Tradition and Change: Gender Relations and Australian Local Government

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decades there has been a substantial increase in women’s representation in local government across a number of western industrialised nations. This paper uses interviews with the nineteen woman mayors in the Australian state of Queensland in the period 2000-2004 to explore men’s response to women’s increased political presence in this sphere. Data reveal the way in which males are attempting to (re)gender the space of local government by enacting a range of resistance strategies that minimise women’s role as mayor, exclude her from knowledge, information and networks and sexualise her. These strategies work both to de-centre and marginalise women and feminine subjectivities from the local government arena as well as valorize and prioritise men and masculine subjectivities. Thus, despite women’s increased numerical presence, the local government sphere is (re)gendered as legitimately masculine.

Keywords: local government, gender, resistance, change

This paper uses a feminist theoretical lens to undertake a critical examination of men and masculinities in the local government sector. This is a particularly rich context in which to examine gender politics as women’s presence has increased dramatically here in a relatively short period of time. In 1980, for example, women accounted for just 6 per cent of positions in local authorities in 1986 this had increased to 13 per cent and in 2000 to 25 per cent (Sawer, 2001). By 2004 women’s participation was at approximately 30 per cent (Pini, Brown and Ryan, 2004).

The paper is divided into five sections. It begins with a discussion of the theoretical framework informing the study. The second part of the paper provides an overview of the research methodology. The presentation of empirical data in the third part of the paper begins with participants’ description of a particular feminine subject position they call ‘woman councillor’. This is a subjectivity men found acceptable, but which women rejected. In the fourth section of the paper I report on the resistance strategies men have deployed in order to (re)gender the local government space as masculine in the face of women’s entry. These include minimising women’s power as mayor, excluding women from networks, knowledge and information, denigrating women and sexualising women. The concluding section of the paper identifies areas for future research.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK
Feminist writers have been instrumental in debunking and critiquing the fallacy that organizations are benign and gender neutral. In a seminal paper in which she espoused a ‘theory of gendered organizations’ Acker (1990) argues that gender is implicated in a myriad of organisational processes, practices, symbols and images. These may include the tendency of particular occupational roles to be gendered as masculine or feminine, the typical over-representation of women in subordinate positions structurally within organizations as well as the continued lack of responsibility organizations take for the familial and care work of employees. To demonstrate the dynamism and pervasiveness of this process, Acker (1990: 146) uses the term ‘gendering’ arguing that every facet of organizational life can be viewed as producing and reproducing hierarchical gendered divisions and differentiations which position the female/feminine/woman as subordinate to the man/masculine/male.

In seeking to further Acker’s (1990) examination of gender as a relational social process embedded in organisations, a number of scholars have found it useful to engage West and Zimmerman’s (1987) concept of ‘doing gender’, which suggests that gender is not something we have or are, but something that is done (e.g. Gatenby and Humphries, 1999; Kvade, 1999). A central tenet of this work is a rejection of the conceptualisation of the subject as unitary, singular and stable, for an understanding of subjectivity as fragmented, contradictory and plural (Hekman, 1990). Thus, subjectivity 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’. 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’ (Scott, 1998; Probyn, 1993). Any sense that these are immutable, durable and natural is illusory (Butler, 1990).

There is, of course, a wide variety of ways in which we ‘do gender’ in organisational contexts and thus mark ourselves as located inside/outside of particular discourses of masculinity or femininity. Indeed,
the doing of gender has been described as riding a metaphorical bicycle because its creation is so routine and repetitive (Martin, 2003). Important to this paper is the fact that management and leadership are occupational roles that are strongly connected to particular definitions of masculinity. ‘Doing masculinity’ and ‘doing management’ are thereby often conflated as one and the same. In the first instance this is related to the fact that, as Collinson and Hearn (1994: 1) note, ‘most managers in most organizations in most countries are men’. The local government sector – both in terms of elected leaders and employed staff has traditionally been no different. It is, however, not merely the dominance of men’s biological bodies in managerial positions that is of concern. More important is that, in both definition and practice, leadership and management have largely been constructed around notions of ‘hegemonic masculinity’. This is a particular version of masculinity which, in a given site and time, is culturally dominant or idealised and defined in terms of other subordinated masculinities as well as all femininities (Carrigan, Lee and Connell, 1985). While emphasizing its fluidity and slipperiness, Connell (1995) suggests that hegemonic masculinity as it is currently manifest in western culture revolves around notions of heterosexuality, competitiveness, instrumentality, aggression, independence and rationality. This definition is strongly suggestive of dominant socially constructed notions of what it means to be a manager/leader (Kerfoot, 2002).

As stated, specific studies of masculinities and political representatives in local government have not been undertaken. Evidence from the broader literature on gender and politics however, suggests that hegemonic masculinity is strongly embedded in the processes and practices of political institutions. Whitehead (1999: 28), for example, describes Westminster as having a ‘prevailing adversarial culture of aggressive, manipulative and vicious competition’. Further, the more specific literature on women and local government indicates that hegemonic masculinities may be equally manifest within local tiers of government. Yule (2000: 42), for example, recounts the way in which male British councillors position themselves as innately more rational and intelligent than their female counterparts. Similarly, in their study of women’s experience of local government in Northern Ireland Wilford et al. (1993: 347) describe the ‘clubby nature of male councillors’ characterised by ‘slaps on the back and drinks at the bar’ while in Japan Bochel et al. (2003) describe the ‘masculine political culture’ as a key
constraint for women in local government. Further exemplifying that the environment of local
government has been one in which hegemonic masculinity has been able to flourish, is a report by
Irwin (2001), which documents bullying, adversarial politics and personal attacks as common among
councillors.

Given that hegemonic masculinities appear to have been strongly embedded in local
government, women’s relatively recent entry to the sector is of significant theoretical interest.
This is particularly so given the fact that the literature on gender and organisations
demonstrates that men are highly resistant to women trespassing on previously male terrain
(Sinclair, 1998; Cockburn, 1991). It is in this light that I seek to address the question of how
gendered identities in local government have been shaped and reshaped in the presence of
women.

METHODOLOGY

Data for this paper are drawn from nineteen semi-structured interviews with women mayors in the
Australian state of Queensland. This approach to data collection, described by Mason (2003: 225) as
‘interactive, situational and generative’ was useful on a range of counts. First, the method gave voice
to women’s own perceptions and experiences of being leaders in the local government sector and was
thereby consistent with our feminist intent to privilege the subjective as we uncovered different layers
of understandings about the phenomena in question (Moss, 2002). Second, while it ensured that the
three interviewers undertaking the research covered the same general territory in their questioning, it
also allowed for flexibility in the manner and order in which questions were asked as well as opening
up space for participants to raise issues not anticipated by the researchers (Holstein and Gubrium,
1995).

The nineteen women interviewed represented the entire cohort of mayors in the state of Queensland in
the period 2000-2004. The selection of this group to interview is consistent with the notion of
purposeful sampling in qualitative interviewing described by Minichiello et al. (1995: 162) as
selecting informants on the basis of relevant issues, categories and themes. In a number of respects the women were typical of the broader population of women in local government in Australia (Purdon and Associates, 1997; Whip and Fletcher, 1999; Irwin, 2001). None was under the age of 40 and just three were aged between 40 and 50. Prior to becoming mayor all but one had been involved in paid work in a range of sectors including health, education, public administration and small business. Seven had tertiary qualifications. While most had been elected as mayor only in 1999 or 1996, all but one had prior experience as a councillor. Over half had first entered local government before 1990. The sixteen mayors who had children had thus had to juggle work and family over the course of their elected life, although the majority now were the mothers of teenagers or young adults. Seven of the mayors were located in rural shires.

Interviews took approximately one hour. They began with questions about the women’s background prior to entering local government before moving on to questions which focused on the participant’s initial entry into political office such as motivations for seeking office, campaigning strategies and skill development. Following this, attention shifted to women’s experience of being a mayor. In the state of Queensland mayors are directly elected by the people rather than by council members so the position holds particular prominence and status. Women were asked a range of questions to elicit information about their gendered experiences of the mayoral role. For example, they were asked what advice they would give to aspiring women candidates, what major challenges they had faced and achievements they had enjoyed while in office and what their opinion was of women specific local government organizations.

Interviews were transcribed in full for analysis and followed a four-stage process that was iterative and ongoing rather than linear and definitive. The first was the detailed and repeated readings of the women’s narratives as texts while the second was the development of analytical categories, which were developed through both an inductive and deductive approach (Schmidt, 2004). That is, they emerged from the data as well as from the researcher’s own knowledge of the literature and theory. Qualitative software was engaged to assist with the third stage in the process, that is, the coding of
data according to the identified thematic categories. At the same time the fourth stage of the process involved returning to the transcripts to review themes, examine the relationship between themes and the interweaving of themes across the narrative whole. Cumulatively, this analytic investigation revealed the ways in which men in local government enact hegemonic masculinity as a means of resistance against women’s presence in the sector.

**Discourses of Resistance**

Mayors in Queensland have a role that is significantly different from mayors in other parts of Australia. In Queensland, as well as Western Australia and South Australia, all mayors are popularly elected directly to the position by the public. This differs from Victoria, Tasmania, the Northern Territory, and some local government authorities of New South Wales, where mayors are elected by Council members from amongst their own numbers; they serve one term and then step down from the position. As such, these mayors perform a largely ceremonial role, and do not carry responsibility for community leadership over and above that of an ordinary Council member (Local Government Focus, 2003). In contrast, those directly elected as Queensland mayors perform a managerial function acting as leaders of Councils. As Neylan and Tucker (1996) argue, in this role mayors are high profile political and community leaders in their own right. The fact that the role of mayor is quite different from that of councillor, and the gendered implications of this did not go unnoticed by the women participants. One explained that ‘being one of eight or so wasn’t so bad. They could live with that. But having a strong woman run for mayor. That was different’.

It is perhaps not surprising that one of the most typical forms of resistance engaged against the women mayors was to undermine this authority, and minimise the formal position she held. One of the women mayors, for example, commented, ‘The line used most frequently at the council table is, “Well, you’re just a councillor like us, you just happen to be full time and that’s all the difference is.”’ Participants also reported being constantly reminded of any limitations in their powers or constraints to their enacting their powers such as needing to gain approval for decisions from an all-male council. Some of the attempts to diminish the standing and role of the woman mayor were highly aggressive and
adversarial. In the quotation below Wanda describes the actions of a councillor who deliberately sought a public confrontation with her, not only as a means of undermining and discrediting her, but also as a means of demonstrating his masculinity as a powerful and strong fighter.

Wanda: ‘This one particular councillor who didn’t want to work with me. He stood up in a council meeting over a particular issue rather than come and see me privately he’s basically torn me to shreds in front of a full council. When I said to him, ‘Well, you know the right thing you should have done was to actually come in and talk to me’. And he said, ‘Oh, I’m not going to be treated like a school kid and go into your office and talk to you.’”

This male councillor attempts to discredit Wanda’s leadership, by locating her power and authority, not within the masculine identity of ‘mayor, but the highly feminised and diminished identity of ‘school marm’. He seeks to delegitimise her position not only by refusing to meet with her, but also by constructing any such dialogue as infantile and beneath him.

The second form of resistance was one of exclusion. This was manifest in a number of different ways. One was simply to vote as a block of men and refuse to support a woman mayor on any issue, or particularly salient issues. Another was to exclude women from vital information or knowledge. This was a form of resistance women mayors experienced from male council staff as well as representative colleagues. When elected to office, the women inherited the staff of the previous administration. This became problematic when the staff, and particularly the Chief Executive Officer, (CEO) acted against rather than with the new female mayoral incumbent. Typically, these resistant CEOs had been in their positions for an extended period of time. In some instances they used the knowledge gained through this employment experience to undermine the newly elected mayoral women. The women mayors were critically aware of the importance of information, and the fact that denial of information, had, on occasions, caused them to be labelled as uninformed, and incompetent. Those males who were privy to information were able to correspondingly position themselves as knowledgeable and efficient. The gendered hierarchy between femininity/masculinity and female/male was thus afforded voice, and the reinscription of local government as a legitimately masculine arena legitimised.

Women mayors were also excluded from information and knowledge through the use of jargon and technical language as the following participant explained:
Martha: The stuff that you deal with is boys’ stuff. It’s roads and it’s water and it’s sewerage. The engineer in place here at the time I was elected as councillor was really difficult. There were gutters not operating properly in my division and he was there saying, ‘no, the water flows from here to here.’ And I’m saying, ‘Well, it can’t because that goes uphill and you’ve got the inlet up the top up there.’ And then he’d start to use jargon and he actually at one stage told me not to bother my little head about it.

Martha’s statement is useful in highlighting the fact that, historically local government has been a space in which hegemonic masculinity has been propagated and affirmed. Male councillors have been able to draw upon some of the central artefacts, objects and metaphors of hegemonic masculinity as they attended to the traditional ‘roads, rates and rubbish’. It has been a space in which ‘boys’ stuff’ has predominated. Like the Health and Environment Unit of a British authority Maile (1999: 150) calls “Westward District, ”managerial masculinities were traditionally ‘secured’ through particular modes of operating and work priorities such as an emphasis on utilities over services and engineering over the environment. Now, however, there has been considerable change in the local government sector and the possibilities for enacting hegemonic masculinity are lost or highly fragile. As one woman mayor explained, ‘You’re more a board of directors now. There is less hands on. You can’t go out there and tell someone how to build a road or not to build a road like that.’

The changed role of local governments has removed some of the important resources through which male councillors have traditionally been able to demonstrate their masculinity. While new and emerging roles may offer other opportunities for masculine identity work, the evidence from the data obtained in this study suggests that some male councillors remain strongly attached to past responsibilities in which they had invested so much of their masculine selves. The issue of a reshaped local government agenda was further gendered by the fact that women reported that for some long-term male councillors, this unwanted change was viewed as synonymous with their entry to local government. Within a range of changes introduced, some could be positioned as ‘feminising’ the agenda of local government in that the sector was now designated responsible for community building and environmental management. The refusal of some male councillors to see these roles as the ‘real’ business of local government could be read as a reaction against what they saw as a de-masculinising of the local government agenda.
The form of exclusion which women found most difficult to name and identify was exclusion from social networks and informal gatherings. At the same time this type of exclusion is profoundly effective as Prokos and Padavic (2002: 449) noted in delineating an ‘in-group’ of men and a corresponding ‘out-group’ of women so that women learn that they are ‘outsiders’. Women were aware that male councillors tended to congregate at particular pubs, all-male service clubs or sporting events outside of meetings and discuss council business. Homosocial relations between representative and employee men in local government were also maintained and solidified in these networks outside of the formal spaces of the council. Women mayors were also conversant with the fact that different masculinised environments provided men with opportunities for fraternal networking, solidarity and politicking, and that their sex largely denied them entry to these spaces, but found it difficult to label what was occurring. As one commented, ‘It’s sort of hard to put your finger on. You couldn’t say they make you go over into the corner there because you’re a woman. It’s hard to identify specific things but we ladies often do chat about it.’

The final form of resistance male councillors enacted against women entrants to local government was to sexualise them. The most pronounced illustration of this was that directed at a woman mayor in a large regional centre. During her campaign for mayor web sites were established which labelled the woman a ‘lesbian’. This was taken up by some of the male protagonists on council and became front page news in the local paper. While this participant was reluctant to name this behaviour as affecting her, she was very forthright in describing it as causing significant disturbance to her teenage children. She asked, ‘Can you imagine a 17 year old and a 16 year old going down the street and you’ve got the front page of the paper saying your mum’s sexuality questioned?’ Dot believed that an important factor in the questioning of her sexuality was her decision to shave her head for leukaemia research. She also spoke of the fact that she had never been a ‘girlie-girl’ and afforded little attention to matters of dress or make-up. Beyond her bodily transgressions, she also named her strength, resilience and forthrightness as factors that would have contributed to rumours about her sexuality. These rumours
coalesced with other discourses of denigration that positioned Dot in masculinised ways as ‘ball-breaker’ or ‘bitch’.

While Dot’s experience was most extreme, all women mayors were acutely aware of the negative consequences of sexuality for females in positions of leadership, and described being vigilant in managing their sexuality to avoid it being used against them. This was a constant struggle as they were routinely subjected to displays of men’s heterosexuality through joke telling, and innuendo.

Collinson and Collinson’s (1989: 103) observation that ‘where women enter male-dominated areas, men may use sexuality to maintain their dominant position’, is evident in Jessica’s quotation. She reveals the truism that for men leaders (hetero)sexuality is valorized and unproblematic, but for women troublesome and a liability (Sinclair, 1995). Women’s desire to dissociate themselves from sexuality is not easily done as they are typically defined in terms of their sexuality and also expected to support men’s performance of heterosexuality (Ozga and Walker, 1999). They are subsequently controlled and subordinated by the dominance of hegemonic discourses of heterosexual masculinity in the local government sector.

CONCLUSION
The paper has demonstrated that women’s elevation to the mayoral role in a context where the position carries particular power and prestige has led male councillors to engage a range of resistance strategies. These strategies of minimizing women’s role, excluding women, sexualising women and denigrating women have a dual purpose. In the first instance they undermine and problematise the place of feminine subjectivities in local government. They emphasise and legitimate the lack of fit between being both a ‘mayor’ and a ‘woman’. In the second instance these strategies enhance men’s own performance of hegemonic masculinity and strengthen the allegiances and connections between male councillors and employees in the sector. Men thus validate, reinforce and repair their own gendered subjectivities as masculine men in local government. This recuperative identity work is complex in that it is connected, not just to women’s entry to the sector, but to the changing role of
local government. The process is thus one of both ‘keeping women out’ and ‘writing men back in.’ In this respect, despite women’s increased presence, local government is (re)gendered as masculine.

ENDNOTES

1. Chris Ryan and Kerry Brown assisted with data collection for this project.

REFERENCES


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