

Changing the landscape? Women in academic leadership in Australia.

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Abstract:

This paper analyses ethnographic interviews with 41 men and women in senior academic leadership roles in five Australian universities. It explores whether management cultures change when women hold power. It contrasts interviewees' conceptions of the role gender has played in career success with notions of the gender-neutral organisation. It probes the impact of the differentially constructed careers of men and women for appointment to senior positions. It identifies factors that sustain women, specifically collegiality, support from senior colleague and a critical mass of other women in power. Finally, in considering the unwillingness of some women to apply for further promotions, it suggests women are still positioned as outsiders to university management, although there is evidence that this is changing.

Introduction

This paper presents selected preliminary findings of an Australian research project that sought to explore whether “the dominance of men and masculinism in organisations appears to be particularly resistant to change of either a micro- or macro- variety” (Whitehead and Moodley, 1999:2). Following some 260 interviews with women and men from organisations with a significant proportion of women in senior positions in the public, private and university sectors in Australia, we aimed to identify if the presence of women in such positions had an impact on the managerial cultures.

In this paper we focus specifically on the university sector, where Morley (1999:87) argued that the “dominant culture positions marginalised groups as intruders, outsiders and this is actively, rather than accidentally, constructed.” Thomas and Davies (2002: 379) found that in British universities women felt “marginalised ...referring to the operation of informal male networks, masculine symbols, and the promotion of masculine identities.”

Australia's 38 universities have been similarly criticised (Burton, 1997; Probert, Ewer and Whiting, 1998; Brooks and Mackinnon, 2001; Chesterman, 2002). Yet equal opportunity legislation aims to redress gender inequities and the Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee introduced in 1999 a four-year plan to advance women staff (see www.avcc.edu.au). Women remain however particularly under-represented at senior levels. In April 2002, 8 (21%) of the 38 vice-chancellors in Australia and 36 (24%) of the 153 deputy- and pro-vice-chancellors were women. Women represented 37% of senior staff in the administrative stream (AVCC, 2002).

The research project took place in five Australian universities, all formerly institutes of technology, which demonstrate an explicit commitment to gender equity. They perform over the national average in the promotion of women to senior positions although this varies markedly between the institutions. For example in one, the Vice-Chancellor, a Deputy Vice-Chancellor and four of the eight Deans were women. In

another, a woman was Deputy Vice-Chancellor, but there were no women Executive Deans and only 2 women among 37 Heads of School.

This paper draws on ethnographic interviews with 18 women and 23 men holding senior academic appointments at the level of Dean and above. They were concentrated in the age range 50-59, and had witnessed major changes in the gender composition of their workplaces. Overwhelmingly our respondents came from Anglo-Celtic backgrounds and did not reflect the present ethnic diversity of Australia.

Ethnographic interviews provide an opportunity to analyse ways in which action and structure operate simultaneously on the production and reproduction of a gendered sense of self. Participants were invited to reflect on their positions within the organisations, how they got to the executive levels, their current management and leadership practices, any constraints they experienced, and the emotional investments made. Within this study we viewed gender as a matrix of habits, practices and discourses, not always a stable and enduring construct but sometimes fluid and malleable.

Although the women in this study were still in the minority at senior levels, many had retained and indeed strengthened their positions over lengthy periods of time. In contrast to much of the research on women and management in higher education, which tends to focus on the barriers that face women academics breaking the “glass ceiling” in the academy, by using a research approach which was expressly qualitative, we sought to obtain, from senior women and their male colleagues, an in-depth insight into women’s participation in senior academic roles, and in particular into the cultural repertoires that exist in a range of contexts when “difference” had to be negotiated.

Universities as Gender Neutral

Foucault (1978) first proposed the perspective that gendered social practices become so normalised that the injustices they perpetuate are utterly transparent. In terms of our research, we were keen to pursue this notion of gendered “transparency” in which the everyday practices of gendered hegemony are taken-for-granted even when its very existence is being questioned and, in some cases, directly addressed. The seductive viewpoint that organisations are gender-neutral is exposed in feminist management texts (Calas and Smircich, 1989; Acker, 1992), yet was frequently presented by some of our research participants. The entrenched view of gender-neutral organisations emerged in some of our interviews when participants were asked “What role, if any, do you think gender has played in your success?”

Generally speaking women participants had thought about this question. For some senior men the question was problematic. They struggled to find an answer:

A: (repeats question) What role has gender ...? (pauses)

Q: Your gender being a male.

- A: Oh, my gender.
- Q: Yeah.
- A: I haven't been asked that question before.
- Q: Women often get asked it.
- A: Um ... I don't. In Engineering, I don't think it has been a major issue because there's no females around much. So in that respect I think for us in Engineering and from the era I'm from, there were and are very few females around my age in academia. Being male was just part of the scene. I guess in some respects it had a lot to do with my getting a job. And in other respects, it wasn't a competitive situation with females.

This exemplifies how deeply unconscious some men can be of the significance of their own gender. Without this acknowledgment systems of merit and promotion will continue to be seen as “objective” rather than reflecting standards and criteria based on male experience. Men's difficulty in problematising their own gender not only serves to preserve the myth of the gender-neutral organisation but also serves to reinforce the idea that “gender” equals female.

Career paths to academic leadership

The academic careers of men and women follow different pathways. Men are more mobile and gain promotion through their ability to change institutions. In these interviews senior men described what they saw as “conventional” academic careers, defined by one male Dean as “going from one place to another place about every 5-7 years. I've often changed country between those positions.”

A male Pro-Vice-Chancellor outlined how his trajectory had advanced his career:

“I started as a lecturer in English. Then I spent some time working in England. Then coming back to Australia I went into what was really a Head of School position and then became a Dean. And then a Deputy Vice-Chancellor at another University and then a Pro-Vice-Chancellor at another University and so here. So if you count that first Head of School position, about seventeen years in those kinds of management positions.”

With family, relationships, child bearing and rearing, the women interviewed had less mobility - one had been in the same institution for 27 years. Only 3 of the women interviewed mentioned experience in overseas positions; 3 mentioned appointments at universities interstate. Feminist analyses suggest that male careers are always more likely to take precedence over women's career within a relationship.

Women also start academic careers later, sometimes after child-rearing. A female Deputy Vice-Chancellor explained the negative career implications of this, particularly considering the traditional emphasis given to research in promotions:

Often female academics come into it slightly later. They haven't got that traditional leave school, go to university, get honours, go into a PhD, become a tutor and do your research and by the time you're 30, you're ready to take on a management position. A lot of females, like me, come in later, start to do all their higher degrees and always take on administrative (and) management jobs because you're good at it. You're doing it all. But then you've a research profile that is not as vibrant as the male who has been spending 10 years devoted to his research.

The dominance of gendered ideologies is reflected in a deeply embedded belief in Western cultures that work is peripheral to women's lives. Women are essentialised in a patriarchal discourse that presumes heterosexuality, domesticity and motherhood. The following comments show how one senior female struggled against the discriminatory impact of such beliefs:

I held only temporary appointments, contract appointments, whereas I saw men who I didn't think made the contribution I did being put into a tenure track. I was considered not to need the job. Then my husband died and people saw that I actually needed an income. There was actually a change in attitude once I was perceived as the breadwinner.

Probert et al (1998) found that in Australia male academics were more likely to seek promotion than female academics at a similar level. 18 of the men we interviewed (78%) had applied for their current jobs, 7 (30%) of those from outside the institution, whereas only 6 (33%) of the women had applied directly for their jobs, 3 (17%) of those from outside. Women were more cautious and undervalued their credentials. They were invited to apply, were appointed from acting positions or were approached by search firms. One woman had been a Deputy Vice-Chancellor in the organisation, during two amalgamations and restructures, over a period of 10 years, working for 3 different Vice-Chancellors. But she did not apply for the senior position, until approached by a search company:

That in itself is a story. I do not have a PhD. I'm probably the only Vice-Chancellor in Australia without one. I considered at the time that, although I could do the job, it would be a major barrier. The search person had done 70 interviews across Australia in relation to this job, including some of them in here, and my name had come up as the obvious appointment. Nobody saw the lack of PhD as an issue in terms of performance. So I was very fortunate.

In a number of cases it was clear that women thought that they were not ready for the jobs. A female Dean had been on the interview panel for her current position; when none of the candidates proved suitable she was persuaded by her panel colleagues to apply. A female Director of an academic centre had assumed that a male colleague had better qualifications; her direct superior, a DVC, had to ring her to request that she apply.

One female Deputy Vice-Chancellor explained:

The big problem is actually getting the women to the point of application. Maybe I've been a perfect example of it, saying no, I wouldn't apply for the Vice-Chancellor's job because I wouldn't get it. Women think they have to be perfect before they actually apply for jobs. Men with an imperfect record will apply much more readily than women and take the gamble. Women like to get it all stitched up and then run.

She went on to argue that women should see their "non-traditional" backgrounds as a strength that gave them a broad range of experience for management:

Women mustn't apologise for having an atypical background. A lot of women do. It took me a long time to realise this, quite frankly. But when I wrote my application for a personal chair, it was the first time that I actually sat down and I wrote as the first sentence: 'My life has been enriched by many things.' And that was really important because it meant that I wasn't apologising any more for having been a wife and a mother and having part-time jobs and having carted around the world with a husband and things like that. Women have got to assess their own backgrounds in a more positive way and women are starting to do that.

One aspect of women's less traditional career paths in academia was more varied work experience. 6 (33%) of the women interviewed had a background at senior levels of the public sector, whereas only 2 of the 23 men mentioned this experience. Prichard (1996:228) suggests that the "contemporary managerialist, competitive, results-based environment" found in the public sector positions women to be change agents. The women interviewed saw public sector experience as a strength:

... I have had very major national experience since the early 1970s in educational policy at schools, TAFE and higher education level. And I have had probably more experience than almost anybody else at my level in Australia across the three sectors. That national experience has been quite important for this particular job (female Vice-Chancellor).

Yeatman (1995:200) argues that women derive strengths from their lack of background in universities and can press for changes in the face of "all the fustian, patriarchal inefficiencies of the old institutional culture." Marginality is symptomatic of oppression yet the same time a location for radical critique, creativity and openness (Davis, 1997). Women's visibility, by virtue of their outsider status, can also make them the target for leadership positions as universities strive to fulfil their commitment to principles of equity.

Sustaining women

A major focus of the research was to explore if organisations where women remained in senior positions had particular characteristics that supported and sustained women.

Burton (1997: 17) criticised the “masculine culture” of institutions, which she defined as reflecting not only values and priorities but also the structural arrangements in which they became embedded. She identified in universities “employment terms and conditions, policies, practices and reward structures (that) historically have been organised around the cluster of characteristics, attributes and background circumstances typical of men”. Yet our interviewees saw cultures changing when women held significant positional power. Both women and men referred to values, to friendly and collegial environments, to supportive senior managers and a “critical mass” of senior women.

Although women are stereotypically associated with more consultative and “collegiate” management styles, Hearn (1999) noted that collegiality in the university system is often a white middle class male version of collegiality. ‘New’ universities which have less traditional networks of mentoring and patronage may not have such rigidities. One institution was much praised as having a friendly culture. Here it is described by a male Pro-Vice-Chancellor recently appointed from a more “traditional” institution:

Anyone you speak to in this University who is a relatively recent arrival will almost certainly comment on that positive aspect of the place, that it is a pleasant place to work, that people do observe the basic levels of courtesy and friendliness.

A female Dean from the same institution suggested this environment was based on the warm relationship between the mixed-gender triumvirate in senior management, saying “They’re really good mates.” She attributed this to the character of some men in senior positions:

Our Vice-Chancellor, our previous Deputy Vice-Chancellor, certainly at least one of our Pro-Vice-Chancellors, are men who in many of their dealings would be seen as operating in a very female way and I think that’s one of the reasons that women feel quite safe in this institution.

It is significant that while the male PVC described a pleasant place to work, the stakes for the female Dean were higher. A friendly workplace was “safe.”

Many of the women expressed concern about the possibility of being isolated, ostracised or criticised. They valued personal support, particularly from the senior executive, and appreciated being backed in difficult staff negotiations:

I now realise that in this management position people don’t necessarily trust me. They have all sorts of ideas about managers. I may be caring and supportive but also being a manager who wants to get things done might put you at odds sometimes. So reconciling who I thought I was with how people saw me as a manager ... has been very challenging for me emotionally. My supervisor has been very supportive, and the three people in the executive group (*note: all men*) have been really supportive of me in working that through (Female Director of Academic Centre).

Some women needed support to experiment and take chances.

I've stayed here for 16 years which I think is just an amazing thing. So it's a culture that has suited me and probably I explain it by saying that anytime I wanted to try something new they've always said, yes, go and do it. So it's a very encouraging culture in that respect (Female Dean).

Many of our interviewees described the support from the chief executive level as critically important to the promotion of women into senior positions. One Vice-Chancellor was described by his female Deputy as follows:

He's used to working with capable women. When you find men who aren't threatened by capable women then I think you're very lucky in life. He is not threatened by capable women, in fact he really understands the kind of contribution that capable women can make and values it.

A male Deputy Vice-Chancellor at one institution described how two male Vice-Chancellors had established an environment where women were encouraged to apply for and maintain senior positions. He went on to emphasise that the appointment of a number of senior women had "made a demonstrable difference." He supported the theory of a "critical mass" and described senior women as having a "magnetic attraction" in bringing others to the institution. He cautioned:

If you get even a slight change in a positive direction that attracts senior women to the place, if the culture changes, that will cause some of them if they get a better offer to go somewhere else. We lost two senior women last year because their immediate supervisor was changed and didn't give them the support they felt they needed and deserved.

Kanter (1977) argued that the presence of women in a "critical mass," which she viewed as numerical equality, led to organisational change. Although senior women acknowledged that their presence had been critical in attracting other women, they also saw the level at which they had been appointed and the power they exercised as more critical than number balancing (Ely, 1995). A female Dean explained:

A: Basically it was still very much a male dominated faculty and the culture of the place reflected that. That has changed, I think, with my appointment. If you're going to bring in one more woman, it's best to do it at the most senior roles. If you want to make a big change, that's the position that can make the most difference and I think my arrival here, even before I did a thing, communicated a message to other women in the Faculty. They also knew me from the late 80s and the early 90s. It was very widely known that I had been a really strong advocate for women's issues, gender equity and senior management in the University. So I really didn't need to do a thing when I came back. Just the fact of my coming communicated the message to women in the Faculty. Suddenly every leadership role would have a bunch of really excellent women expressing interest in it to the point where I started to become a bit concerned that I needed to appoint a few men because they're feeling a bit left out. And it's not out of the gender commitment; it's just that there were a stack of really talented women.

Q And they put their hands up?

A And they put their hands up, yes they did.

Having women in senior positions means that other women are more ready to apply. And women managers with an explicit feminist commitment can also ensure that women are interviewed for appointment and promotion:

A lot of people had no confidence in coming forward – female staff. You needed to specifically focus on them otherwise they got lost in the crowd. So I still think you need policies. And to just think about why you do it. I still have issues when I look at a selection panel and they've got one woman and four men and I'll send it back and say, 'Go back and do gender balance. Do you understand what we're talking about here? It's not a token female, it's balance.' So there still need to be messages. There still needs to be someone, when they are always talking about 'he, he, he,' to say 'and she.' Which makes you most unpopular in meetings but I will continue to do it (Female Deputy Vice-Chancellor).

A female Dean indicated that women were prepared to be honest about insecurities with other women, suggesting they felt less scrutinised and judged:

I find I can speak to other women much more frankly about my experience and to many more women. It takes me quite a bit more time to know a male manager well enough and develop a sense of trust where I could say 'Look I feel really distraught about this issue,' where I find with women I can say that fairly readily. You don't have to pretend to have everything together.

The complex interaction between gender and organisational cultures and the impact of a critical mass of women within the working environment were the subject of musings from a male Vice-Chancellor.

I think it's really been interesting going through a period where no women, to a period where there's one or two women, to a period where there's enough women so that there is an actual formation of a new culture altogether.

So period 1, it's a male culture. Period 2, it's male with one or two women. In a university setting the males are being very conscious and too careful about what they're saying, in the modern equity sense. Period 3, there's much more of a mix and it becomes much more open. So you can say (to a woman) 'God where did you get that new dress from?' You can't do that when there's only one or two women, but when there's more women you can actually make those remarks, 'Had your hairstyle changed?' and it's not offensive.

Q And does that make for a better running of ...

A I think so. It's just a much more normal mix of human beings. You can have a much more novel conversation, you can actually have a few jokes ... and I don't mean sexual jokes or anything like that. You can poke fun about

all sorts of things which, when you've only one or two women, you've got to be so careful. So I think it's quite unhealthy. I think the male thing may have obvious pitfalls, but I think the all male thing is almost better than just one or two women. I think you need a significant number of women to really change.

In another institution, one with a female Vice-Chancellor, a male Pro Vice-Chancellor suggested that easy relationships between the members of the vice-chancellors' management group were demonstrated by the fact that he was often ribbed about his ties.

Billing (1994: 190) suggests

The idea of a basic, essential contradiction between feminism and bureaucracy must be rejected. ... It seems to be possible to create 'soft' bureaucracies.

The interviewees from these five universities all had roles in the senior advisory committees of their organisations. From the point of view of most of them, both men and women, there are strong suggestions that when women gain and more importantly retain senior positions in significant numbers, both men and women can develop a sense of ease and comfort with each other. This in turn enables more cooperative and collegial forms of management to emerge.

Yet it is also clear that the situation is still contested. A couple of senior men, both Pro Vice-Chancellors, were more critical of the capacities of women in senior positions. One, who believed he had been passed over for senior positions by affirmative action for women, suggested that women faced challenges "moving out of that transactional domain (*sic*) more into a domain coupled to the real driving values of the organization." The other emphasised that the current financial pressures on Australian universities had produced a situation in which hierarchical management became more important. Although he criticised "command and control managers," he also defined women as favouring "soft, fluffy cuddly decision-making" and suggested that this did not lead to effective management. Stereotyping such as this indicates that women are still defined as outsiders in the world of management.

So far, but no further.

The interviews in the five universities broadly suggested that some transformation of cultures had taken place and that women were more integrated into senior management. Nonetheless, also emerging from the interviews was a resistance by many of the women to moving up what many saw as a corporate ladder.

A ... we've just recently gone through the process of appointing a new Vice-Chancellor. There wasn't a single woman that we could shortlist. There was only one woman applicant. And that's for a major job. There were a number of women on the panel and we all asked the search company why this was so because we had certainly had hopes of at least short listing some women. The response was that women are choosing not to go into the very senior positions now, but they get into the level of Dean, sometimes to PVC and then opt either to stay at that level or to opt out of academia altogether.

Q Have you seen evidence of that?

A Yes.

Q Why would that be so?

A Because vice-chancellors' positions at the moment aren't doable jobs. Why would you set yourself up for it? I mean if you really look at what our VC does, how much of what he does would **you** want to do. I mean a whole lot of it is drivel and the other bit of it's **so** hard. It's almost not able to be done (Female Dean).

A female Deputy Vice-Chancellor commented:

I just don't think enough women have done it. I have asked myself this question before, what is it that stops some women applying for jobs, is it family, is it home, is it the outside commitment, is it strength of purpose to carry through. I haven't quite come up with an answer, because when I look around at the ones who have successfully managed, usually their support system outside is very good, very strong, whether it is friends or family. They are certainly high achievers in themselves. They are women who will fight for what they want, the position they wish to get to.

It's just at the Executive Dean level we're not so successful and one wonders whether women draw the line at wanting to do those sorts of jobs. This is the other phenomenon to do with women's careers, that some them just decide that they've got a really good job and a really interesting job doing their profession.

Yet one male Dean commented that an unwillingness to seek promotion might not be a problem, but an assertion of values.

My observation of a number of very able women that I've come across in universities is they don't in fact aspire to the senior management positions. They will look laterally at something else that fulfils them. And I think to construe that as some sort of failure is far too simplistic....

This was borne out when the female Director of an academic centre was asked, "Do you aspire to a more senior role in the University?"

No I don't. I look at the role and the responsibilities the PVC has or the Deputy Vice-Chancellor and I think no, I don't want that. I feel I'm kind of at the edge of what I'm able to manage and remain sane. And I'm also at an age now where, probably because my youngest is finishing high school, I'm just beginning to see that there is another life. There are some other things that we do and my partner and I have just bought some land in another state and we're thinking about our future there and a different kind of life.

Within the year following the interview however this woman had accepted a Pro-Vice-Chancellor position at another university elsewhere in the country, indicating that this woman's perspective of the inter-relationship between gender, family relationships and employment was not fixed but responded to changes in circumstances.

Despite the significant gains for women in senior positions in these institutions ambiguities remain, and were recognised by some as relating especially to the acceptance and the legitimacy of women in these positions. A male Dean who had been succeeded as Head of School by a woman said that she had had "certain things a whole lot harder. Certain people did not give me a rough time and they've given her a rough time and I think a good deal of that is to do with the fact that she is a woman."

A female Vice-Chancellor suggested that women are still judged more harshly, because they are not seen as legitimate leaders:

When we look at a male manager going into a job we sit there and expect them to be successful and look for success. In Australia things are exactly the opposite for women. There's still a level at which we all think at some deep psychological level that the first mistake they make is evidence of the fact that you're waiting for them to fail. I think that the whole issue for women is the amount of time that they've got to get runs on the boards is much less. It's very dangerous for them if there's a major misjudgement of which they're guilty in their reign.

You have to assert your authority. You're not given authority. You have to take it. Men are given it. It's a very significant difference.

Conclusion

In these five Australian universities women have entered senior positions, but are still in the minority. The most important issue for women in senior management is whether women are present in a "critical mass" and most particularly if they are in senior positions so that they can make a difference. None of the women interviewed saw herself as a token in academic leadership. Most of our female participants were at ease with their male colleagues and confident of their capacity to influence events and to effect changes. Many of the women expressed great enthusiasm about their positions and what they had been able to achieve. They were aware that they approached management differently to men. They particularly emphasised how they worked with staff and students to encourage them to develop. Women also emphasised focussing on values. They highlighted the importance of collaboration and consultation over hierarchical management.

Many of the men interviewed were committed supporters of their female colleagues. They appreciated their contributions, acknowledged women as important in innovation and in bringing values to the work-place. They noted the changes that had occurred in managerial cultures as a result of the presence of women, describing workplaces as friendly and "more normal." Yet a very small number of men were critical, naming issues such as over-consultation and slow decision-making as typical of women's leadership style.

Some of the women interviewed consciously followed particular rules of the promotion game successfully, others had some ambivalence about their position and others resisted by developing new practices and arguing for the importance of these. There was, however, an underlying sense in several of the interviews of insecurity. The deeply gendered assumptions that still prevail in organizations may be working to make women sense that they are not legitimately in senior positions and that they must be careful and cautious. This could explain the importance of explicit support from superiors and peers so valued by some women interviewees.

This should be considered in conjunction with the expressed reluctance of some women to seek senior positions. The interviews suggest that for some it reflects a lack of confidence in their own abilities and experience and a need to be absolutely certain before they apply for promotion. Others are making a clear decision about the value of senior positions, preferring to stay in direct contact with students or their own research. Others describe the senior jobs as unmanageable, and prefer to make decisions based on balancing work and personal life. It is acknowledged in the interviews that the small numbers mean that evident gains can be easily reversed.

To understand a particular juncture we need to understand the particular subjectivity of the time. Through the process of qualitative interviews our participants had the opportunity to reflect on their situations and experiences and to interweave the various factors, rules, agents, actors, discourses and formative contexts that shaped their present world view. The interviews provided an environment in which “gender” was questioned. It was clear however that such questioning is limited. Both men and women responded within normalising stereotypes. Gender can be questioned and still remain transparent.

The rich data that have emerged from these self-reflexive interviews suggest that we are at a critical time in the relation between gender and universities. No longer can universities be seen as totally dominated by male power. At the same time, the cultures of universities are changing dramatically in response to corporatisation, the challenges of technology, students’ rights and restructuring. The impact of these on the gendered nature of academic leadership is unclear. What is clear is that many women will demand to be part of the landscape of change.

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