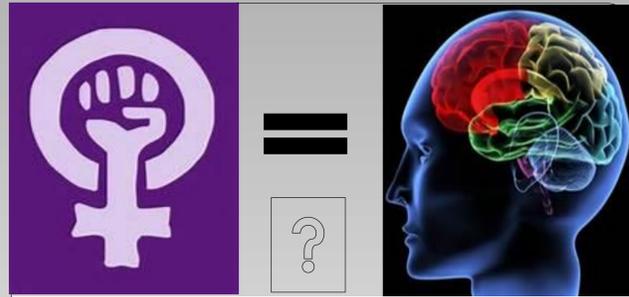


# The Feminist Clinique

## A Foucauldian analytic of the production of sexual assault as trauma

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### Background

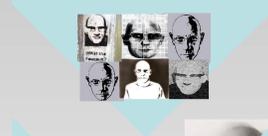


**Problematique**  
How has trauma a form of knowledge associated with medicine and psychiatry come to achieve a position of 'truth' in the field of sexual assault, a field synonymous with second wave feminist activism, theorising and research?

### Research design

**Epistemology**  
Challenge  
The many versions of Foucault present in scholarship depending on disciplinary background and geographical location of the writer

- A Foucauldian inquiry into knowledge production is not an investigation into whether a belief or theory about a given problem is 'true' but rather an inquiry into *how* a particular idea or set of beliefs has achieved the position of 'truth' about the problem or topic of analysis.
- In early research studies, Foucault investigated the formation and transformation of the knowledge systems and discourses of madness (1982), medicine (1975) and the human sciences in Europe (1973).
- In his later work the production of 'true' were analysed in relation to their 'regimes of practices', the forms in which institutionalised practices are organised (Dean, 1994, p. 154).
- While there has been extensive feminist theoretical engagement with Foucault's concepts there has been less focus on using his ideas to empirically investigate feminism as a form of knowledge and a practice of power.



**Deploying Foucault's concepts of power and knowledge as methodological strategies required:**

- Focusing the investigation on "local centers of power - knowledge" (Foucault, 1998, p. 97).
- Studying power as a practice at the *extremities* in its local forms rather than in legitimate central locations.
- Understanding that the relationship between power and knowledge is unstable and subject to change.
- Recognising there is variability within a single discourse, depending on how it is deployed (Foucault, 1998, p.100).
- Investigating knowledge formation through analysis of discursive formations. This involves examination of the formation of concepts objects subjects and strategies (Skehill, 2007, p. 9).

**Methodology**  
Challenge  
The disconnect between scholars using Foucault's work as theoretical tools and those concerned with his methodological approach



**Operationalising Foucault's methodological strategies**

- The NSW sexual assault services sector as a local centre of power- knowledge.
- Focus on service delivery as a means of accessing knowledge/practices at the extremes.
- Adapted the questions Foucault (1972) developed to analyse historical in discursive formations for the purpose of undertaking research in the contemporary.

**Method**  
Challenge  
Adapting a methodology devised for historical research to investigate a contemporary problem



**The library of documents**  
Challenge  
The lack of clarity and detail in existing research of how Foucault's methodologies have been used to design the research

- Governance documents (i.e., policy and procedure manuals)
- Website material
- Service brochures
- Job advertisements
- Interview texts produced from 30 interviews with sexual assault workers.



### Findings & significance

- Feminist knowledge of sexual assault as embedded in the regulatory apparatus of the sexual assault service and enacted through the day to day practices of the sexual assault worker.
- Consistent with a radical feminist analyses of sexual assault the form of most closely associated with second wave feminist work against sexual violence, (Bell, 1993; Carmody, 2000; Irwin, 2000; Jackson, 1996; Mason, 2002).
- Simultaneously an individualised understanding of sexual assault as 'trauma' emerged as a contemporary 'truth' in the field of sexual assault.

**Power, violence, patriarchy, gender inequality**



- The traction trauma has achieved is predicated on an existing understanding of sexual assault as an assault on the self (on the psyche).
- Trauma, in particular the neurobiological aspects, have been integrated with and become part of contemporary feminist knowledge practices.
- This finding stands in contrast most previous post-structural feminist work which has positioned trauma and medical knowledge as having co-opted feminist work on sexual violence (Gavey & Schmidt 201, Lamb, 1999; Mardorossian, 2002; O'Dell, 2003; Reavey, 2003; Reavey & Brown, 2007)
- This concomitant relationship theorised as related to the feminist principle and theoretical work on embodied subjectivity - the idea that injury to the psyche has a corporeal aspect.



### Follow-on project

**Aim**  
The aim of the proposed follow-on postdoctoral study is to gain an understanding of the increasing dominance of trauma and neurobiological (the 'brain sciences') explanations of social problems such as sexual assault by conducting an 'ascending' analysis of the relationship between this local field and the apparatus of the Australian welfare state.

**Working hypothesis**  
That there will be a positive relationship established between neoliberalism (as implemented through the apparatus of the state) and the increasingly dominance of neurobiological understandings of social problems (including the use of trauma discourses to inform responses to those problems).



**Challenge**  
A tendency in research analysis and commentary to approach neoliberalism as a master category that unproblematically explains all manner of programmes (Rose et al 2009)

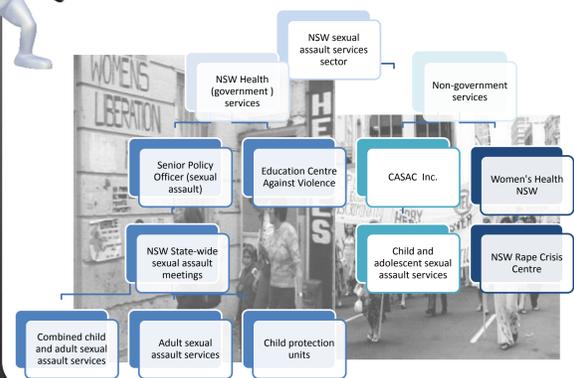
### Background

Organisations dedicated to the care and counsel of the victim of sexual assault are a uniquely twentieth century institution. Historically the *Feminist Clinique* can be traced to the second wave women's movement, a site of protest and grass roots political activism *and* from feminist 'gains' in the occupation of the state bureaucracies characteristic of western democracies in late modernity. However, in the contemporary field neuro-scientific and psychological discourses of trauma discourses appeared increasingly dominant and concerns had been raised about a decline in feminist principles and practices.

The research questions guiding the doctoral project were  
1. What is the current place of feminism  
2. What is the place of trauma and how does this discourse operate in this field.

Using a Foucauldian derived methodological the research sought to investigate these questions empirically by focusing on a specific institution located in a local site, the sexual assault service in NSW Australia.

### The object of analysis



The NSW field of sexual assault

### Notes on methodology

Foucault's (1998, p.99) 'rule' or methodological strategy of "double conditioning" provides a strategy to operationalise his theoretical work on the relationship between local, capillary forms of power and power that operates through the apparatus of the state. He proposed that local centres of knowledge/power could not function effectively if they did not link with an over-all strategy, and nor could an overall strategy be effective if not anchored by local forms of power and knowledge.

The local and the overall strategy are not the same but rather have an affinity with and can support each other (Foucault, 1998, pp. 99-100). The key point in deploying this strategy is that links between local centres and overall strategies need to be demonstrated rather than assumed (Foucault, 1998, p. 99).

Foucault himself did not conduct research using this strategy. His empirical focus remained on local sites, the prison, the asylum, the hospital. However other scholars working in his research groups had begun undertaking research using this methodological strategy prior to his death and there is now a sub-discipline - governmentality studies - devoted to this area of Foucault's work (see Rose et al 2009 for an overview of this scholarship).

### Significance (i.e., what's it good for)

- Illuminates the authority that feminist categories and concepts hold in this field.
- Challenges the discourse of feminism as 'in decline'.
- Adds to the body of empirical work examining the moral economy of trauma ( Fassin and Rechtman 2009).
- Provides a small piece of the puzzle on the dominance of the 'brain sciences' in understanding and responding to contemporary social issues ( Rose 2009, Rose and Abi-Rached 2013).
- Contributes to scholarship on the elaboration, development, and implementation of Foucauldian methodology

### Foucault on the State

"I do not mean in any way to minimise the importance and effectiveness of State power. I simply feel that excessive insistence on its playing an exclusive role leads to the risk of overlooking all the mechanisms and effects of power which don't pass directly via the State apparatus, and yet often sustain the State more effectively than its own institutions, enlarging and maximising its effectiveness" ( Foucault, 1980,p.73) .



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