Gender Identity as a Lived Process: A Study of the Australian Sugar Industry

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This paper uses data from a study of the Australian agri-political group CANEGROWERS to identify how managerial men in agri-politics construct their gendered identities. This is a process which involves discursively positioning themselves in relation to the gendered identities of women and other men involved in the industry in three ways. In the first instance CANEGROWERS’ managers do gender by drawing on discourses which emphasise their differences from women and femininities. A second dimension to their constitution of a masculine gendered identity is to emphasise similarities in their performance of masculinities and the performance of masculinities by male farmers or ‘growers’. Thirdly, and simultaneously, male leaders also generate and exercise their gendered identities as managerial men by representing themselves as distinctly different from the constructed subject the ‘grower’. In conclusion, the paper draws attention to the way in which this process of ‘othering’ legitimates and sustains managerial men’s hold on power in CANEGROWERS.

Introduction

Men’s dominance of agricultural organisations has led Irish sociologist Sally Shortall (2001: 170) to claim that these groups should be called 'men's organisations'. While this numerical inequity is important, it is not only with the dominance of men in agri-political groups with which this paper is concerned. The paper draws on feminist post-structural theory and, as such, rejects an ‘a priori theory of the subject’ manifest in biology and instead understands identity to be discursively constituted across a number of contexts (Foucault 1987: 121). The purpose is to explore how elected male leaders constitute their masculine identities in the context of agri-politics.

To address this issue the paper is divided into five parts. The first section establishes the theoretical context and briefly overviews the relevant literature. Following this, I outline the methodology. In the subsequent three sections of the paper I explore the ways in which managerial masculinity is constructed by men in CANEGROWERS.
The paper concludes by reflecting on how the gender identity work of CANEGROWERS’ leaders has both generated and reinforced their organisational power.

**Gendered identities, management and agri-politics**

Feminist theory has been radically transformed by poststructuralism. Central to this transformation has been the critique of the subject (Hekman 1992). For feminist poststructuralists the subject is never complete or fixed but, as de Lauretis (1990: 116) explains ‘shifting and multiply organized across variable axes of difference’ or, according to Weedon 1987: 32) ‘in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak’. To convey this theoretical position feminist poststructuralists explain that gender is not something we have or are, but something that is done (Butler 1990). There are, different discourses – the historically, socially and culturally specific terms, beliefs, values, institutions, statements and practices – by which we may constitute ourselves as ‘feminine’ or ‘masculine’, (as the widely adopted terms ‘masculinities’ and ‘femininities’ indicates), but there is no fundamental self-evident category ‘man’ or ‘woman’ (Weedon 1987; Probyn 1993).

In order to understand and theorise the relationship between varied and various gendered identities, Connell’s (1995; 2000) notion of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ has been particularly influential. The term itself was first engaged in 1985 when Carrigan, Connell and Lee (1985) proposed a ‘new sociology for masculinity’ which would focus, not just on power as it was manifest in the relationships between men and women, but as it was manifest in the relationships between groups of men. They argued that there is a hierarchy of masculinities. Some are hegemonic in that they are privileged while others, such as the masculinities of young men, effeminate men, and homosexual men are marginal and/or subordinate Rather than being a list of traits
hegemonic masculinity is a relational. It is also not fixed, but subject to shift and change across different sites, times and contexts. As a consequence, what masculine identity is desired and valued in one setting or period may be that which is excluded or considered inferior in another.

In organisational studies – as in other disciplines – gender scholars have been highly influenced by Connell’s (1995; 2000) work and particularly, his notion of ‘hegemonic masculinities’. They have consequently given considerable attention over the past decade to identifying and describing hegemonic masculinity as it is manifest and constituted in management (e.g. Collinson and Hearn 1994; Hopton 1999). Within the field of rural and agricultural studies, Liepins (1998; 2000) and Brandth and Haugen (2000) have engaged in a similar interrogation of the nature of gendered managerial identities. Three similar findings are highlighted in these studies. Firstly, like their Antipodean counterparts described by Liepins (1998; 2000), the Norwegian agricultural managers examined by Brandth and Haugen (2000) draw on a managerial discourse of power, authority, decisiveness, control and authority in the construction of themselves as managerial men. Secondly, the same slippage or what the authors call ‘spill-over’ (Brandth and Haugen 2000: 21) between hegemonic on-farm masculinities and agri-political masculinities is evident in the Norwegian texts as it is in Liepins’ (1998; 2000) textual analysis. The constitution of on-farm and off-farm masculinity are thereby connected. Finally, both studies report that hegemonic constructions of managerial masculinities in agricultural groups render particular groups such as women and young people within the sector invisible or marginal.

This paper engages with this literature to examine how masculinities are constituted in CANEGROWERS. However, a key point of difference between this paper and the work of Brandth and Haugen (2000) and Liepins (1998; 2000) is that these prior
studies relied either exclusively upon, or largely upon, documentary data in the form of agricultural media. In this study other data sources such as interviews, focus groups and participant observation were engaged. Data from these methods highlight the complex, lived and dynamic process that is gender identity formation.

**Methodology**

This paper is based on a study which examined women's involvement in the Australian sugar industry, and in particular, their participation in the key agri-political group representing sugar cane farmers. This agricultural organization, CANEGROWERS, represents 6000 cane farmers in Australia, and, despite the fact that women are listed as part or full owners on half of these farms, none of the 181 positions of leadership is held by a woman. Thus, the research questions were directed at examining both the constraints to women's leadership in the organization as well as strategies to facilitate greater involvement by women.

Three case studies were conducted as part of this feminist research project and a range of data gathering techniques engaged across the case studies (see Pini 2002; 2003; 2004).

The first case study was of the CANEGROWERS' organization itself. This involved interviews with fifteen male elected leaders as well as document analysis and ongoing participant observation. While a range of organizational documents were analysed, past and recent editions of the CANEGROWERS' corporate fortnightly publication, *The Australian Canegrower*, which is sent to all farmers, was given particular attention. Two further case studies were conducted in cane growing district locations. In each of these case study sites focus groups were undertaken with forty women involved in the industry as well as interviews with women who have stood for elected leadership in CANEGROWERS and district CANEGROWERS' staff.
Document analysis and participant observation in the districts further enriched these case studies. Data were analysed with the assistance of NVivo, a qualitative data software package. The first stage of coding was based on a list of themes identified from the literature while the second stage concentrated on identifying emergent themes from the data (Miles and Huberman 1994).

Managerial men’s construction of themselves as the same as growers

Managerial men in CANEGROWERS, like those described by Liepins (1998; 2000) and Brandth and Haugen (2001), constitute their gendered identities by constructing their role as requiring the same types of hegemonic masculine attributes as on-farm physical work. Farmers and agricultural managers are positioned as constantly involved in battle and, as a consequence, needing to demonstrate masculine strength, determination and toughness. (See Figure I below).

The dominance of an organizational battlefield discourse even predates the constitution of CANEGROWERS. In the first edition of a journal published in 1918 by the group which paved the way for the establishment of CANEGROWERS, the United Cane Growers’ Association, the editor outlined the need for an agri-political group which could ‘fight and fight with all its power’ (CANEGROWERS 2000: .22). At this time the fight was with government, unions, southerners and millers and focused on the involvement of South Pacific Island Labor on canefields.

Since this time there have been some shifts in who and what the editor of *The Producer’s Review* called sugar cane farmers’ ‘pitiless enemies’, but the discursive construction of farmers being engaged in battle and the agri-political leader similarly engaged has not (Doherty in CANEGROWERS 2000: 18). Farmers for example, according to a recent publication, are 'always battling the elements' of ’cyclones, strong winds, excessive rainfall and flooding, drought and accidental fires' but when
'disaster does strike’. In undertaking this battle against the weather and other forces, CANEGROWERS’ managers invoke a range of military metaphors. The Chairman for example, introduced newly elected members in the CANEGROWERS’ magazine to growers by editorialising:

Our elected members are our front line troops. Keep them fully supplied with ammunition and give them total support which will give them the encouragement and confidence to hold the line against those who would demolish our present position (Bonanno 1998: 8).

That the strength required to fight on-farm battles and board room battles is similar, was conveyed by the elected leaders who emphasised that it was their participation in on-farm physical work which gave them something to offer as agricultural leaders. They had as one said, ‘been there in the paddock’ and ‘gotten their hands dirty’.

Others referred to themselves as having strengths as managers because they had been ‘a grass roots grower’ or because they ‘had hands-on involvement in the industry’.

What is absent and suppressed from the constructed subject ‘agricultural leader’ and ‘farmer’ are any attributes associated with femininity. As the following section will report, being an agricultural leader means not be female.

**Managerial men’s construction of themselves as different from women**

According to the elected leaders women are different because they are not ‘growers’. The ‘grower’ is someone with ‘hands-on-involvement’ who is involved in all aspects of on-farm physical work. Five women who met the definition of ‘grower’ as someone involved in all aspects of on-farm physical work on a daily basis, had stood for leadership but been unsuccessful. In explaining why these women were unable to secure decision-making positions in the industry, elected leaders pointed to other ‘differences’ between women and men. They acknowledged that these women had
their ‘respect’ and ‘were hands-on farmers’. At the same time they were still unsuitable for leadership because they were women. In these discussions women were constructed, as a group, to be weak, emotional, irrational and fragile. In contrast, industry leadership was presented as a tough, demanding job requiring objective and critical thinkers. A district CANEGROWERS’ manager explained:

CANEGROWERS’ Staff member: One view that was expressed by one of the guys was that, we actually pride ourselves with not having our women heavily involved you know, that’s something we can take care of. You know, we don’t have to have our women, you know sort of burdened with trying to administer the organisation (Herbert River, In-depth Interview, August, 1999).

Three salient factors need to be elucidated from this exchange. The first point concerns the way industry administration is portrayed as a difficult and tough burden unlike other responsibilities women are encouraged to undertake (such as domestic work). The second is the way women’s exclusion from leadership is justified. It is turned around and legitimised as an act of lightening women’s load and of ensuring that women are not placed under strain or stress. The third crucial point is the way men’s pride is associated with the capacity to keep women out of industry politics. The hegemonic masculine identity of agricultural manager is thus created and enhanced by positioning women as ‘different’ and keeping them out of industry politics.

Managerial men’s construction of themselves as different from growers

Women are not the only group constructed as different by managerial men in CANEGROWERS. Another group positioned as different is ‘growers’ (See Figure 1). Positioning this group as ‘different’ is particularly interesting because as explained above, the managers are also insistent that there are commonalities between
themselves and what they ubiquitously refer to as the ‘hands-on-farmer’. This connection is however, qualified. What is apparent in CANEGROWERS, is that managerial men may have been growers, but not all growers can be managerial men. According to elected male leaders what differentiated their masculine identities from the identities from male growers was their expert knowledge. They thus emphasised the difference between what one called the ‘fairly basic’ knowledge of cane growing and the variously described ‘intense’, ‘highly complex’, ‘onerous’ and ‘complicated’ work of agricultural leadership. Agricultural leaders further differentiated themselves in discussions of their skills, knowledge and expertise by engaging dualistic ‘us/them’ ‘we/they’ divisions in their speech. They referred to the time when they had been only ‘a grower’ and compared their lack of knowledge and expertise then with what they now had as ‘managers’. One stated for example that ‘when you’re a cane grower you’re out there farming and you don’t know what goes on within CANEGROWERS’. Another manager elaborating on the same theme, distinguished himself and other leaders from ‘growers’ who were, in his view, uninformed about cane payment systems, cane testing processes and local board arrangements. Growers, he said, ‘grow their cane and cut their cane and they’re happy.’ The expert knowledge of the elected leadership is not necessarily gained through formal qualifications because none of those interviewed had such qualifications. Rather, they stressed it was knowledge gained through on-site institutional and organizational learning as a representative of CANEGROWERS. For ‘a grower’ to become ‘an agricultural manager’ it was necessary, elected leaders said for them to do ‘an apprenticeship’. This was the process by which those interviewed had themselves come to leadership. That is, they had all been approached by an older male in the
district who encouraged them to become involved and mentored them into their role. For many this had been a father or grandfather.

**Conclusion**

This paper posed the question of how managerial masculinities are constituted by male leaders in the agri-political group CANEGROWERS. What emerges from the data is that the process of masculine gender identity formation is, as Barrett (1996: 140) suggests in his study of the US navy, that requires a focus, not just on how women are implicated in the project of masculine identity formation, but also on the construction of unities, differences and interrelationships between men.’ This is because the constitution of managerial masculinities amongst elected members relies upon inscribing particular gendered identities on men as well as women in the sector. Growers are, on one hand, positioned within discourses of hegemonic masculinity common to the farming environment. Growers are what women are not. They are strong, hard-working and robust. At the same time, growers are feminised as lacking expert knowledge and as demonstrating naivety. Managerial men, in contrast, are politically astute and highly knowledgeable. The identities of these elected leaders are consequently constructed via this purported difference between themselves and the growers.

The gender identity construction undertaken by male agri-political leaders validates their position and status. Given that the simple farming folk who are ‘the growers’ are unversed in the harsh realities of business and politics it is not just necessary, but critical that managerial positions are held by those currently in position. If not they should at the least be held by those chosen by the incumbents as appropriate successors. Secondly, the particular gendered masculine identities taken up by CANEGROWERS’ managers provide an effective justification and legitimisation for
the exclusion of particular groups from management. Finally, when male leaders position agricultural leadership as being a difficult burden and women as lacking the strength and fortitude for such as task, power relations and women’s subordination are obscured. It is for these reasons that further deconstructive work which highlights the normalised and gendered constructions of agricultural leadership is required.

Figure 1:
Managerial and Grower Masculine Identities: Sameness and Difference in the Construction of Masculinities
References


