

# **Towards a critical literature on work, family and community in resource dependent rural Australia: A case study of the closure of the Ravensthorpe nickel mine in Western Australia**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The 'resource boom' that occurred in Australia over the past decade and the more recent detrimental impact of the global financial crisis on the resource sector nationally have elicited significant media attention, but far more limited scholarly commentary. At the same time this literature has been somewhat partial as scholarship has primarily focused on the workplace as the key (or only) site of analysis and thus left the relationship between mining work and families and communities under theorized. This paper makes a contribution to addressing this gap through a case study of the closure of the Ravensthorpe nickel mine in the south-west of Western Australia in January 2009. While participants in the research described many of the features of contemporary mining work that have been well documented in the literature such as the use of contract and fly-in/fly-out labour, they drew attention to the connections between these shifting work practices and family and community relations. In conclusion, the authors identify critical future research directions.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The mining sector has enjoyed a position of some prominence amongst industrial relations scholars as is evident by the significant national and international literature on the subject of mining employment. At the same time this literature has been somewhat partial as scholarship has primarily focused on the workplace as the key (or only) site of analysis and thus left the relationship between mining work and families and communities under theorized. In part this is reflective of the continued propensity of industrial relations scholars to conceptualise work as distinct from experiences of community and/or family (Wajcman 2000).<sup>1</sup> As Ellem (2005: 247) has noted, what is 'usually missing from any analysis' of employment is 'the communities surrounding work'. While feminist industrial relations scholars have argued for the importance of locating the employee within a family and a community and produced rich empirical studies demonstrating the interconnections between work, family and community

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<sup>1</sup> A further reason why there is limited academic literature on work, family and community in mining relates to the mining industry itself. This is an industry with significant resources and where public and community relations are tightly managed through a wide variety of means, including through the management of research. This is evident in a recent review of the literature on the social dimensions of mining in Australia which cites 60 sources, but just 10 of those listed are refereed journal articles. The vast majority are working papers, reports, and/or conference or seminar proceedings which have been commissioned or sponsored by the resources sector. While there is clearly a place for such research it is not just that so much of the 'literature' is sponsored by industry, it is also framed from within the mining industry and tends to be influenced by this perspective. Consequently, critical social perspectives are often ignored and the picture of the social world is a partial one' (Cheney et al. 2002: 4). So, for example, while there are a number of industry sponsored reports on 'women and mining' (e.g. Pattenden 1998 and MCA 2006), these have been framed by neo-liberal and managerialist discourses of 'women as a resource' for industry rather than by feminist concerns with equity and equality.

much of this has been urban centric (Charlesworth et al. 2007). Alongside their counterparts in industrial relations, feminist rural studies scholars have also contended that the employment relationship in rural spaces needs to be understood in the context of families and communities. However, the majority of this gender based research, has, like the broader discipline of rural sociology, focused largely on labour relations in agriculture and on farming families and farming communities (Little 2002).

In this paper we address the fact that the interconnections between mining work, families and communities have been under-researched through a case study of the closure of the Ravensthorpe nickel mine in the south-west of Western Australia. Through interviews and focus groups with mine employees, family members and rural residents we begin to map out some of the complex relationships between work, family and community in resource affected rural Australia, as well as gesture to areas requiring further investigation.

## **BACKGROUND**

There is, of course, a rich body of knowledge on mining communities. Illustrative of such work is the seminal study *Coal is our Life* in which Dennis et al (1956: 7) explore the influences of 'work, leisure and the family' on the social life of an industrial town in West Yorkshire they label 'Ashton'. Also indicative of this literature is Claire Williams' (1981) feminist Marxist study of two open-cut coal mines in central Queensland between 1974 and 1975 which argued that while mining men may face class inequities as manifest, for example, in a lack of control over their jobs and broader work environment, mining women are equally struggling with gender inequities in their marital relationships as they are typically isolated from family, undertake all domestic labour and have limited opportunities for paid work. While these studies provide a strong context for this paper to consider mining work, families and communities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they are also somewhat limiting on a number of counts. Firstly, many focus only or primarily on closed mining towns (e.g. Gibson-Graham 1991; 1992; Pattenden 2004), leaving unexamined those spaces where mining occurs alongside other industries. Secondly, much of the literature is now very dated and consequently, while many authors traced changes occurring in mining and explored how these changes were impacting on families and communities, there is little work which has explored the very significant transformations in the mining sector that have occurred in contemporary times and what this has meant for families and communities (e.g. Williamson 1982). Thirdly, as Strangleman et al (1999) have noted, there has been a tendency in the literature to caricature mining workers and communities in overly positive terms as strong and resilient or alternatively in overly negative terms as narrow and parochial. There is consequently a need for more nuanced scholarship which explores resource-affected communities in all their heterogeneity and which is contextualised by a focus on the reconfigured industrial arena of mining work.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Ravensthorpe Shire in the south-west of Western Australia has undergone rapid and profound social upheaval resulting from the arrival of a BHP Billiton nickel mine which commenced construction in 2004, was officially opened in June 2008 and subsequently closed unexpectedly in January 2009. Though the Shire has a long history of mining this project was the first modern, large-scale mine in the area. In May 2008, upwards of 300 employees and their families were residing in the region (Ravensthorpe Nickel Operation 2008), making Ravensthorpe Shire one of Australia's fastest-developing local government areas (Department of Industry and Resources 2008). Consisting of an open-cut mine and hydrometallurgical process plant and

requiring an operational work force of 650 staff the venture had an expected ore reserve lifespan of twenty-five years (Ravensthorpe Nickel Operation 2008).

Data for this paper were derived from interviews and focus groups with men and women living in Ravensthorpe at the time of closure. This sample includes the experiences and perceptions of 8 long-term pre-mine residents, 6 post-mine community members who had arrived in Ravensthorpe as a direct result of the mine operation and who would be leaving as because of its closure, plus a focus group with 7 mine-employees and 2 spouses newly arrived in Ravensthorpe on employer sponsored or 457 visas, faced with imminent forced departure from Australia as a due to the mine closure. No Indigenous people were in the sample which is reflective of the non-existent Indigenous mine-related population residing in the area.<sup>2</sup>

### **CASE STUDY: RAVENSTHORPE NICKEL MINE**

Communities are central to the concept of a 'social license to operate' which describes an approach widely adopted in the minerals industry whereby the broad approval of communities is sought in order to facilitate the mine establishment and operation. 'Community' is conventionally positioned in this framework as an unproblematic entity separate from the sphere of work, a position which fails to take into account the ways in which industries also construct and (re)shape communities, sometimes in unexpected ways. This was evident in the Ravensthorpe Shire where the arrival of the mine involved substantial and uneven changes to both the local culture and physical environment. Many of these changes were unwelcome for large sections of the existing community (Mayes 2008). Hopetoun, the main site of residence for mine employees and families was described by local residents as being transformed from a 'sleepy,' 'peaceful' 'retirement' town to a 'small mining town'. Concurrently, Jerdacuttup was reshaped around the mine site. Local residents were concerned about the loss of Jerdacuttup's identity as a farming community as the following quotations from letters to the editor published in the local *Community Spirit* newspaper prior to the mine's closure make very clear:

*Jerdacuttup Road is an important aspect of the community's history and identity which is in danger of being forgotten completely with the influx of a new population who only associate this area and community as Ravensthorpe Nickel Operations*

*No longer are we the community of Jerdacuttup, we are "That Place Next To The Mine".*

A substantial number of residents across the Shire, both young and old, saw the infrastructure developed to support the mine and the increased population as erasing the very characteristics that drew them to the town, as is noted by Mayes (2008: 16):

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<sup>2</sup> According to ABS 2006 census data, the Indigenous population in the region at 1.7% of the total population is lower than the Australian average. It is important to emphasise that largely absent in the literature on employment and mining are the voices and experiences of indigenous people themselves, particularly indigenous women. A number of projects have provided a useful statistical picture of the disadvantage experienced by rural and regional indigenous Australians in terms of labour market participation (e.g. Taylor 2006). However, as Taylor and Scambary (2005) acknowledge there are concerns about 'the capacity of census (and other) data to provide meaningful representation of the social and economic status of indigenous people in the region' because social indicators report only on observable indicators and such indicators may not even be culturally relevant. For these reasons writers such as Hunter and Gray (2004: 30) argue for the importance of 'thick or qualitative description' about the labour market perceptions and experiences of rural indigenous people.'

*But the reason why everyone came here was because it was the town it was. We didn't come for the hustle and bustle. Telling us we're going to bring all this new good stuff to you: we didn't want that stuff. We didn't want their schools and community big flash halls. We just love the old world of Hopetoun.*

At the same time, many community members saw that the engagements with the community designed to maintain the social licence to operate were profoundly instrumental in serving the needs of the *working* community.

*It's never been for the community. They [the mining company] don't give a stuff about Hopetoun. They only care about their workers. You just happen to live in the same town. All it was ever about was keeping BHP workers happy.*

At the mine's closure, there was what one participant described as a 'sense of being disheartened' as community members reflected on the considerable unpaid labour they had undertaken through involvement on Community Liaison Groups and other committees designed to lubricate BHP Billiton's relationship with the community. A number of these participants gained no personal benefit from this work, but had given their time and effort on the basis of what they believed would be real, long term benefits for their community. What this reveals is that narrow constructions of community embedded in the 'social licence to operate' fail to acknowledge community as both an emotional intersubjective 'space' or experience, and a physical site in which community is made possible. The day to day working of the mining operation influenced the experience of community through, for example, the ubiquity of mining uniforms in public spaces, the presence of mining vehicles with flags in the local streets, and the development of a substantial housing estate for mine workers. The way in which 'the mine' seeped into all aspects of the physical, social and emotional dimensions of the community was patently clear as research participants described their response to the mine's closure. Across the community residents had varying relationships to the mine, but there was little evidence of immunity to its presence and to its closure.

Family members of mine employees spoke of a sense of loss, betrayal and anger as they recounted how partners/sons/daughters/siblings had worked long hours to meet and even exceed increasingly high production targets. They recounted the sacrifices this demanded of them (for example in terms of extra emotional and domestic labour by women) highlighting the familial dimensions of the well-recorded move in mining to continuous production, extended working hours and compressed and extended shifts (Barry and Waring 1999; Sturmev 1992; Heiler and Pickersgill 2001). Also emphasised in these discussions were the implications for family of Fly-in/Fly-out (FIFO). As we have explained, a defining feature of the Ravensthorpe nickel mine was that it was conceived as a residential mining town. For some participants this had been very attractive in terms of family relationships. This is particularly notable given that, as Kaczmarek and Sibbel (2008: 300) remark in introducing a small-scale quantitative study of the psychological well-being of children of FIFO mine workers, 'there is a paucity of Australian research in the area' despite it being a common industry practice for over 20 years. One Ravensthorpe mother explains:

*Our eldest boy, he's got some learning difficulties...With FIFO there's a lot of sacrifices. We just thought if we were together, and my husband would be home every night and then we could discuss issues that arise in the day. Whereas it's very hard over the phone. When you've got boys that are teenagers – or 13 and 11.*

While the shift to FIFO has been noted in the literature and some of its work-related impacts studied (e.g. Di Milia and Bowden 2007; Storey 2001), the 'radical segmentation between the domains of home and work' it constructs and the impact of this on families and communities has not been explored (Pattenden 2004: 252).

Importantly, the emotions triggered by the closure of the mine extended beyond the families of sacked workers; they appear as public expressions of overwhelming shock, grief and anxiety as the reality of not only economic insecurity but also of the loss of friends, community, and a sense of a 'bright' future sets in. These complex feelings were publicly displayed in a range of ways from a series of impromptu street parties on the night of the closure to an emotional Australia Day celebration at the local oval. These displays forge a connection between work, family and the broader community in ways which directly involve members of the community not connected to mining. As one long term, non-mining resident commented:

*I think it's devastating for the families, you know that first week here it was, you know, people were just crying in the streets. We had the Australia Day breakfast and that was the most people we've had at the breakfast and ... just talking to people round there, you didn't feel like you wanted to get emotional, but, you know, when someone else starts crying and it's so hard to keep your emotions in check too so there we were both, you know.*

Another male participant and mining employee observed:

*They wouldn't have done it if that was a union site. The union just wouldn't let them do what they did. They'd probably have to be ramped down slowly but don't just walk in and say 'We close it' and then they got rid of all the contractors. Some contractors came back but not the same companies.*

This quotation is particularly notable as it is the only time unions were mentioned across the focus groups and interviews. This absence reflects the well-documented shift to individualism in mining and the marginalisation of unions across the mining sector (Ellem 2006; Timo 1997). Past scholarship on mining communities have revealed the central role unions played as community actors (e.g. Mercier 2001), and while much has been written about the diminution of union activity and membership in the contemporary mining industry (Peetz 2006), little is known about how this has impacted at a community level.

Interviewees did, however, talk about the lack of public protest at the closure of the mine. They described the factors that they believed circumvented opportunities for activism such as the refusal of BHP Billiton to participate in any community meetings and the removal of all employees by bus and/or plane from the mine site post the closure announcement. Managers known to employees and the broader community (including the General Manager) were also replaced at the time of the announcement. The community and familial dimensions of the consolidation of global corporate resource and energy interests through mergers and acquisitions (Russell 1999; Waring 2005) were clearly evident as interviewees spoke of the difficulty of finding another job, being seen as a troublemaker, and getting a reputation when opportunities for jobs are so limited.

*If they're seen to be stirring the pot, they won't get a job anywhere in the mining industry. Not just BHP. Contractors too. They'll be finished in the mining industry. It's not that big a circle of workers.*

The distinction between BHP Billiton employees and contractors was made repeatedly across interviews. Contract staff had lesser entitlements than BHP Billiton staff. Their lesser status was conveyed to them by management as they were separated from BHP Billiton staff and corralled outside for the announcement of the mine closure. In marking a boundary between 'staff' and 'contractors', participants suggested that class was not a 'zombie category' of no importance (Beck & Willms 2004) to postmodern lives, but that class relations are shifting and fracturing for a range of reasons, including as a result of increased contractualism in mining. Again, while the use of contract labour in the mining sector has elicited significant interest from industrial relations scholars (Bowden 2003), studies have not considered how this may be affecting community and familial relations.

The ongoing importance of class relations to mining work, families and communities was also highlighted in the interviews as participants spoke of the negative portrayal of them in state and international media. Letters to editors, blogs and newspaper articles constructed a dominant classed narrative of the over-indulged mine employee who had expended the vast amounts of cash they received for their work on extravagant and tasteless purchases and now was complaining about their position. One commented:

*The fellow that had an apartment at the Gold Coast and another property in Perth. He's got a flash Monaro and he was wondering how he was going to pay for it. And yeah, it was the worst. Everyone says, "Appalling. Look at you guys. You're cashed up bogans"...The media loved it. They've got him and his wife all dressed up to the Ts. They've got him doing a bit of circle work in his car.*

Again, what transpires in this quotation and was conveyed in other interviews is the ongoing importance of class relations. Of course, class has historically been a key concern in studies of resource-affected communities (e.g. Williamson 1982; Warwick and Littlejohn 1992), but what may require more attention from scholars today are, as the participant above notes, the cultural and symbolic signifiers of class.

The community surrounding the Ravensthorpe nickel mine was not only constituted around class, but also around ethnicities particularly in relation to mine workers employed through temporary work programs through Visa Category 457. As has been noted, "the international" has only recently gained attention in industrial relations scholarship (Harworth and Hughes 2003), and has done so specifically in recognition of the growing importance of international institutions and processes. While much literature on 'skilled migration' has focused on the workplace and implications for career to the neglect of family and wider social relations (Kofman and Raghuram 2005), discussions with mine employees from the Philippines, South Africa, and Germany working in Ravensthorpe on 457 visas indicates that international labour flows are intricately connected to family and community aspirations:

*Even if the place [Hopetoun] hadn't been so nice I think we would have still said yes because of our dream to come here and basically I wanted the better future for my family with better education for my children.*

Thus, while it is clear that further research is required on the subject of Visa Category 457 employees working in the mining industry, such research needs to be framed not just in terms of the occupational arena, but also in terms of family and community.

A further social cleavage marking the landscape of work, family and community in Ravensthorpe was gender. While there was some evidence of the 'new' generation of 'mining women' who have entered the industry in recent years and work alongside men as mine employees (Eveline and Booth 2002), participants described a workplace that was highly gender segmented. Women's participation in the Ravensthorpe workforce was impeded, interviewees argued, by the long working hours (10-12 hours), the lack of flexible work-practices such as availability of part-time work and limited ready access to child-care. Clearly, the highly masculinised nature of the mining industry is not new (Lahiri-Dutt and Macintyre 2006), but what was being suggested, and what requires further analysis, is the extent to which changing industrial norms in the sector have further solidified mining as a masculine occupation.

## **CONCLUSION**

This case study of the closure of the Ravensthorpe nickel mine demonstrates the complex interconnectedness of work, family and community and the need for future research on the mining industry to not only include family and community but to challenge the status of boundaries between work, family and community and to

establish the ways in which these concepts/areas define each other. In Ravensthorpe for example a focus on employee workplace experiences and labour relations as played out in the context of the mine's closure would fail to understand the way that mining work defines families and communities and the ways in which the experiences and contexts of family and community impact upon labour relations. Importantly, broader approach needs to take into account emotional aspects and gendered division of labour, along with geographical contexts. Future work will need to draw on scholarly work in the human geography field which has drawn attention to the importance of 'place,' of 'the local', the 'global' and the relations between these spheres as well as new sociological perspectives on class as lived and embodied rather than simply marked by occupational identity. In undertaking such an enterprise scholars will open up understandings of the ways in which industrial relations is enacted with and by not only workers, but also families and communities.

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