of the anecdotal stuff that we have heard.

The attack continued nonetheless.

Mr Paterson Yes, but that evidence is not evidence of discrimination. That is not evidence of people having been singled out, merely because of their age, for less than equitable treatment by comparison with people with a similar skill set.

Chair I accept that.

Mr Paterson That is why I caution that you will get those claims. Those stories will be put before this committee. They will be used elsewhere to justify a whole range of activity. That does not mean that there is discrimination going on in the labour market (Hearing, 22 November 1999,
This single attack had a profound effect on the inquiry. Before the appearance of this witness, Committee members had repeatedly stated that age discrimination was a ‘fact’ based on the evidence it had received so far, including stories by and about older workers. After the appearance of this witness, the Committee referred instead to ‘perceptions’ of age discrimination. This construction survived translation to appear in the final report:

Certainly the Committee found a strong perception among mature-age job seekers that age-specific barriers exist to their gaining employment. (Age Counts, 2000, p. xv; emphasis added).

Thus the meaning of stories about age discrimination changed in the final report as a result of this single attack – age discrimination was no longer a ‘fact’, but a ‘perception’.

Both statistics and stories were subject to re-inscription in multiple texts: from submission to hearings; among different hearings and from hearings to final report. However, when we compared patterns of reinscription, statistics were more durable than stories insofar as when they were re-inscribed, their meanings appeared to be largely unchanged from the original use. Despite being simplified in the hearings (when statistical information from dense reports in the submissions was presented in more simple and ‘user-friendly’ ways in verbal interactions), the ways in which statistics were re-inscribed in the final report typically conformed to the original submission. The following example indicates an instance of statistics pertaining to New Zealand in the final report to argue that declining participation of older workers in the labour market could be redressed with incentive-based policies.

New Zealand evidence suggests that declining labour participation among older people could be reversible if policies provide the right incentives. Eligibility for superannuation in New Zealand is rising progressively from age 60 in 1992 to 65 in 2001. This has increased the participation rate of those aged 55-64 by 8.45 percentage points (Age Counts, 2000, p. 13-14).

Not only were the specific numbers reproduced from the original submission so, too, was the meaning of those numbers – the original submission made virtually the same argument:
Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business [GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENT] ... declining labour participation among older people is not inevitable and could be reversible if policies provide the right incentives. New Zealand provides a clear example. As part of a raft of reforms to benefits payments beginning in 1990, the age of eligibility for superannuation is being gradually lifted from age 60 in 1992 to 65 by the year 2001. Maloney (1997) estimates that this has already brought about an increase in the participation rate and employment propensity of those aged 55-64 of 8.45 percentage points and 9.08 percentage points respectively. Since the rise in participation was largely matched by growth in employment for this age group, these policies have not caused hardship due to unemployment (Submission 142, p. 46).

Discursive conventions concerning the citation of source material referring readers to the original submission and giving the name of its author protected the re-authoring and re-inscription of statistics, even though conventional presentations of statistics in submissions were simplified for the purposes of the hearings. Accordingly, despite being taken up in different texts – submissions, hearings, and the final report – the meanings of statistics and their original authorship were retained.

In contrast, when stories were re-authored and re-inscribed over the course of the inquiry, they were far more fragile. Their meaning was often changed and traces of original authorship erased. For example, many older workers told their personal stories in ways that included quantifying their personal experience in applying for jobs e.g., sending out large numbers of job applications and only receiving a small number of interviews.

Mr Barresi [COMMITTEE] – Of the 250 jobs [you sent out applications for], could you just give me an idea of the type of job that you were applying for ….

Mr Clark [PRIVATE INDIVIDUAL] – Of course, I applied for jobs in the fields I have been in and for other sales jobs. I had been in the hearing industry. I applied for anything that pertained to jobs that I had directly done … (Hearing, 8 September 1999, Melbourne, p. 148).

Unlike the example of statistics above where the actual numbers were faithfully reproduced, the numbers in these stories were not protected by the discursive conventions of referencing. As a result, these numbers changed when the story was re-told by a Committee member at a
Mr Barresi [COMMITTEE] – Last week in Melbourne we heard evidence from some very long-term unemployed people. Their stories, I guess, were typical of most long-term unemployed: 700 applications, those sorts of things; 140 interviews … (Hearing, 16 September 1999, Adelaide, p. 341).

In this case, the number was inflated from 250 to 700 (a number not mentioned in any of the hearings). This larger number survived to be repeated in a subsequent hearing, and, more significantly, it formed the basis for a change in the meaning of the story.

The author of the original story had used the number of applications (250) to emphasize that he had personally taken initiative in applying for jobs; that the jobs for which he had applied were related to his particular expertise; and, yet, he had received very little response from prospective employers. As the story was re-told by different Committee members in two separate hearings, it took on a very different meaning: the larger number of applications (700) was used to convey incompetence on the part of older workers more generally because they were failing to target their job seeking activities effectively.

Ms Gambaro [COMMITTEE] … We have had a lot of submissions where people have said, “I have sent away 700 applications and the decent ones have replied and then there are a whole lot of others who do not even bother to reply”… What can we do to make sure that people do target according to their skills rather than just sending out blanket applications? (Hearing, 23 September 1999, Canberra, p. 477).

This latter meaning was reproduced as the story was told again during a third hearing, where it was taken up by a labour market service provider, who also used it to signal evidence of incompetence in job seeking activities on the part of older workers:

Ms Gambaro [COMMITTEE] We have had a number of people come to us who have sent out 500 to 700 resumes … This is just a thought, but perhaps a lot of the jobs they are applying for are not within their area of expertise…

Mr Cazey [SERVICE PROVIDER] Yes. People have this idea that as long as they are doing something – sending out resumes – they are helping themselves. But, if the resumes are not targeted to that job, the effort could be quite nugatory (Hearing, 27 October 1999, Brisbane, p. 556).

Later in the same hearing, the Committee member made further mention of the ‘the
scatter gun approach that we hear of 700 applications’ and emphasized the importance of the ‘targeted thing’ when responding to an older worker (Hearing, 27 October 1999, Brisbane, p. 582).

In sum, despite being heavily criticized, actors were more likely to call for more statistics than to demand an alternative way of knowing the older worker. In contrast, stories were far less likely to be criticized but, when they were, the effects were significant. Additionally, when statistics were re-inscribed in different texts during the course of the inquiry, their meaning was unlikely to change, whereas when stories were re-inscribed, their meaning and provenance changed. These findings not only show the fragility of stories, they also indicate that the durability of statistics emanates not from the use of numbers per se, but from being embedded in the appropriate discursive conventions and being presented by actors who have been constructed as expert. When numbers appeared in stories told by older workers, they had none of the protection afforded by the discursive conventions associated with more complex use of numbers by other actors, as a result of which the numbers and the stories changed, and the original author disappeared from view.

Discussion

Our analysis shows that both statistics and stories featured in the processes of knowledge production constituted by the inquiry and in demonstrating how older unemployment was a problem deserving of government attention. However, to establish their authority as a valid form of knowledge representing the subject of inquiry, each had to be embedded in discursive conventions appropriate to the particular setting i.e., a public inquiry in which individuals were asked to present statistics and stories. In the case of statistics, knowledge had to be expressed through distance, where researchers’ characteristics had ‘no bearing on the production of results’ (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984, p. 52). In contrast, stories produced knowledge through discursive conventions that established the proximity of the
story teller to the older worker and involved a regression narrative. Both sets of discursive conventions had significant effects for how knowledge was institutionalized and the way in which the subject of inquiry was constructed, as we discuss below.

First, our study shows how the differences in discursive conventions have implications for the institutionalization of knowledge. Lanzara and Patriotta (2007, p. 637) argue that knowledge is institutionalized as it is ‘embedded in durable artifacts and stable structures of signification’ to the extent that they become the taken-for-granted background for ‘acting, communicating and further knowing’. These authors focus on practices in a car plant that were progressively re-inscribed in transformations from the human to the material. However, as these authors point out, this process can also take the form of scripts and stories as ideas are authorized (delegated) to others to author (re-inscribe) them and, through this process, become institutionalized forms of ‘knowledge’ i.e., accepted as fact and part of an external objective reality (see Zucker, 1977). Our study provides insights into how processes of textual re-inscription – from submissions to hearings to the final report – served to institutionalize knowledge about the older worker in different ways.

Statistics was a relatively stable signification as the discursive conventions described above authorized others to re-inscribe them in such a way that their original meaning and authorship were retained. Accordingly, statistics were durable products produced by the inquiry through multiple re-inscriptions to appear in the final report without losing their meaning or provenance. Stories – and statistics that were not embedded in these discursive conventions – were a less stable signification. In this case, re-inscription did not retain original ownership and meanings were often radically changed. This is not to say that stories cannot be institutionalized but, rather, that their meaning – the knowledge they are purported to represent – is more likely to change during the institutionalization process than with statistics. In our study, the story that older workers faced structural barriers to employment
Despite being effective job seekers became institutionalized as “knowledge” that older workers were incompetent job seekers as it gained a degree of authoritativeness and legitimacy among different inquiry actors (cf. Lanzara & Patriotta, 2007). However, it may be the latitude with which stories can be re-authored that makes them such a useful form of knowledge – they can be appropriated by a wide range of actors and for different purposes. In so far as the institutionalization of knowledge involves multiple re-inscriptions through which meanings may change in subtle and incremental ways, our study shows the importance of not only examining the generalized, ‘uninterrupted’ authoritative narrative in the final report produced by the inquiry (Brown, 2004, p. 107), but also the ways in which stories – and for that matter, statistics – are re-inscribed and transformed during the inquiry.

Second, our study shows how discursive conventions can have major implications for the construction of the subject. Previous work on knowledge production has tended to examine the construction of epistemic objects, ranging from molecules and production systems to diseases and social problems (McGivern & Dopson, 2010; Miettinen & Virkkunen, 2005). This work argues that knowledge development proceeds as gaps in the epistemic object are gradually filled in ‘an ongoing and dialogical way; embodying a lack, raising a question, begging an answer, unfolding, developing a lack elsewhere, raising new questions, and so on’ (Ewenstein & Whyte, 2009, p. 27). Inquiries can therefore be considered epistemic communities whose members are brought together to construct epistemic objects – in this case, the social problem that is ‘the older worker’.

However, as our study shows, the older worker is also an epistemic subject who appears at the inquiry and is a member of the epistemic community. If epistemic objects are that which come to be known; then epistemic subjects are those who know. And like epistemic objects, epistemic subjects do not come to inquiries fully formed. In our case, the older worker subject, who s/he was and what knowledge claims s/he could make were also
filled in as a result of the knowledge production processes that constituted the inquiry. This process was not neutral. In the case of this public inquiry, discursive conventions constructed the older worker as a marginalized, powerless subject in a number of ways. First, the predominant use of regression narratives helped to construct an older worker who was at the mercy of events outside their control, and who was powerless to extricate him/herself from unemployment without the intervention of service providers. Second, these subjects were largely excluded from using statistics as inquiry processes directed them towards story-telling, while other categories of actor where able to use both statistics and stories. Third, when the stories by these subjects were re-inscribed by other actors, the original ownership and meaning were lost.

Finally, our study contributes to understandings of the multiple ways in which power permeates hearings and inquiries. Many studies have emphasized the importance of what has been termed the first dimension of power (Hardy & Leiba-Sullivan, 1998) where resources such as information, credibility, networks, and group support are used to influence decision making (e.g., Pettigrew, 1973). For example, in contrasting expert and lay witnesses at a public hearing on wind power, Aitken (2009) showed how non-experts had to present themselves as credible in order to share their expertise; non-experts were discredited; and experts were able to draw on wider networks of expertise. Our study shows similar power dynamics, such as when the Chair called for information from – and deferred to – experts. Studies have also shown evidence of a second dimension of power (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962), such as the manipulation of inquiry rules and protocols (e.g., Topol, 2009). Our study shows how inquiry processes involved multiple points of re-inscription when statistics and stories told by one actor can be appropriated by another i.e., statistics and stories in submissions are re-inscribed in hearings; statistics and stories presented in one hearing are re-inscribed in another; and statistics and stories told in submissions and/or hearings are re-
inscribed in the final report. Each of these points of re-inscription distribute agency among a range of actors – but particularly Committee members – to shape the knowledge production process.

Insofar as public inquiries serve to legitimate events (Boudes & Laroche, 2009), influence sensemaking (e.g., Brown & Jones, 2000), and engage in the blame game (Boudes & Laroche, 2009; Brown, 2004), they indicate a third dimension of power (Lukes, 1974) and the management of meaning (Pettigrew, 1979). Our study shows particularly how stories were potentially, an effective means of shaping meaning through their appropriation over time (although statistics can also be used to craft different meanings). To avoid this, researchers have examined how stories might be treated to allow original authors to retain ‘ownership’ rights. Charon (2004, p. 27) talks about ‘narrative ethics’ which include hearing all sides, contextualizing events, and bearing witness to those who suffer. Gabriel (2004, p. 182) emphasizes the importance of experts ‘honouring’ storytellers by respecting their narratives and giving up the presumption that they can understand them better than they understand themselves. Our study suggests that, in the context of public inquiries, new discursive conventions that record original meanings and ownership of stories may also help.

Finally, our study also shows how a fourth dimension based on Foucauldian notions of power/knowledge permeates the very processes by which knowledge is produced (Hardy & Leiba-Sullivan, 1998). This view acknowledges the limits to the intentional mobilization of power by individual actors to achieve pre-determined and desirable outcomes. As Foucault noted: ‘People know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don’t know is what they do does’ (quoted in Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982, p. 187). Instead, power is exercised through a network of relations that captures everyone in its web – the advantaged and disadvantaged alike (Deetz, 1992). In our study, we can see wider pre-conceptions about the position of the older worker in society, the relevance of regression
narratives to public inquiries, and taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature of experts and expertise all served to disadvantage the subject of inquiry, even though there is little evidence to suggest that this was a deliberate strategy on the part of Committee members.

**Conclusion**

Our study has shown that objective data in the form of statistics and experiential and particularistic knowledge in the form of stories are both important to public inquiries. Statistics help to lend the authority of disinterested and impersonal expertise, while stories allow government representatives to witness narratives outlining individual suffering. If statistics are the science of the state (Woolf, 1989) and enable government ‘at a distance’ (Rose, 1993, p. 292); stories lend the authority of intimacy, conferring legitimacy on a government that ‘cares’. Stories establish contact between government and the governed and between the instigators and the subjects of inquiry. So, although statistics are associated with the ‘high noon of modernity’, the balance has shifted in late modernity to include both the ‘authority of expertise’ and the ‘authority of experience’ in claims to represent reality (Gabriel, 2004, p. 176).

Our study also shows that in order for authoritative knowledge to be produced, both statistics and stories must be embedded in the appropriate discursive conventions. The discursive conventions associated with statistics are widely shared and familiar, and they render statistical representations highly durable. The discursive conventions associated with stories are arguably more idiosyncratic and context-specific, as a result of which stories are more fragile, in that their meaning can be appropriated – and changed – by other actors. Even statistics, when not embedded in the appropriate discursive conventions, become far more vulnerable to appropriation by other actors. These discursive conventions do not only influence the production of knowledge, they also influence the construction of the subject, in our case marginalizing the subject of inquiry through regression narratives, inquiry practices
and processes of re-inscription.

There are limitations to our study. First, we examined only those texts produced in the inquiry and not what happened following the inquiry. Nor did we observe the interactions that occurred in the hearings, and work only from the transcriptions of verbal interactions. Future research on inquiries might benefit from participant observation to take into account the role played by the physical setting, use of artifacts, and embodied interactions in inquiry processes. Second, for analytic purposes we made an artificial distinction between statistics and stories, although we acknowledge that statistics are used to tell stories and – as we have shown – stories involve the use of statistics. Third, in drawing on statistics and stories to construct a narrative of the way in which knowledge is produced in public inquiries, we engage in some of the very same processes noted in our study. For example, we have appropriated stories told by witnesses and changed their meanings: no longer stories about the older worker, they have become stories about the production of knowledge. We also present aspects of our analysis numerically and in tabular form to persuade the reader of the basis for our findings as well as for ease of communication. As Porter (1995, p. viii) emphasizes, numbers, graphs and formulas can be regarded ‘first of all as strategies of communication’.

In conclusion, it is clear that statistics and stories are both used in public inquiries to produce authoritative knowledge. Our study has shown that this authority is not a straightforward property of these genres, but derives from particular discursive conventions and social interactions conducted by different actors in the particular setting. During these processes, epistemic subjects are also constructed. The focus of much of the work on knowledge production and public inquiries is often on the epistemic object; yet the epistemic subject is just as important for the knowledge that is produced. The knower and the known are inextricably linked:

knowledge and knowledge production bear the characteristics of the
epistemic subject and the transactions between subject and object from which
the knowledge in question has resulted (Breuer & Roth, 2003, p. 187).

In situations where epistemic subjects are constructed whose ability to represent the
world in these different terms is constrained, the knowledge that is produced will be shaped
accordingly: by constructing a marginalized subject of inquiry who is restricted in their ability
to construct certain kinds of knowledge, our knowledge about the older worker as the object
of inquiry is also restricted.
References


Marshall, N. & Rollinson, J. (2004). Maybe Bacon had a point: The politics of


Table 1 – Instances of statistics and stories in submissions and hearings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of actor</th>
<th>Number of actors participating in inquiry</th>
<th>Submissions: Instances of statistics</th>
<th>Submissions: Instances of stories</th>
<th>Hearings: Instances of statistics</th>
<th>Hearings: Instances of stories</th>
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<td>Private individuals</td>
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<td>49</td>
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<tr>
<td>Service providers</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>12</td>
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<td>41</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
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<td>13</td>
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<td>62</td>
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<td>91</td>
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</table>

\(^5\) 63 private individuals identified themselves as older workers.

\(^6\) The 10 Committee members are not included in the count of the number of actors who participated in the inquiry via submissions and appearances at hearings.

39
Table 2 – Positive and negative references to statistics and stories in submissions and hearings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of actor</th>
<th>Positive reference to statistics</th>
<th>Negative reference to statistics as invalid</th>
<th>Negative reference to statistics as incomplete</th>
<th>Positive reference to stories</th>
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Authors’ biographies

Susan Ainsworth is a senior lecturer in management (organizational studies) at the University of Melbourne. Her research interests include discourse, identity and the intersection of gender, age and employment. She has published in Organization, Organization Studies, Human Relations, Management Communication Quarterly and Gender, Work & Organization, and has a joint chapter (with Cynthia Hardy) on discourse and identity in the Sage Handbook on Organizational Discourse. She is an Associate Editor of Gender Work and Organization and Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management.

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