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| Institution: University College London | | |
| Unit of Assessment: 28 – History | | |
| Title of case study: Shaping new public understandings of women and the 1984-85 miners' strike: co-production, oral histories and museum exhibition | | |
| Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2015-2020 | | |
| Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit: | | |
| Name(s): Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite | Role(s) (e.g. job title): Associate Professor of 20th-century British History | Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: September 2015 onwards |
| Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2018- 2020 | | |
| Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No | | |
| 1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words) | | |
| <p>“Women in the Miners’ Strike,” an oral history project that collected interviews with over 100 women from coalfield communities across Great Britain, created a new platform for recording, celebrating and preserving working-class voices. The project preserved this underrepresented heritage for wider audiences in the archive of the National Coal Mining Museum for England (NCMM), creating new curatorial resources. Participation changed how many women and men valued and understood their own and others’ actions during the miners’ strike of 1984-5 and how they saw “history” itself. Through interviews, a film, 16 public events and an exhibition based on this research, the project transformed how members of the public interpreted women’s actions in the miners’ strike. Media coverage amplified this effect, engaging wide audiences with the significance and legacies of working-class women’s experiences in the miners’ strike.</p> | | |
| 2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words) | | |
| <p>Sutcliffe-Braithwaite’s research explores the impact of class on British politics after WWII, especially in the Thatcher era. She uses testimonies from “ordinary people” to examine the intersections between politics and individual identities (R1, R2, R3). In (R2) she focused on women’s testimonies, arguing that close readings of individual self-narratives enable historians to provide broader accounts of cultures or subcultures—including gendered codes—by examining how individual subjectivities navigated and interacted with broader cultural discourses. In her co-authored “Telling Stories” (R3), she argued that postwar “popular individualism” (including feminism) had roots in left- as well as right-wing politics, and that the growing belief in the right to individual development and empowerment in twentieth-century Britain followed diverse pathways—including ones that promoted personal liberation through collective action.</p> <p>The 30-year anniversary of the 1984-85 miners’ strike in 2014 encouraged Sutcliffe-Braithwaite to explore these themes and methodologies from new gendered perspectives. The anniversary saw many triumphant public claims that the development of the movement of Women Against Pit Closures in the strike, far from being restricted to “class” politics, stimulated a “feminist” transformation in mining communities. Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Thomlinson (Reading University) devised a research project to investigate this claim, using press accounts, archives, and both existing and new oral histories. Their 2018 article on Women Against Pit Closures (R4) demonstrated that this narrative gave a very partial picture of women’s experiences in the strike. Drawing upon archival research and their interviews with 6 women involved in the strike, it demonstrated the importance of understanding the diversity of women’s experiences and suggested the analytical potential of undertaking a larger oral history project.</p> <p>In 2018, Sutcliffe-Braithwaite (PI) and Thomlinson (Co-I) received a GBP200,872 AHRC grant (i) for a major oral history project to work with over 100 women from coalfield communities across England, Scotland and Wales. Building on (R2) and (R4), the project’s oral history interviews and exhibition (with accompanying exhibition essay) (R5) challenged dominant historical narratives in three key ways. First, in a literature dominated by men’s experiences, they demonstrated women’s essential roles in sustaining mining communities during the strike. They established the scale of women’s activism in the strike and demonstrated the vital (but hitherto understudied) role of women’s paid and emotional labour in sustaining industrial action. Second, in keeping with (R3), they established that while most activist women did not see their work as</p> | | |

creating a “working-class feminism,” their activism was premised on a powerful belief in equality for all. Third, building on but also expanding the arguments in (R4), they demonstrated the diversity of these women’s experiences, looking not just at activism but also at the home, the workplace, the experiences of women who themselves went on strike, and the experiences of women in non-striking families—numerically the majority in Nottinghamshire. Sutcliffe-Braithwaite’s research thus showcased the centrality and range of women’s coping mechanisms during the strike. It also revealed how this diversity of experience has undercut women’s ability to tell their stories in its aftermath, in the context of public commemorations of heroic male strikers after the pit closures of 1985-93.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- R1.** Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, *Class, Politics, and the Decline of Deference in England, 1968-2000* (Oxford University Press, 2018) [peer-reviewed monograph]
- R2.** Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, “New Perspectives from Unstructured Interviews: Young Women, Gender, and Sexuality in the Isle of Sheppey in 1980,” *SAGE Open*, 6:4 (2016), 1-11, DOI: 10.1177/2158244016679474 [peer-reviewed journal]
- R3.** Emily Robinson, Camilla Schofield, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Natalie Thomlinson, “Telling Stories about Post-war Britain: Popular Individualism and the ‘Crisis’ of the 1970s,” *Twentieth-Century British History*, 28: 2 (2017), 268-304, DOI: 10.1093/tcbh/hwx006 [peer-reviewed journal]
- R4.** Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite & Natalie Thomlinson, “National Women against Pit Closures: Gender, Trade Unionism and Community Activism in the Miners’ Strike, 1984–5,” *Contemporary British History*, 32:1, (2018), 78-100, DOI: 10.1080/13619462.2017.1408540 [peer-reviewed journal]
- R5.** Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite & Natalie Thomlinson. 2020. “Women in the Miners’ Strike: An Essay Accompanying the Special Exhibition at the National Coal Mining Museum.” <https://www.coalfield-women.org/read-the-exhibition-essay> Emerged from grant (i).

Exhibition: “Women in the Miners’ Strike” exhibition, National Coal Mining Museum for England, 29 Feb. 2020-summer 2021: <https://www.coalfield-women.org/> Emerged from grant (i)

Grant (i): AHRC, 2018-2020: “Women in the Miners’ Strike of 1984-5: Charting Changing Gender Roles in Postwar Britain,” an Early Career Research Grant awarded to Sutcliffe-Braithwaite (PI) and Thomlinson (Co-I). Award: GBP200,872.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The project documented and encouraged reflection on a much wider spectrum of experiences and impacts of the miners’ strike than had previously been recorded (R4, R5). It: **1)** captured memories of the strike from diverse coalfield women, ensuring their preservation in the NCMM archive; **2)** enhanced public understanding of women’s role in the strike through face-to-face and online participatory events; **3)** in collaboration with the NCMM, made these sources available in a public exhibition (in Wakefield and online); and **4)** fostered new knowledge of British history through media engagement.

Preserving diverse cultural heritage and enhancing museum collections:

The project recorded and preserved life-story oral history interviews with 104 working-class women (in 86 separate interviews). Working-class women are underrepresented in British archives, and (because mining was a uniquely male occupation) women’s lives are especially poorly documented at the NCMM. Between August 2019 and December 2020, the project team provided the NCMM with audio files, permission forms, metadata and detailed interview summaries for all the interviews, enabling their permanent deposit and use by museum staff, researchers and the public. As the Museum’s curator reported, “most of our collections are interviews with men,” making the project’s materials “extremely valuable to us.” The NCMM especially valued the project’s recognition of the diversity of women’s experiences (as demonstrated in R4 and R5) as beneficial for its public audiences: “this is the first oral history collection to preserve the memories of women with a whole breadth of experiences in the miners’ strike – including women whose husbands worked through the strike, or who returned to work,

as well as women who themselves went on strike or worked through the strike,” the curator commented. The experiences of working miners’ families are particularly underrepresented: the stigma attached to working during the strike has rendered these memories “unsayable” for many. One interviewee whose husband returned to work before the end of the strike, said “people like myself [...] that voice was never heard, really”; another, whose father returned to work early, said her interview was like an “exorcism.” The curator concluded that the archive collection “will enhance our ability to make women’s history central to the Museum” and “gives us many more ideas for different stories to tell” (A).

Transforming understandings of women’s activism through participatory events:

Throughout 2018-20, the project team drew upon research findings (R1-R5) and insights from the interviews to organise a series of 16 public participatory events (of which 3 were held on Zoom due to COVID-19 restrictions). These events changed how both women involved in the strike and members of the public understood this decisive moment in British history. Several events were augmented by a 14-minute film (<https://bit.ly/3ubEVFZ>) based on the research and interviews, produced by the project team. Held in Aberdare (3 events), Barnsley, Bristol, Doncaster, Durham, Fife, London, Nottingham, Stirling and Wakefield (2 events), these community-based participatory activities included, for example, a Reminiscence Day at NCMM, 2 community dinners at Cynon Valley Museum, and a stall at the Durham Miners’ Gala. The in-person events attracted c. 275 attendees to discuss and reflect on the research findings while the Gala stall enabled the project to talk to hundreds of gala-goers across the day. 3 further online events (themed around Kent, Wales and feminism) attracted 112 attendees.

Feedback from events demonstrated the project’s impact on understandings of women’s roles in the strike. One interviewee, who supported her striking husband and worked for a wage but was not involved in any activism, said she had felt previously that she “didn’t really do anything”; after attending a project event at the NCMM, she saw the significance of her actions differently (B). At the Durham Miners’ Gala in 2019, attendees commended hearing “a breadth of stories”: otherwise, they said, you have a “distorted” view of history (C). Attendees valued hearing women’s voices and recognised that the project’s interviews added new perspectives to history. At a 2020 online event, one commented, “Made me think about the strike from the point of view of the women,” while another reflected “you get so much from intonation. They sounded resourceful and proud.” Attendees also gained new recognition of the complexity of feminism in the strike: a London event attendee was especially interested to learn that “Working class women aren’t really that interested in the concept of “feminism” which is largely a middle-class topic. Practical equality with men is more important” (C). The Policy and Communications Support Officer for Wales TUC highlighted the importance of events such as the Aberdare event, “looking at social history from the perspective of women, because this aspect is so often overlooked” (D).

Participants also gained a new understanding of the experiences of strike opponents. One interviewee described how her interview led her to re-evaluate her thoughts about the divisions between striker and non-striker: “thinking back on a certain person [you realise], that they probably did that because of this reason, whereas at the time you thought, ‘oh I hate you” (B). Event attendees valued the opportunity to “hear some of the views [...] about the more private, negative feelings towards the strikes” (C).

The project’s findings about the power of women’s and community support in trade union struggles, and the transformative nature of the strike for many working-class women, also informed contemporary political discussion. Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Thomlinson were invited to speak at Bristol Transformed (8 March 2020), an annual festival of politics and culture organised by activists, on a panel alongside interviewee Sian James (MP for Swansea East 2005-15), to an audience of c. 40. A co-organiser of the event reported that “their research showed” how “vital” women’s activism was to the strike, noting its “hugely inspiring lessons for activists today” (E). She confirmed: “Feedback was positive, with people reporting being surprised by the extent of the role of women in the miner’s strike, in particular around the organising of food and soup kitchens.” This legitimised the approach of National Food Service Bristol, as the Director explains: “Florence and Natalie’s research [...] confirmed our organisation’s theory of change by demonstrating the power of bringing people together around food, and [I] have found it useful to consider how we can bring this into our organising” (E).

The project's public events supported cultural organisations by engaging new audiences within the heritage sector. An initial event with the Cynon Valley Museum in South Wales was full to capacity with 59 attendees. This included "regulars" and "many who had travelled a significant distance." Discussions were "very engaged" and "went on after the end time," and visitors "look[ed] at other exhibitions in the museum," too, according to the Museum Coordinator (F). This success led the team to organise two Community Dinners and one online event specifically aimed at attracting under-engaged groups to the local museum. The two Community Dinners drew 49 attendees; 50% of those who completed feedback forms were not frequent visitors to the museum previously, and 100% said they were likely to visit again. The coordinator concluded: "These events were immensely valuable to us – as a museum with no local authority funding – in our goal of being a 'useful museum,' embedded in the community. They attracted new visitors, many of whom said they planned to return to the museum, and enabled us to offer regular visitors an enhanced cultural offering." Without such partnerships, he reflected, the museum lacked "capacity to offer many history-based events," or to "directly communicate to the public university-based research focused on underrepresented histories (women's and working-class history) based in our local area." The project's events added "hugely to our profile," with attendees including Welsh Assembly Member Vicky Howells (F).

Exhibiting and understanding women's and working-class activism:

In 2019-20, drawing on (R4), (R5) and their interviews to represent diverse stories about women's experiences, Sutcliffe-Braithwaite co-produced the "Women in the Miners' Strike" exhibition with the NCMM curator and interview participants. It launched in the NCMM's "Mining Lives" gallery on 29 February 2020. COVID-19 restrictions closed the Museum to visitors from 17 March-5 August and 4 November onwards. From the exhibition launch to year end, the Museum had **9,142** visitors (in the comparable period February-December 2019 there were 105,324 visitors) (A). An online version of the exhibition however, maintained public access to its highlights, interviews and project video (<https://www.coalfield-women.org/>) (R5). This version had 1,356 page views and 834 unique visitors (spending an average of 7 minutes 53 seconds on the site) between its launch in March and 30 December 2020 (G). The project's film, embedded in the online exhibition, was viewed 514 times from its YouTube platform to 1 January 2020; the page hosting the film on UCL's website was viewed 235 times to 1 January 2020 (G). In recognition of its value to NCMM audiences, the physical exhibition has been extended from January 2021 to at least summer 2021.

The exhibition changed interviewees' and viewers' perceptions of what constituted history, and they used it as an opportunity to reflect on a new kind of history. At a 2018 event at the NCMM discussing the production of the exhibition, one interviewee wrote in answer to the question of whether she thought her actions were "historic," she said, "I hadn't but I am now thinking that everything you have done could be called history – people's history" (B). The exhibition launch in Wakefield attracted 59 interviewees and family members. Some travelled from as far away as Kent, demonstrating that this opportunity to commemorate their experiences was valued by members of former mining communities. At the launch, one wrote, "This has made me think about how we record our stories for future generations in our own words." Other attendees underlined the gendered dimensions of historical commemoration and amnesia: one commented that women's history was "[v]ery important. Often not heard/listened to," and that seeing the exhibition made her feel "[v]ery proud" (a feeling many attendees recorded) (C).

The exhibition encouraged the reinterpretation of a range of women's activities during the strike. By demonstrating the significance of women's paid labour alongside women's activism (R2), it prompted visitors to reflect on household economics and gender roles. As one visitor commented, "[it] made me recognise how so crucial housewives' salaries/wages were to miners' households." Another interviewee wrote, "talking to other attendees, I thought most people were involved in women's activism, but many like me were working to support families". The importance of preserving diverse experiences was also highlighted by those who engaged with the online exhibition: "It was good to see the variety of women's experiences, from those rallying to those focusing on keeping the home going" (C). Viewers reflected on the creation of narrative and what is and is not included in histories of the strike: "It's the women who were in the minority that interest me the most, the one who said her experience was had by so few that it wasn't relevant. To me, that's the most relevant story to be recorded and heard" (C). The NCMM's

curator commented that the research “enabled us to offer visitors an enhanced sense of the importance of women’s history to the history of mining” (A). In addition, it “perfectly complemented the area in our permanent galleries where we look at the role of women in the community and industry” and enabled them to tell “less well-known stories” in a “less-stereotyped display” (A).

The online exhibition attracted a global audience (including viewers from Australia, Finland, Greece, New Zealand, Norway, Spain and the US) (G). Viewers used it to inform creative outputs. A fiction-writer awarded a bursary by Literature Wales for a coming-of-age novel set in Wales during the strike used this “really interesting and helpful” resource to research her novel (H). One interviewee used quotations from the online exhibition in a project about the aftermath of the coal industry in Kent for a photography degree. She noted that “[t]he quotations from the exhibition underpin the second part of the project entirely,” and that through the project, “I sometimes feel I have stepped back in time, and have a huge affinity with the women’s experience all those years ago” (H).

Informing wider public interest through local, national and international media:

Media engagement further amplified the project’s impact. The first Welsh event prompted a 9-page feature in the *Western Mail* on 22 June 2019 (circulation 13,419). Five women were interviewed about their experience of the strike, demonstrating a new desire to share these stories. A column titled “How women’s stories are making history” explained Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Thomlinson’s oral history research, detailing the experience of non-striking families and the growth in women’s confidence during the strike to enhance readers’ understanding. Two of the women interviewed for the feature had not been interviewed by the project: the research has prompted a self-sustaining interest in these histories, leading to greater visibility for women’s experiences of the strike. On 20 July 2020, Sutcliffe-Braithwaite was interviewed about the project by BBC Radio Kent (12:10-12:30). The interview included two segments from the oral history interviews, bringing these narratives to a wider audience. She was also interviewed for an episode of the documentary series *Rise Up*, titled “British Miners,” shown on American channel VICE TV (161) on Sunday 15 November 2020. Vice TV has more than 30 million monthly viewers and is distributed in France, Australia, and the UK. *Rise Up* tells inspiring stories of socialist activism; the producers wished to integrate women’s varied and vital contributions and this led them to contact Sutcliffe-Braithwaite to discuss the research findings (R1, R2) (i). The exhibition launch was covered by Radio 4’s *PM* programme, 7 March 2020, 17:00-17:30 (average listener figures 700,000; 5 minute 8 second package, including clips from three of the oral history interviews), and on regional ITV news on 6 March 2020 (J). A Broadcast Journalist for BBC Radio 4 explained that collaborating with “Sutcliffe-Braithwaite helped in bringing to life the most interest[ing] and novel areas of research.” On the *PM* programme, “we are always looking for fresh ways to reflect social and political debates in the UK,” and reporting on the exhibition “was a way to shed some new light on a topic which is already of general interest to our listeners.” He concluded that “the original audio gathered as part of the project was one of the main reasons that the item worked so well for radio. [...] the voices which Dr Sutcliffe-Braithwaite collected were highly original and ones which we would have been unlikely to find ourselves” (J).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- A. Testimonial, Curator NCMM
- B. Feedback from interviewees
- C. Feedback from in-person and online events
- D. Policy and Communications Support Officer for Wales TUC email, 30/1/20.
- E. Testimonial, Co-organiser, Bristol Transformed and Director, National Food Service Bristol
- F. Testimonial, Museum Coordinator, Cynon Valley Museum
- G. Google Analytics for exhibition and exhibition launch event feedback
- H. Testimonial statements, writer and student
- I. Media bundle including details of programmes and *Western Mail* feature
- J. Testimonial Broadcast Journalist for BBC Radio 4 news programmes