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A toolkit for women: the mis(sed) management of gender in resource industries

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to show the extent to which work on how to manage gender in resource industries fails to draw on the body of knowledge which explores gender in the workplace.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper explores the efficacy of a recently published toolkit within the context of the current debate about gender in resource industries (such as mining, and oil and gas).

Findings – The Australian Human Rights Commission's toolkit speaks to this debate, but fails to analyse existing strategies to deal with the "gender problem"; it simply repeats them as successful examples of what to do. The authors of the toolkit also fail to ask a question which is fundamental to the success of any intervention into gender: what is the definition of "gender" on which the work is based?

Originality/value – The debate about gender in resource industries fails to take into consideration contemporary ideas about gender as they have appeared in academic research and human practice.

Keywords Gender, Workplace, Organizations, Masculinity, Resource industries

Paper type Conceptual paper

In 2013, the Australian Human Rights Commission published *Women in male-dominated industries: a toolkit of strategies* ("toolkit"). This toolkit offers information on strategies used by Australian and non-Australian companies to attract women to non-traditional occupations, and is identified as playing "an important part in Australia's Equal Futures Partnership with the USA and other international partners to expand opportunities for women" (p. 2). It therefore intends to have relevance to discussions about the management of gender in male-dominated industries within Australia and beyond, particularly in cultures where the liberal feminist goal of equality for women in the workplace is similarly recognised as a legitimate political and economic topic of concern (e.g. Canada, UK, USA). In this paper I explore the efficacy of this toolkit in relation to its contribution to the management of gender in resource industries specifically. The term "resource industries" covers a range of industries whose primary business is the extraction of non-renewable resources. These industries include mining, oil, gas, and petroleum; and are often also referred to as "extractive industries" or the "resources sector". Resource industries are male-dominated. Recent calculations suggest the percentage of female employees is somewhere between 15 and 22 per cent (Chamber of Minerals and Energy, 2013; Trembath, 2013). The inequitable position of and for women in these industries is confirmed in the toolkit which cites data to show that only 15.1 per cent of employees and 13 per cent of managers in the mining industry are female (p. 3).

At the time of its publication there were expectations this toolkit would provide significant input into the debate about the management of gender in male-dominated industries. In the introduction, the Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Elizabeth Broderick,



stated that the toolkit aims to “enliven public discussion about ways to increase gender diversity” (p. 1). The then Minister for the Status of Women, Julie Collins, claimed the publication of the toolkit would mean “more women will have genuine choices about how they can participate in the nation’s economy”, and that businesses and industries would gain information on “new and exciting ways of benefitting from the skills and expertise that women bring to the workplace” (p. 2). By locating this toolkit within the discourse of women in resource industries, I will show how it fails to meet these expectations. This toolkit provides a summary of existing diversity initiatives and practices being used in male-dominated companies. It does not seek to analyse or comment on these; nor does it seek to educate on alternative/better management of gender in the workplace by drawing on the extensive body of knowledge that exists in this field. Instead, it works to encourage the *status quo* of ignoring contemporary thinking about gender in the management of gender in resource industries. It also legitimises an essentialist understanding of gender – as a static and stable man-woman binary – which is already dominant in resource industries and which helps ensure these industries are “naturally” more appealing to and supportive of men than women.

Managing gender in mining

The subject of gender in resource industries is starting to attract attention. Recent research has explored the histories of men and women in these industries (Burton 2014; Diamond, 2011; Evans, 2005; Klubock, 1996; Mercier and Gier, 2009; Murray, 2009), the impacts of mining operations on women in local communities (Lahiri-Dutt, 2006; OXFAM, 2009; Sharma and Rees, 2007), the status of femininity in mining (Mayes and Pini, 2010), the role of gender in the training of employees (Andersson and Abrahamsson, 2007; Somerville, 2005), the relationship between gender and safety (Albury and Laplonge, 2012, 2013; Ely and Meyerson, 2010; Laplonge, 2014), and the impacts of gender in fly-in-fly-out communities (Clifford, 2009; Lozeva and Marinova, 2010). This work sits alongside an equally emerging interest in exploring women in male-dominated industries in general (see, for example, Benecke and Dodge, 1990; Corcoran-Nantes and Roberts, 1995; Denissen and Saguy, 2014; Hatmaker, 2013; O’Farrell and Harlan, 1982; Powell *et al.*, 2009; Reskin and Padavic, 1988, Rosell *et al.*, 1995; Smith, 2013a, b). It also contributes to and draws from the more extensive body of literature which explores the role of gender in the workplace. This latter body of knowledge offers numerous ways to think about gender in the context of the workplace. These include organisationally motivated practices of gender (Martin, 2003), productions of gender through corporeal involvement in work (Beagan and Saunders, 2005), the dualistic use of gender for conforming and resisting at and through work (Chauntelle, 2007; Mavin and Grandy, 2013), and the intersectional links between gender and other categories of relevance to contemporary workplace identity formation such as race and class (Laneyrie and Mylett, 2005; Maynard, 1989; Schilt and Connell, 2007; Walter *et al.*, 2004). It also offers a diversity of ideas about how gender impacts on management practices and tasks, including appraisals (Acker, 1990), recruitment (Catanzaro *et al.*, 2010; Gorman 2005), motivating performance (Gilbert and Walker, 2001; Ivanova-Stenzel and Kübler, 2011), and leadership (Kyriakidou, 2012).

A dominant theme within the study of gender in the workplace is the call to pay attention to how we do gender(s) rather than how are we are or how we have a gender (Gherardil, 1994; Jurik and Siemsen, 2009; West and Zimmerman, 2009). The latter understanding of gender reflects an essentialist notion of gender which often assumes

fixed positions for men and women, and which disallows changes in gender patterns and behaviours. In its most simplistic form, the essentialist's view of gender is that there are masculine men and feminine women, and that this linking of behaviours to bodies is both natural and correct. It thereby disallows or disputes the role of cultural and historical differences in the ways we understand and practice gender. The concept of "doing gender" has been described as "a conceptual breakthrough that compellingly responded to this theoretical impasse [of understanding gender within systems of patriarchy and capitalism] and influenced feminist theory worldwide" (Messerschmidt, 2009, p. 85); and as "a story of challenging sociological canon" (Jurik and Siemsen, 2009, p. 72). Its popularity in gender research today signifies an epistemic move away from seeing gender as stable and static, and towards recognising gender as diverse, multiple, contextual, and relational. Drawing on the works of other researchers who use the concept of "doing gender" in their work, Mavin and Grandy (2013) explain this shift in the following way:

Poggio (2006) notes that the traditional essentialist conception of male and female as ascribed individual traits has been superseded and progressed to recognizing gendering processes: gender is constantly redefined and negotiated in everyday practices. Doing gender involves a "complex of socially guided perceptual and interactional and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine 'natures'" (West and Zimmerman, 1987, p. 126). Doing gender approaches have been useful to show that gender is not the property of a person but is a process that people enact in everyday situations (Linstead and Pullen, 2006). Indeed, West and Zimmerman (1987, p. 126) view gender as "a routine, methodical and recurring accomplishment" embedded in everyday interaction (p. 233).

The double reference to West and Zimmerman indicates the importance of these two researchers in formulating the "doing gender" approach. Even as these two authors lament the misuse of and failure to cite their self-proclaimed "original idea" of doing gender (West and Zimmerman, 2009, p. 113), their article on "Doing gender" (1987) is still considered "foundational" in helping to understand gender in and at work (Mavin and Grandy, 2012, 2013, pp. 219, 233).

The uptake and application of "doing gender" has introduced significant possibilities for changing the way we think about gender in the workplace specifically. Investigations into how people do gender and/or how they are expected to do gender within the context of their workplaces have what West and Zimmerman (2009) label as "political implications: If the gender attributes deployed as a basis of maintaining men's hegemony are social products, they are subject to social change (however challenging such change may be)" (p. 114). By understanding gender as being done, we can explore ways of seeing it undone or redone (Kelan, 2010), and the gendering of our workplace cultures can change accordingly. The "doing gender" concept has also encouraged thinking about men in the workplace. This might seem like an obvious topic to include in any study of gender at work; men do, after all, work and they also do gender. It is, however, the overt obviousness and naturalness of men and masculinity in workplace contexts that often render them invisible to analysis and scrutiny (Mumby, 1998, p. 164). In line with a general poststructuralist attention to the normative within categories of identification such as race and sexuality (see, for example, Anderson, 2002; Katz, 1995), there is therefore now an established interest in exploring men and masculinity at work (see, e.g. Collinson, 1992; Collinson and Hearn, 1994; Halford and Leonard, 2001; Mumby, 1998). In the work that is being done to explore the status of women in resource industries we nevertheless see a re-essentialising of the stable and static gender model. The possibilities

of redoing gender and the need to discuss men or masculinities in these industries are curtailed because of a failure to integrate contemporary thinking on gender into the work on gender in resource industries specifically.

Pattenden's (1998) report to the "Women in Mining" Taskforce of The Australasian Institute of Mining and Metallurgy is the earliest known report which explores the status of women in resources industries. There have been previous investigations into women's work in this sector, most notably the 1842 Royal Commission reports on workplace conditions in the coal mining industry in the UK[1]. Pattenden's report nevertheless signifies the start of a specific interest in promoting opportunities for women in resource industries in the context of a late-twentieth century drive to promote equality for women through, among other things, equity in employment opportunities and experiences. There have since been many more reports which discuss the status of women in resource industries (see, e.g. Australian Government Office for Women and Minerals Council of Australia, 2007; Canadian Mining Industry Human Resources Council, 2008; Colmar Brunson Social Research, 2005; International Finance Corporation, 2009; Queensland Resources Council, 2012; Women in Mining Canada, 2010). The intent of these reports is to advise resource companies on how they can address gender inequality in their workplaces and what they can do to promote a higher number of women in their workforces. An analysis of the reports issued since 1998 (Laplonge, 2014, pp. 54-66) reveals they are highly repetitive in both methodology and results. Many of the reports draw on the content of interviews with resource sector employees and information provided by resource companies to build their arguments. In this sense they comply with the demand for "doing gender" to be understood through analyses of "the empirical world" (Fenstermaker and West, 2002, p. 214). Over a period of more than 25 years, however, nothing has changed in terms of the perceived problem (i.e. a shortage of women working in resource industries) and the recommended solutions (e.g. market employment opportunities to women, create networks for women). The differing cultural context of the researchers, subjects, and/or the companies also do not affect the results. Both historical and cultural specificities appear to be irrelevant to the issue; and what we are seeing is, in fact, repetitive research that is not promoting successful gender culture change in resource industries.

The major problem is that these reports all assume a particular model of gender in their methodology and in their findings. They rely on a stable sex-gender model which insists on the distinct separation of men from women, and the distinct separation of their respective genders. This again is the essentialist model. It is a model that arguably complies with how many people understand gender at a very superficial level – that men and women are different. However, it is a particular model for explaining and living gender that is at odds with extensive contemporary work on gender in the workplace and beyond. It is the essentialist model of gender which, since West and Zimmerman's introduction of "doing gender" at least, has been considered an incorrect model for understanding and managing gender. It does not allow for consideration of a range of key contributions to the "doing gender" canon. It disallows thinking about how gender might be constructed within groups (Connell, 1995). It ignores cultural formations of gender in contexts such as the nation (Coad, 2002; Greig and Martino, 2012) or the workplace (Beagan and Saunders, 2005; Martin, 2003). It ignores the ideas about gender that have emerged out of queer theory, including gender performativity (Butler, 1990), female masculinity (Halberstam, 1998), and transgenderism (Hines and Sanger, 2010). Instead, gender, as it is understood and applied in the numerous reports that seek to explore gender (women) in resource industries, is written into the individual.

It is seen to have nothing to do with bodies in organisations or institutional discipline. Men and masculinity become topics of little concern. The problem of gender is seen to be a problem of and for women. The focus is always what can be done to help “her”; and the resulting construction of “woman” is somebody who is alarmingly always “mother, family-orientated, weak and victim” (Laplonge, 2014, p. 64).

The concept of “doing gender” was not easy to introduce into work on gender. It took a long time for this idea to be accepted (Jurik and Siemsen, 2009; West and Zimmerman, 2009). The fact that this concept is now widely accepted as important to explorations of gender in the discipline of gender studies, and in the workplace specifically, suggests there must be some very specific barriers in place to prevent it being adopted as relevant in the debate about gender in resource industries. It is possible to understand why “doing gender” is rejected in these industries by drawing on theories of psychology which consider the human’s attraction to the *status quo*, particularly if this can help legitimise and validate existing behaviours and identities (e.g. system justification theory, attraction-selection-attrition). In gender theory, it is often seen to be related to the desire by individuals to maintain powerful positions they are afforded as a result of an existing gender order and dominant gender roles. Connell (2010), for example, argues that “If, as doing gender theory posits, hegemonic gender norms maintain male dominance, then the workplace is an important place to investigate challenges to normative gender performance” (p. 32). The workplace therefore only becomes an “unimportant place” for looking into gender seriously when existing hegemonic gender norms and male dominance are desired. An acceptance of the need to explore gender outside the stable sex-gender model poses a threat to the dominance of hegemonic masculinity in resource industries and to the men who benefit from this (Laplonge, 2011; Somerville, 2005; Wicks, 2002). It might also threaten the position of the few women who have already “made it” in these industries and whose ongoing success relies on their ability to eradicate any signifiers of a potential threat to the *status quo*, including femininity (Mayes and Pini, 2010).

One toolkit among many

The publication of the Australian Human Rights Commission’s toolkit marks 25 years of contemporary research into women’s employability in resource industries. It emerges at a time when questions have already been raised about the broader efficacy of focusing on the “problem of women” to address workplace gender inequalities (Liff and Cameron, 2002). It contributes to the debate about women in resource industries specifically at a time when this debate sits at a critical juncture. The movement to bring more women into resource industries has, after all, been unsuccessful (Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2012). Leading voices in this movement seek to justify the time-consuming and often expensive work that has been done by referencing rather weak signifiers of an acceptance of the non-male body in the workplaces of these industries. Just a year before the publication of the toolkit, for example, the founder of the International Women in Mining Network, Barbara Dischinger, claimed we can see evidence of the gender culture change that has occurred in resource industries because of the availability of pink safety hats (Kumar, 2012). In this same paper, she is also quoted as claiming that “many mining companies now employ female truck operators as they take better care of the multi-million dollar equipment”. This claim is not supported by research. Such comments also reveal the essentialist ideas about gender which underpin the work being done to address gender issues in male-dominated resource industries, particularly by those who involved in the

“women in mining” networks (Laplonge, 2016). It is within and to the dominance of this same stable-sex gender model that the toolkit issued by the Australian Human Rights Commission also speaks.

A primary aim of this toolkit was to “encourage continued discussion and engagement on strategies to increase women’s recruitment and retention in male-dominated industries” (p. 1). The extent to which this has been successful can be measured by the number of comments made in response to its content. On the Commission’s website, readers of the toolkit are encouraged to share their views on strategies used to increase the number of women in male-dominated industries and their ideas about how to further increase this number. At the time of writing this paper, 43 comments had been posted. Five of these were introductory posts from the forum administrator and 26 were posted by somebody involved in the development of the toolkit. Further analysis of the remaining independent 14 comments would help clarify if there is evidence of the ability of the writers to draw on broader research into gender in the workplace to inform their commentary. Needless to say, the Commission’s intent of using this toolkit to encourage people to “virtual network” about the strategies and about the general topic of women in male-dominated industries has evidently been unsuccessful.

In the toolkit, it is identified that there is a connection between gender and workplace culture, and that the gendered state of the workplace culture can impact on women:

Male-dominated industries are perceived to have a masculine or “blokey” culture that is non-inclusive and has a higher tolerance of behaviours that could be viewed as sexual harassment, bullying and discrimination. This leads to a perception that jobs within these organisations would be a challenge at every stage of a career, not just at senior leadership (p. 4).

Elsewhere, companies are urged to encourage men to get involved in gender initiatives and projects in the workplace (pp. 7, 11). These references to masculinity and men indicate acceptance of the importance of broadening discussions about gender at work beyond a focus only on woman. Including an analysis of men and masculinity seems obvious after all, not only because of the extensive research that is available in the field of masculinity studies to help with this analysis, but also because the targeted workplaces in this instance are known to be dominated by men and highly masculinised. The use of the words “perceived” and “perception” suggests, however, that the workplace culture might not really be what women imagine it to be. These words function as signifiers of blame; they risk implying that women are at fault for misreading the workplace cultures of these industries and wrongly assuming they will have a difficult time working within them. A desire to see more men actively involved in gender work at work is also not backed up with references to available advice on what it takes to encourage men to think about gender at work in male-dominated industries specifically (Albury and Laplonge, 2013). References to “men” and “masculine” are, in fact, scant throughout the 68-page document. These words appear only 26 and 2 times, respectively. The word “men” is used primarily to make statements about the availability of education and training for men, or in the joining of women to men in statements about employees; and the word “masculine” is used only to identify the workplace culture as in the quote above and later to discuss leadership skills:

Some organisations are focused on developing leadership capability frameworks which focus on the skills that are actually required to lead in these industries. These organisations acknowledge that leadership capabilities are not “masculine” or “feminine” and are instead, more inclusive of a broader range of experience (p. 31).

Without further explanation of how this conclusion was made or what it means in terms of doing leadership in resource industries, this statement risks de-gendering the practice of leadership entirely.

In her foreword to the toolkit, Elizabeth Broderick argues that many women are “deterred from participation” in male-dominated industries in Australia because of “structural problems within those organisation” (p. 1). This invites an additional opportunity to draw attention to a range of ideas which help us think about how gender works at the structural level. These include symbolic gender violence (Bourdieu, 2004; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2004), heteronormativity (Robinson, 2012; Schilt and Westbrook, 2009), and the social organisation of gender (Connell, 1987). There is, however, no development of what it means to look at gender structurally in the toolkit, and no advice on how managers of male-dominated companies might seek to look at the relationship between gender and the structures of their organisations. This omission iterates the assumption that the problem of gender in male-dominated industries is deemed to be no fault of established practices of masculinity or masculinised workplace structures; and as such, these do not need to be examined or changed. The results of this omission are then a failure to advise people who manage gender issues in resource companies to look beyond the “problem” of women, and the further ghettoisation of women as the problem of gender in the workplace (Mukhopadhyay *et al.*, 2006, p. 12).

Conclusion

In this paper I have discussed how The Australian Human Rights Commission’s publication *Women in male-dominated industries: a toolkit of strategies* fits within the broader debate about gender in resource industries. I have shown how this publication iterates many of the assumptions made about gender in this debate, and how it fails to draw on available knowledge about managing gender in the workplace to educate its target audience. Through my explanation of how gender is understood and addressed in resource industries, I have been able to show the extent of the gap between the management of gender in these industries and the body of knowledge that exists to discuss gender in organisational and workplace contexts. I have argued that a refusal to engage with this latter body of knowledge is evidence of a particularly strong masculine culture in resource industries, and further evidence of the desire of many who work in these industries to maintain the *status quo*. This particular toolkit serves as an example of how gender norms are (re)iterated discursively through texts, and how the management of gender often requires the disciplining and silencing of alternatives, particularly if the people in charge are already benefiting from the dominance of these norms.

A new model of gender is urgently needed in the management of gender in resource industries. Developing methods for exploring gender are, after all, always important (West and Zimmerman, 2009, p. 116). My analysis and critique of this particular toolkit seek to contribute to the process of building this new model of gender for resource industries specifically. Existing work that looks at how gender can be undone, redone, or done differently in the management of gender in resource industries and in the practising of gender in their workplaces offers an important foundation for this new model of gender (Laplonge, 2014; Smith-Rolston, 2014). Of paramount importance is that work on gender in resource industries should challenge dominant gender norms and practices, and move away from considering gender within an essentialist framework which limits our ability to understand the doing of genders in multiple and

often contradictory ways in organisational contexts. The re-gendering of resource industries must include far more than seeking to place more individual women in an otherwise masculinised space. It must consider, as examples, how the management and practice of safety within these industries have been influenced by gender; how the technology and equipment that are used work to reinforce dominant masculine ideals and bodies; and how a rejection of femininity within resource industries is connected to the relationship these industries have with the environment.

For now, I have here exposed what has not been included in the debate about gender in resource industries, to help undo the genders that are still being done in these industries in such a way as to disallow any alternatives and any redoing of gender. For this particular toolkit and others like it to be successful in helping to improve the gender cultures of male-dominated industries, it is important that those involved in the research and writing pay closer attention to contemporary thinking on gender. Time and money are being wasted when attempts are made to respond to existing gender issues in resource industries specifically by working within the paradigm of gender that already dominates within these industries.

Note

1. Available via www.cmhrc.co.uk/site/literature/royalcommissionreports/

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