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Observations through gendered lenses: experiences of managerial women

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Appendix 1

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This paper explores how gendered contexts within and around Australian organisations over a 12-year period restrict and place boundaries around women's managerial aspirations. The study finds that three types of gendered lenses typically depict various systems of oppression: mono-cultural, statistical, and structural. The discussion explores the relationships between each type noting that particular characteristics work to reinforce and interlink each to the other. The network effects are discussed and different coping strategies employed by women in management outlined over the period. A number of metaphors appropriately capture the essence of gender struggles and inequality over the three stages of the study: early (1995-1998), transition (1999-2002), and emergent (2003-2006).

Building on the work of Blair-Loy (2001), Ward (2004), Britton (2000), Lorber (1994), and Acker (1990), this paper advances the idea that gender is an institution that causes actors to respond to mutually sustaining cultural and institutional schemas that at any point in time comprises of, and leads to, different kinds of gender lenses.

Three types are recognized: mono-cultural, structural, and statistical. The paper has three aims. First, the managerial demographics of Australian women are discussed. These results are then grounded in a discussion about the different forms of oppression and their meaning within the Australian context. The networked boundary effects of the three lenses are also outlined.

Second, the qualitative study is explained. Following Miles and Huberman (1994), Burrell and Morgan (1979), and Weick (2001), the discussion explains the methodology and analyses qualitatively the stories and observations of women managers in the workplace and their actual lived experiences.

Third, the paper discusses the coping strategies employed by managerial women by providing analytical insight into institutional gender norms. The study expects to add to existing gender theory by linking the importance of context to the coping strategies of women over time, and how the managerial aspirations of women are bounded by networks of discriminatory practice.

Demographics of Managerial Women

The comparative figures of managerial women (Table 1) indicate progress for women executives and managers and administrators in mostly support functions and line management roles. Less convincing however is the position of managerial women in the top 200 companies listed on the Australian Stock Exchange. A poor result in the percentage of women on company boards coupled with only six CEOs reflects the current status of managerial women.

Similar to other industrialized countries that have witnessed an increase in women's labour force participation (Mannon, 2006), 45 percent of women were employed in 2006 compared with 43.4 percent in 1995. While this does not entail a large increase from 1995, .it does indicate a very low base initially and that the participation of managerial women as a percentage of total working women in 2006 is still low at the extreme.

While a low representation of managerial women has as many social causes as structural ones, the next section analyses the types of discrimination evident in the Australian workplace.

Bounded Networks of Discrimination

1. Mono-Cultural Lenses

Managerial work reflects a mono-cultural dominance emanating from the "middle-class, twentieth-century model of devotion to a managerial career" (Konrad & Cannings, 1997: 690), which fashions employer expectations and managerial commitments related to the meaning of work. Symbolism embodies Australian work culture as a masculine rugged male stereotype of Australian men suggesting organisational practices still reinforce the values and expectations of what a boardroom "should" look like or how a manager "should" act.

The mono-culture reflects two sides: 1) subconscious masculinity embodied in the actual nature of the work itself, and 2) its gendered expectations on the type of

roles performed. In the traditional mono-cultural image of Australian workplaces, gender differences influence how people react to others in the workplace while sex differences mostly influence how people behave (More, 1999). Gendered substructures are reproduced as a result of everyday and gender neutral practices (Acker, 1990), which become emboldened through gender lenses, shaping the perception of social reality. Australian organisations generally pay "lip service" to basic practices by obeying the laws; maintaining credibility yet ignoring true equality and egalitarian practices (de Cieri & Kramar, 2003; Kramar, 2004).

2. Statistical Lenses

Employers use statistical averages for demographic groups in assessing their longevity in the job (Konrad Cannings, 1997). In theory, advancement processes benefit all employees with managerial aspirations, however in practice, statistical averages bias employers towards one group or another. Statistical discrimination is arguably one of the most pervasive forms of oppression confronting managerial women. Statistical lenses work to institutionalize role congruence by rewarding hours on the job and potentially marginalizing women to support roles, or segregating them in maternal roles.

In a study of women finance executives in the U.S., Blair-Loy (2001) observed that some senior executives (in this case a woman chief financial officer) openly discriminated against mothers in hiring decisions preferring to employ men. Job and time commitment together with motherhood hinders career women (p.694), forcing them into part-time work with little flexibility (Tomlinson, 2006). In a study of promotions in two companies in the U.S. and Canada respectively, Konrad and Cannings (1997) noted that women experienced statistical discrimination that pressured them to demonstrate their commitment and competence more rigorously than their male counterparts (p.1319).

3. Structural Lenses

Structural lenses refer to both institutional and organisational systems of control that regulate gender boundaries on women's advancement.

Two interpretations of structural lenses are relevant to this study. The first is that although discrimination laws benefit workers by changing behaviours on the one hand, they unintentionally impose multiple boundaries by removing and impoverishing women's rights on the other, by institutionalizing gender structures.

They also create conflicts between work and family by imposing rigid structures in the interpretation of work which biases out the needs of working women. For example, the new WorkChoices Bill does nothing to encourage and support women to increase their participation in the labour market. Contemporary work is based on productivity and economic determinism that is selective in choosing flexible policies that enable social rights. Laws which might otherwise improve the status of working women by changing behaviour have now led to multiple structural oppressions.

Moving to the second point, managerial women are confronted by two competing schemas related to family devotion and work devotion (Blair-Lo)7, 1997, 2001). The family devotion schema pushes women into making difficult and painful choices.

The organisational mono-culture reinforces the biological differences between the sexes by structuring organisational work on the basis of gender where real equality is watered down by laws that favour a form of heroic mono-cultural centralism.

Bounded Networks

A hounded network of discrimination is a term we use to describe the multiplicity of intersecting oppressions imposed on managerial women. We describe the phenomena as a condition in which structural, statistical, and highly gendered mono-

Table 1: Managerial Demographics of Australian Women

Leadership and Managerial Characteristics	1995	2006
% of board seats (top 200 companies)	4.2	8.7
Women CEOs in (top 200 companies)	1	6
Executive managers (top 200 companies)	1	12
No women executives (top 200 companies)	54.5	39.5
Managers and administrators (top 200 companies)	24.95	38.14
Senior managers in APS (Public Service only)	16.5	30
Professionals	43.92	51.6

Source: Based on data from Davis and Harris, 1996; DOCS, 2004; EOWA, 2006

cultural lenses act as forces of oppression that simultaneously intersect at different points in time to place a boundary around women's managerial advancement. Each type of discrimination is mutually reinforcing since particular work cultures can be institutionalized by structural conditions that reinforce and privilege some behaviours at the expense of others.

Similarly, both the mono-culture and its structural equivalent disadvantages some groups on the basis of gendered perceptions and expectations related to the longevity of work, future work expectations of a particular group (for example, working mothers or single income families), and whether these groups can be economically sustainable over a longer period of time. A structural network here will consist of many connected parts that together support boundary functions discussed later.

Method and Data

First, the study was based on a longitudinal examination of managerial women's experiences and observations of institutional and work practices over a twelve-year period. Texts were examined from a well known edited affirmative action and employment relations Australian publication called *Making the Link,* comprised of a collection of speeches presented to an annual conference for women related to gender issues of management and employment relations.

The study was divided into three stages: early (1994-1998), transition (1.999-2002), and emergent (2003-2006). In total, thirty-six articles were selected over the three periods averaging three articles for each year.

To enable a sense of change over the periods, metaphors were used where possible to describe a gendered phenomenon. This followed counting to determine the number of times a problem was raised, to develop consistency judgments related to which things matter more than others, and which facts go together to form a coherent argument (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Counting and ranking were also used to determine (where applicable) the degree of fit between work and family of each executives experiences on the basis of very great (1), moderate (2), and small (3).

Similarly, to rank whether each executives' experiences and observations met their expectations, a four-point Likert scale was used to manually rate the observations on the basis of: seldom-hardly ever (1), occasionally-now and then (2), usually-most of the time (3), and almost invariably (4). To this extent, triangulation of the data was attempted by employing multiple methods of analysing contextual experiences over time.

Results

A large cross-section of executive women occupations was represented by government agencies, industry, unions, and other professionals. This section will discuss the broad findings for each stage of

gendered experiences and a number of metaphors that capture the struggles and challenges of managerial women.

Early Stage: Battle Hardened Warriors

The experiences of women executives from the early stages talk of a painful journey and a decade-long struggle campaigning for women's rights as a metaphor for battle hardened warriors. Participants talk of "heroines and victims" and that it was critical to formulate a "battle plan" since organisations at the time viewed this (that is, the appointment of an EEO manager), as an imposition and infringement of their rights.

Male manager responses were typical of gendered insults: "If you can't take the heat, then get out of the kitchen" prompting Triulzi to suggest that little had changed and that the old perceptions of organisational inequality were still organised on gender lines. If a woman was to "make it" to the top, then they must adopt male-type characteristics and become "one of the boys".

Organisations through the first four years are consistently viewed in a battle metaphor of "generals demanding absolute allegiance" and little flexibility in labour management practices coupled with pre-existing perceptions of woman's roles made it almost impossible for women to pursue a managerial career.

The paternalistic attitude towards pregnancy at the time divided women into two categories: 1. those in the promotion stream and 2. those not, with many women deciding to postpone having children and/or avoiding making their pregnancies known, and/or preferring to "leave the battle field altogether".

Experiences such as "exclusion, alien, outsider, different, out-of-place, resistance, impenetrable, boundaries, barriers, rejection and isolation" were common, further widening the gap between the observations of the male workplace as "group solidarity, inner circle, networks, camaraderie, bonding and in-group understanding." These experiences further emboldened women's negative attitudes with women increasingly restricted to support roles or part-time work.

For the early stage of the study as a whole, the degree of fit between work and family (where applicable) was small (counted five times), and moderate (counted twice). To determine whether each executive's expectations were met, the great majority of responses fell in the areas of "occasionally-now and then" (eight times), and "usually-most of the time" (four).

The researchers noted the strong similarities between the variables across all the role-ordered matrixes. The comparisons between the experiences and whether the expectations were met were similar across rows and columns leading the researchers to describe the great majority of executives as battle hardened warriors for the early stage.

Transition Stage: Invisible Cloaks

The most dominant metaphor to describe the second stage is the story of the emperor with no clothes. Here, the wizard spins for the emperor a fine cloak made of gold that only the brilliant and insightful can see. The story follows that the emperor cannot see the cloak but is too embarrassed and ashamed to admit it, henceforth, he wears the cloak in front of his servants, who, not wanting to appear stupid themselves likewise agree that the cloak is brilliant, that is, until a young boy in the emperors presence states the unthinkable: "the emperor has no clothes".

hTis theme is consistent across the four years of the transition stage. CEOs and top management according to the Director of Equal Opportunity Fiona Krautil are mostly wearing "invisible cloaks by thinking they have solved the problem of EEO" by employing EEO officers, industrial relations officers, and or paying "lip service" to EEO legislation.

The sense of reality experienced by women is similar to O'Sullivan and Sheridan's (2005) interpretation of an episode of *The Bill* where the representation of "rapid organisational change and the associated renegotiations of gender in the workplace have made explicit for us the superficial nature of those changes. They are indeed tall tales" (p. 316). Law professionals for instance appear to "believe" that people are assessed on merit yet offer perplexed reflections of future family responsibilities: "Mind you, I haven't quite reconciled how you have a family and work, when you are completely at the whim of clients."

The transition period is perhaps most responsible for workplace change in Australia despite many acts such as the Sex Discrimination Act of 1984 and the Affirmative Action Act of 1986 having been legislated much earlier. In much earlier times, the legislation was treated with great scepticism even disbelief that "the genie is trying to escape the bottle," and as a confrontation to the mono-culture, was not yet visualized as any great threat to traditional work organisation.

For the transition stage, the degree of fit between work and family (where applicable) was small (counted eight times), and moderate (counted four times). In addition, executive's expectations were met, "occasionally-now and then" (eight times), and "usually-most of the time" (four times), which is a small improvement on early stage experiences.

Emergent Stage: Rose-Coloured Glasses

Quite resolve has given way to great determination by women to break the glass ceiling and challenge the traditional occupations of male workers in the emergent stage. This appears to be a result of cultural change filtering through, but also the encouragement of role models and mentors.

Underpinning these is a new perception by women

Table 2: Thematic Conceptual Matrix: Problems and Coping Strategies

Mono-Cultural	Statistical	Structural
Gender Specific Women can't take the heat Act was a work in progress Mono-culture image in boardroom Informal male networks, women not commercial enough	**Roles and Group Partitioning** - Middle management increased but 75% women in lower clerical grades - Women's benefits removed forcing them to part-time and casual work - Women perceived as "good for support roles" only - Few women on company boards - Still low percentage in administrative positions - Percentage of women who will remain in "active" service but will leave to have family - Future role discrimination on the basis of gender and maternity decisions	**Legislation** - Treacherous EEO roles and poor perceptions of affirmative action legislation by business - Rise in workplace agreements and collective agreements dismantling worker benefits - Workplace Relations Bill did not regulate for different forms of work disadvantaging women forced into part-time work
Other Values and Perceptions Culture is formal obstacle Women involvement not matched by practice Affirmative Action Act saviour Many subcultures spoke of goodwill phase, legislation phase, cultural phase - Battle heroines and victims - Women are mainly in support roles		**Social** - Paternalistic attitude towards pregnancy - Women postponing children - Hiding pregnancy - Painful family choices
Coping Strategies - Raise awareness of cultural change needed to CEOs Identify barriers Learn from men No turning back	**Coping Strategies** - Boards should reflect community standards - Make uniform assessments based on merit rather than gender - Showcase successful women - Establish women's networks	**Coping Strategies** - Need to advance EEO agenda - Renew battle plans and reinforce positions - Let's get tough too

Researcher notes only : It is an Early Stage specimen. Note the three lenses and highlight differences. Compare the coping strategies across the three stages.

such as Tembv, a senior girls' school captain, that generation X and Y "will be the ones to break the glass ceiling-". The attraction of success is not unrealistic in one sense since in the emergent stage, there is an indication that woman are tackling gender boundaries by "proving" themselves and by contributing to organisational teams by building tolerance and respect. The new values are built on a perception that "we can do anything" and an "idealized view of office life". The *rose-coloured* glasses metaphor summarizes women's somewhat fantasized world of work and an emergence from a long journey of committed heroines and exhausted victims, trial and error, serendipity, painful choices, and the fighting of prejudices.

Compared to the early and transition stages, improvements were noted by the researchers in work-family fit and executives expectations. Greater perceptions of benefits had increased through rose-colored glasses, partly fulfilled in some cases and not others. The degree of fit between work and family (where applicable) had improved to small (counted three times), moderate (counted seven times), and very great (twice).

The researchers concluded that the improvements reflected some progress by many large companies in work-family benefit policies. In addition, executive's expectations were met, "occasionally-now and then" (five times), "usually-most of the time" (four times), and seldom-hardly ever counted three times. In making comparisons, it is clear that each stage represented a particular shift in thinking as managerial women became more confident, and institutions gave concessions.

Constant Themes of Oppression

In moving to the thematic conceptual matrixes, these are dominated by the three constant themes of gender lenses: mono-cultural, statistical, and structural. Table 2 is an example of the three matrixes across each of the stages. In attempting to theorize these relationships, we follow Risman (1998), Gerson (1985) and Blair-Loy's

(2001) accounts of the relationships between structure and agency.

The experiences noted between the stages in this study are the degree of contestation by managerial women of the status quo. But it is also an attack on the three forms of oppression grounded in the symbolic ordering of work and how gender differences are maintained. What is noticeable across the three stages is the constant range of problems. Interestingly in the early stage, there are more problems and less coping strategies noted than in other stages (see Table 2).

In transition, there is a similar range of problems but 18 coping strategies, while in the emerging stage, there is less evidence of problems and twenty nine coping strategies employed contrasting the previous two stages. In comparing the variables between the themes, the increased number of coping strategies coupled with the decreasing number of problems suggests the increased confidence expressed by managerial women in coping with the three gender lenses. At no stage however did managerial women appear in total control over their careers because of the intersecting nature of the oppressions they faced.

Connecting Bounded Networks

Statistical lenses are networked to both their mono-cultural and structural counterparts by partitioning women into support roles (see Table 1).

The link to the mono-culture is the controlling factor between the dominant elite and the reproduction of existing norms. As Konrad and Cannings (1997) note, "people may conform to gender roles because such roles provide guides for appropriate behaviour in new, ambiguous, or complex situations" (p.1307).

The connecting point to the structural lens is in the reinforcement of laws that keep people within structural boundaries defined by occupation and type of work, contractual obligations, and structural outcomes that produce social consequences that are difficult to break. The only way managerial women can break the boundaries is to keep pushing and

Figure 1: Bounded Networks of Discrimination
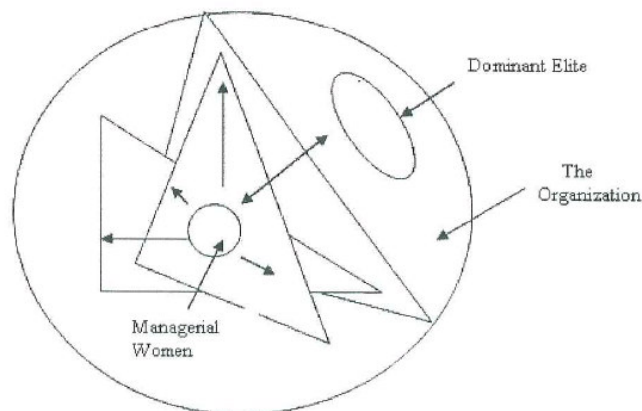
challenging the dominant elite, including the individual boundaries in the hope that one day they will completely disappear or change shape.

This is illustrated in Figure 1 with the three discrimination types represented as triangles surrounding managerial women and the arrow breaking boundaries future strategies.

Figure 1 is not meant to fit any preconceived notion of what an organisation looks like as it may be conceived differently from one person to the next. Rather, the shapes of discrimination are a matter of perception and vary in size and impact based on temporal and contextual dimensions.

Conclusions

The study notes the progression of managerial women towards equality. The metaphors had changed from battle-hardened warriors, to invisible cloaks, to rose-colored glasses, to reflect a journey littered with heroines and victims, winners and losers. While managerial women in particular have improved their status, large cultural adjustments are still required. The findings noted how bounded networks simultaneously restrict managerial women in a variety of ways: in limiting career choices, in maternity decisions and family tradeoffs, in dismantling job benefits and job roles, in the partitioning of women into predefined groups, in the patterns and meaning of work, in the future construction of identities, and in ways mostly unique to women but not men. The study finds instances where men are equally disadvantaged by structural oppression such as individual and workplace contracts, and work-family benefits, but such experiences are not gendered in the same way. The findings seek to add to existing gender theory by showing the value of linking multiple discrimination lenses in the workplace by examining them in contexts over time. To this extent, the study provides additional evidence that gender experiences are not the result of single-identity movements (Stockdill, 2001), and that complex mechanisms lie behind the reasons for gender inequality.

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