

PAPER: "'Like a bird of paradise among the carrion crows": An exploration of women leaders in the media and education'.

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(This paper represents research in progress towards a PhD in Education).

Currently, I am in my second year of a PhD in education, working in the area of women and leadership. I would welcome feedback, ideas or questions on my work as this paper is part of research in progress. My PhD is a qualitative piece of research which has two key components. The first component is an examination of media representations of Australian women leaders in the mainstream press in the past twelve months using a feminist cultural studies approach. In examining media representations of women leaders, I am interested in teasing out the variety of discourses which are used to construct representations of Australian women leaders in the media. The second component is an analysis of a series of 8-10 interviews that I am currently conducting with women who hold positions of leadership in education in the primary and tertiary sector. Again, I am interested in examining the range of discourses around women and leadership which the interviews elicit and then comparing and contrasting these with the discourses in the media. It is the first two interviews that I conducted as part of this section of my PhD that I am going to focus on today.

In my interviews with women, I use the term 'leadership' in a broad sense, to refer to women who hold recognized positions of seniority within education, for example, in the primary sector, at deputy principal level and above and in the tertiary sector, at senior lecturer level and above. In terms of media representations, I am examining women who hold or have held recognized senior positions within public life (for example, Sharan Burrow as the current ACTU president) or who may not hold actual public leadership positions but because of the nature and status of what they do, are viewed by the public and the media as leaders (for example, Cathy Freeman who is viewed as both a fine athlete and an unofficial spokesperson on indigenous issues).

In summary, I am interested in comparing and contrasting the discourses around Australian women leaders that are constructed in the media, with the felt realities of actual women leaders in education 'on the ground', so to speak. Hence, the key focus of my PhD is:

PUT UP OVERHEAD WITH KEY TOPIC ON IT ('A commentary on the way in which representations of women leaders are more broadly connected to other kinds of cultural and discursive formations in the media and in the subjectivity of women leaders themselves').

As an initial, small-scale experiment to see if I could tease out these sorts of connections, in the first half of this year, I interviewed two women who hold senior positions in the primary sector in New South Wales within the public education system. My selection of the two women was based on the pragmatic grounds that this was a pilot study. I was unsure whether such interviews would necessarily yield much useful data as there has been a lot of research conducted on women and leadership in the education sector in Australia. Hence, I selected women who worked geographically closest to me. I did not want to waste a lot of time traveling if it turned out that what the women had to say wouldn't necessarily add to the body of knowledge we already have in regard to women and leadership in education. I used the 'snowball technique' which essentially is seeking potential interviewees out by word of mouth. I spoke to a few key informants I had within the Department of Education and compiled a list of potential candidates. I then selected the two highest ranking women who worked closest to me and they gave me permission to interview them. The interviews were relatively unstructured, consisting of a series of nine open-ended questions which took approximately an hour to explore.

PUT UP OVERHEAD WITH QUESTIONS ON IT

In terms of analysis, I used feminist discourse analysis to examine the interviews. I define 'discourse' in the Foucauldian sense, 'not as a group of signs or a stretch of text, but as "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault cited in [Macdonell, 1986 #167] (, p.17) and as 'something which produces something else (an utterance, a concept, an effect), rather than something which exists in and of itself and which can be analysed in isolation' [Macdonell, 1986 #167](, p.17). An example of a discourse around masculinity might be that which constructs the white, Anglo Saxon male as the 'natural' authority figure, exemplified in the position of school principal. Hence, a female as principal subverts or challenges this dominant discourse.

Why examine women educational leaders in rural New South Wales?

Firstly, despite over two decades of affirmative action policies and strategies within education bureaucracies, women teachers still are clustered predominantly within the lower paying, less prestigious echelons of the teaching service throughout Australia, with men mainly filling the higher paid, more prestigious administrative and management roles. This phenomenon of vertical segregation of the teaching profession (women clustered in teaching, men in administration) parallels the situation in other Anglo Saxon countries, such as New Zealand, the USA and Britain [Pringle, 1995 #370](, p.163). Bob Connell uses the phrase 'gender regime' to describe the 'gendered character of specific institutions' such as education in the modern state [Lingard, 1995 #371](, p.5). Clearly, there is a classic series of binary oppositions occurring within the education labour force between male/female, administrator/teacher, order, logic, rationality versus nurturing, care and emotion. The relations of difference that are established between these oppositions and the subsequent privileging of one over the other has major material effects for the genders within education.

PUT UP OVERHEAD WITH NEW SOUTH WALES STATISTICS RE PRIMARY TEACHERS ON IT

Hence, a key reason I wished to examine women leaders in education was because of evidence of continuing, systematic bias within the education system despite years of affirmative action policies to redress the gender imbalance. I have an education background and was both a teacher and a deputy principal of a large rural secondary college in Victoria so I have a personal interest in the subject.

Secondly, research on senior rural women educators is scarce. Most research on women leaders in education has taken an urban background as a 'given' with the consequence that the possibly different issues and experiences of rural women educational leaders have been rendered largely invisible ([McLay, 1992 #162]; [Coombe, 1993 #163]; [Coombe, 1993 #164]; [Coombe, 1993 #164] appear to be the Australian exceptions to this 'rule'). Hence, the selection of rural women educators from one region of New South Wales, was designed firstly to examine how actual subjects read the cultural discourses around women and leadership and secondly, to fill a gap in the literature in regard to Australian rural women educators as leaders.

A Methodological Journey

INSERT OVERHEAD - POINT ONE

In trying to understand how actual subjects read the media discourses of women leaders, it became apparent that the interviewees themselves were extremely familiar with the discourses of women and leadership produced by feminists and academics and were able to produce them in their own talk. Because of their work as women leaders in professional development and training, both women were familiar with the training and development issues around women and leadership. I gained the sense as a feminist academic that I was being 'hoisted by my own petard' and that the discourses which circulate through research and which have percolated through to the training and development of women leaders in education, were now being regurgitated by these women in their interviews with me. I felt that particularly strongly in Rhoda's interview, although less so with Lisa (these are pseudonyms). Rhoda is an experienced principal, getting close to retirement, who can now afford the luxury of a concern about where tomorrow's leaders are coming from. In contrast, Lisa is still on her way up the ladder with many years of her career ahead of her.

For example, one of the discourses which seems to run through Rhoda's interview is the classic 'how I got to the top' story which this type of interview elicits. I had the sense that this was a very practiced narrator who knew how to pitch her story to a receptive audience (in this case, feminist interviewer). The narrative of how she gained her first principal's position occurs early in the interview (page 5 of a 32 page transcript) and it had a tone and feel to it which suggested that it was a well rehearsed, frequently told story. As interviewer, I could hear Rhoda's tone of voice change as she swung into something which had the tenor of a witty, after dinner story. This is not to cast aspersions upon Rhoda but more as a reflection on how this type of interviewing and questioning has become familiar to these subjects to a point where they can trot out a well-rehearsed story without much thought. Ideologically this kind of well-worn discourse picks up some of the threads of the American rags to riches story of the poor boy who becomes president, in that one can read this story as a reassurance that in the end things will work out, that it is possible for able and gifted women in Australia to gain positions of leadership despite prejudice in the community. In other words, such stories reconfirm a conservative ideology centred around individualism and capitalism. It masks the fierce gender discrimination which Rhoda has encountered in her career, particularly in regard to the taking on of principal positions in traditional rural communities (see page 29 of Rhoda's interview). It also suggests an understandably pragmatic attitude in that for Rhoda to suggest that there is systemic gender discrimination in education could possibly jeopardize her career. Hence, 'speaking out' is a politically fraught process. In addition, Rhoda is part of a conservative farming community where the ideology of individual triumph and self-reliance is strong. To challenge these belief systems is a radical act.

In contrast, I did not gain the same sense with Lisa that there was a 'practised', fairly glib range of success stories that she could recite at will. Lisa's comparative youth and the fact

that she is still in the advancement phase of her career, may well explain this difference. Lisa came across as an optimistic and positive individual who often laughed in the interview but frequently this laughter occurred prior to or parallel to her introducing a sensitive topic, in particular, in reference to her account of the gender discrimination that appeared endemic to the region in which she worked (for example, p.12 of interview). I read the laughter as a way of 'softening' what may appear to Lisa to be harsh judgements which call into question her faith in the system of merit selection, "It's who you make contact with and who you rub shoulders with, not your ability' (laughter). I found Lisa's analysis of the situation poignant. It suggests that despite a decade of affirmative action and merit selection, discrimination against women (particularly non Anglo women) may still be a key part of the system of promotion in education. It raises the question as to whether merit selection has become part of a newer discourse of leadership which 'dresses up' discrimination in more subtle, but just as pervasive ways. The covertness of this discrimination is consequently far harder to deal with, a point that both Lisa and Rhoda note in their interviews (pp.31-32- Rhoda; p.12-Lisa).

SHOW POINT TWO OF OVERHEAD

Justice Mary Gaudron's recent speech at a 'launch of a study into the balancing of family responsibilities and careers', picks up this point when she noted that the debate around appointment by merit only occurs 'when, and only when, a woman is considered for a particular position or office' and that this 'is clear evidence of a belief that women are inferior and ought to be treated as such' [Jacobsen, 2000 #330](, p.3). Justice Gaudron was launching the findings of a workplace study in the financial and legal sector, which revealed that discrimination in this sector 'was now more covert' [Jacobsen, 2000 #330](, p.3). The continued 'othering' of women in leadership despite close to two decades of feminist activism in the area raises some clear concerns and hard questions. Having identified and at least partially reduced structural barriers to women's advancement (at least in the education sector) how can feminists account for the continuing persistence of women's concentration within the lower echelons of the workplace and of men's over-representation within the upper echelons, a pattern which appears to be systematically occurring across all areas of the workplace? Such persistence at least partially suggests the failure of feminist discourses around leadership. Clearly, discourses centred around equity, equal opportunity, women's discrimination and affirmative action have not worked, or at least not to the extent that feminists have hoped. In addition, the co-option of the discourses of equity and empowerment by the new Right in the 1980s (a phenomenon identified by writers such as Clarke and Newman) is echoed in the interview with Rhoda (in her discussion of the possible future need for affirmative action plans to encourage more male teachers into the system). Again, this suggests that the discourses of equity which feminists have used as a powerful tool for highlighting women's disadvantage may have now, in a sense, been turned against them.

The failure of our language to grapple with the issues raised above is a key feature of the interviews with Lisa and Rhoda. In discussing their advancement through the ranks of the teaching service and the barriers they encountered (and continue to encounter) I gained a sense that our language lacks adequate expression for the experiences these women have experienced. Feminism has given these women some enormously useful discourses with which to discuss their experiences. They are able to articulate the bias within the system when it is encountered by them as individuals and to name it for what it is - sexism - despite their discomfort at times in acknowledging this. However, to take it that step further, to name the deeply pervasive, entrenched and systematic advantaging of masculinity within the power structures of the system was both difficult (I gained a sense that the women were uncomfortable with being seen as disloyal or traitorous to an organization that had provided them with a good deal of success and to the men -colleagues and partners - as well as women who had supported them) and professionally potentially unwise. Lisa's tactic was to

cover her discomfort with laughter (see for example, pp.12, 13, 15) or to resort to ironic clichés, 'I don't know if I'm being overly sensitive or not now - females are allowed to do that though, aren't they?'). Rhoda spoke clearly of the need for a network of women leaders for survival reasons (p.32) but also had bought into the liberal feminist discourse that women should be appointed on merit rather than as the 'token woman', despite providing possible evidence in other parts of the interview that many men in her district may have been appointed at last partially on the basis of mateship rather than merit (pp. 14-15, 31).

INSERT POINT THREE OF OVERHEAD

In discussing the furore surrounding the sexual harassment case of Ormond College at Melbourne University in the early 1990s, Foong Ling Kong noted that, 'What the Ormond case ... has highlighted is that the language to deal with sexual harassment and with difference is still inadequate' [Foong, 1997 #332](, p.74). A similar argument can be applied to feminist discourses of equal opportunity. Joan Eveline, a feminist academic, suggests a way out of this impasse. She argues that Australian feminists have centred their arguments around liberal democratic notions of equality which emphasize 'negative liberty - that human rights are basically about protecting citizens from the unfair encroachment of the state'. The emphasis is thus placed upon women's disadvantage and renders invisible the consequent conferral of gender advantage upon men as a group. The focus or spotlight shines on women as victims of the system but allows the advantaging of men to remain uninterrogated and unproblematised [Eveline, 1996 #316](, p.69).

However, I would take Eveline's argument one step further. The interviews with Lisa and Rhoda suggest the possibility that the entrenchment of ongoing systematic inequities in the paid workforce may not simply be a question of the advantage of being a male, but of being white, middle-class and heterosexual. These interviews suggest that leadership in the education system, at least, may be based upon maintaining the relations of difference and thus, of hierarchy, within gender, ethnicity, class and sexuality.

The gender advantage of male colleagues is a powerful silence in these interviews along with ethnic advantage in Rhoda's interview and class in both interviews. Lisa is from an ethnic minority background and Rhoda is Anglo Saxon. Rhoda's interview reveals that to be a white, middle-class farming woman, is a decided advantage in rural New South Wales. The advantaging that this relation confers upon Rhoda is not to be underestimated. As a new principal, the recognition of her status as the spouse of an old farming family amongst the rural community she was entering gave her an acceptance that she would have been otherwise denied, at least temporarily (see page 29 of Rhoda's interview). There is a clear hierarchy of difference which places Rhoda 'higher on the ladder' than Lisa, for Lisa is not white and not part of a farming background. The colour of Lisa's skin as well as her sex marks her both physically and symbolically as the threatening other - it is far more difficult for her to lay claim to the ultimate authority position of Principal in a region which has one of the highest rates of people from Anglo-Saxon Celtic ethnic backgrounds. The visibility of her non Anglo-Saxon appearance amongst mainly white people, allows the 'hidden text' of whiteness (and of class and sexuality) to go unchallenged in this region. Lisa wryly sums up this dilemma when she notes that in order to get a job as principal 'you've gotta be a grizzler and a male' (p.10) - and I would add, white. Otherwise, she notes, 'Locally the message for me is if you want to go any further you have to leave' (p.10).

In comparing and contrasting the experiences of Rhoda and Lisa I do not intend to denigrate Rhoda or to suggest that her rise to principalship has not been fraught with barriers along the way because of her gender. It is clear that the two women share much in common in terms of their experiences of being amongst a handful of women in senior positions within their education region. Yet, I think it is important to note that along with the commonality of

their gender, their experiences do appear to differ because of the intersection of race and gender - an intersection that appears to work in Rhoda's favour but at the expense of the non Anglo-Saxon Lisa.

The term "gender advantage" which Joan Eveline, an Australian feminist researcher has coined, is extraordinarily useful in opening up and reframing the terms of the debate around leadership and women. However, as the interviews with Lisa and Rhoda reveal, there is a danger that it can be used as a blanket term which disguises the advantages of particular types of ethnicity, class and sexuality. For example, what of the experiences of Koorie women and men in the education sector? Of white, working-class rural men? Of women from Non Anglo Saxon backgrounds? Of gay men and lesbians? Of single women? What of the differential impact upon these groups of a homogenizing construction of gender? Second wave feminism's ignorance of the diversity of the group, 'women' and its blanket application of a middle-class, white agenda had major material consequences for many Aboriginal women, for example.

INSERT POINT FOUR OF OVERHEAD

As Mary Ann Doane notes in her discussion of psychoanalysis and race, 'A psychoanalytically informed feminist theory is accused of hierarchizing sexual difference over racial difference ... The allegation is not simply that psychoanalytic feminist theory has *neglected* the analysis of racial difference but that there is an active tension between them' [Eveline, 1996 #316](, p.451). I would argue that a similar tension may be occurring in Australian feminist analyses of leadership. Clearly, on the basis of a pilot of two interviews, no conclusions can be drawn and far more extensive research would need to be undertaken. Nonetheless, there is a suggestion that these interviews may be pointing to a possible gap in Australian feminist leadership literature in terms of the intersection of gender and ethnicity. As a consequence, Australian feminist research in leadership may be ignoring the issue of ethnicity at its peril.

Key Focus of PhD

A commentary on the way in which representations of women leaders are more broadly connected to other kinds of cultural and discursive formations in the media and in the subjectivity of women leaders themselves

Interview Questions

1. Could you tell me about yourself and your career?
2. What are your aspirations for leadership and where do they come from?
3. What do you see as the main perspectives about women leaders in the broader Australian community and within the education system?
4. Do these perspectives reflect your own reality as a woman leader?
5. When we talk about women leaders, who do you think of and why?
6. What are your main understandings of the women leaders identified in Question Five and where do you get these understandings from?
- 7.
8. Could you select one of the women you identified above and tell me your reactions to her? If she was a public figure, do you think her gender was important in regard to media reporting upon her and can you give specific examples of this?
9. Could you think back to a decade ago when Carmen Lawrence and Joan Kirner were elected as state premiers. What was your career at the time? Can you recall how the

media covered their promotions? Was the way in which the media reported on this an issue of discussion for you with other people? How did the media reporting make you feel and why?

10. An opportunity for you to add thoughts or information that you would like me to know about.

A METHODOLOGICAL JOURNEY

Familiarity of interviewees with leadership discourses

Merit selection: The debate around appointment by merit only occurs 'when, and only when, a woman is considered for a particular position or office. [This is] clear evidence of a belief that women are inferior and ought to be treated as such' (Justice Mary Gaudron).

Inadequacy of language: 'What the Ormond case ... has highlighted is that the language to deal with sexual harassment and with difference is still inadequate' (Foong Ling Kong).

Intersection of ethnicity and gender: 'A psychoanalytically informed feminist theory is accused of hierarchizing sexual difference over racial difference ... The allegation is not simply that psychoanalytic feminist theory has *neglected* the analysis of racial difference but that there is an active tension between them' (Mary Ann Doane).