Gender and Sexuality in Discourses of Managerial Control: The Case of Women Miners

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Mining scholarship has focused chiefly on capital developments, labour relations, changing technology, and global markets, ignoring the equally critical aspects of gendered organizations and their role in shaping the subjectivities of workers and managers. This article probes how gender and sexuality organize a mine site through organizational design and productivity management. It looks behind the rhetoric of equal opportunity, glamour mining and human resource techniques to explore the sexual politics of employing women as miners. In particular it scrutinizes the discourses of masculinity that produce ‘the woman miner’ in a context where the barriers between work and personal life are particularly mobile and highly contested. Equally crucially, it recounts some of the ways in which women have mobilized against systemic male dominance and privilege. The workplace in question is the world’s largest gem mine of its kind, a state-of-the-art computerized operation set in the remote Australian outback.

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Introduction

In the 1980s Emerald Site (Emsite) gained renown as a social laboratory of innovation in socio-technical systems management. As part of that reputation it was touted as a model for women entering male-dominated occupations. Since then the organization has won two Australian Affirmative Action Awards for its equal opportunity strategies, a rare honour for a mining company. Yet beyond the public face lurk problems that its human resource managers and staff development trainers have never managed to resolve, despite some significant worker-led strategies.

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Remotely located even by Australian standards, Emsite has been at pains to counter the isolation of its workforce through HRM and jet-age technologies. For example, planners replaced the company town model of a mining operation by a rostered fortnightly fly-in/fly-out system of staffing, which allows employees to leave their families in the nearest city and fly the 2000 kms to work and back. During their two weeks roster employees live at what is called ‘the camp’ — 5-star luxury accommodation and recreational facilities situated a ten-minute bus ride from the mine operations.

Partly due to the way Emsite promotes its gems and partly to its claims to have reshaped the nature of mining itself, the enterprise is one of Australia’s most newsworthy. The open-cut operation was commissioned in late 1984. Ever since, evaluation teams, studious researchers, a receptive media, curious onlookers and of late guided tourists have investigated the operation. They have reported on the mine’s rare and fabulous dress gems, its high rate of production, and its innovative work organization. They have also examined employee satisfaction and motivation, workplace culture, environmental impact, the organization’s treatment of the Aboriginal population who once occupied the land, and its compliance with or neglect of legislative requirements. From 1993, there has even been the long-running saga, and eventual trial, of a gem-stealing conspiracy at the mine, including an unsolved murder in which senior police officers have been unofficially accused of complicity. In short, the glamour and notoriety that have surrounded the company since the 1980s have ensured that Emsite is one of Australia’s best-known enterprises.

The research from which the article is drawn began in 1988 after the Equal Opportunity Committee at the mine (a workplace-based group which relied on management patronage for its resourcing and existence) lobbied upper management and the Australian Workers Union and finally won some support for research. What initially spurred our interest were the concerns we heard being expressed by women employed at the mine. At the same time Australia was introducing Affirmative Action legislation but there were few existing models for how that could best be implemented in male-dominated workplaces. Emsite was one of the 28 participants in the Prime Minister’s Voluntary Affirmative Action for Women Program in 1985, which made it ideal as a research site into the effects of regulation on behaviour. The fact that it joined that program while recruiting workers for its huge open-cut operation added further interest.

Our qualitative methodology included interviews and focus groups with workers and managers in Perth (the nearest city to the mine) spanning 1988 to 1998, interviews with union organizers over those years, and the reviewing of company documents, news items and union archives. In particular it included a field trip to the mine site during 1988, including interviews, focus groups and observation. Participants in interviews and focus groups between 1988 and 1998 totalled 115, of whom 45 were women.
(70% of total females employed). Of the eight managers interviewed, only one was a woman, and she was situated at the Perth office.

In what follows we reflect on the forms of subtle sexism and open hostility as well as support that women mine workers encountered, set against the regulatory strategies of equal opportunity law and human resource management techniques. Our intention in analysing interactions between women employees, the management and men employees at Emsite is to critically thematize and problematize men and masculinities, evaluations and managements, women and their relation to control of workplace behaviour, in a manner similar to that Martin (1996) takes up following Kondo (1990). The events described are evocative examples of mobilizations of gender and of sexuality. They start with men’s and women’s evaluations of each other at work, yet behind these is the constant symbolic presence of management as a relative outsider to that workplace, yet always present as the locus of control. The analysis builds on earlier accounts of control in organizations and its relation to sexuality and develops the role that women’s agency plays in such a work context.

**Control, sexuality and change**

The equal opportunity movement, which in Australia prompted the 1980s ‘decade of EEO legislation’, helped shape the context for Emsite’s employment of women miners. Organizations, gender and sexuality operate within legislative environments that selectively and partly construct them. For example, until the mid-1800s when the Mines Act excluded both women and children from the arduous and dangerous work of mining, definitions of British womanhood included women as miners. Australia based its legislation and subsequent customs on this British example until the era of equal opportunity and new technologies dictated and enabled a wider scope for women’s occupational opportunities. Women, as workers, voters, politicians and bureaucrats, helped drive those legislative changes. The discourse of equal opportunity was in part the outcome of the multiple responsibilities that confronted women in the latter part of the twentieth century. As the number of females entering paid work expanded, they provided ammunition for the campaigns that a reawakened women’s movement mounted against governments and work institutions, creating a space for the so-called ‘femocrat experiment’ of the 1970s and 1980s when women with feminist credentials were employed to develop and monitor equal opportunity policies for women (Eisenstein, 1996).

The liberalism of equal opportunity discourse raised women’s hopes and expectations of educational and career opportunities. Underpinning the discourse was the assumption that if organizations increased their numbers of women across all levels, they would rebalance the dynamics of power,
rewards and status that served to advantage men. Enshrined in the late 1970s through the concept of ‘critical mass’ in the work of Rosabeth Kanter (1977), this idea suffers from a theoretical flaw. It fails to account for why women do not share equal rewards and status with men in society more broadly, given that they make up more than 50% of the world’s population. Pointing to this fault, political theorist Drude Dahlerup (1988) suggested that the concept of critical mass is not a sufficient indicator of what is involved in transforming organizations into ‘woman-friendly’ spaces. In her study of women in political life in Scandinavia, Dahlerup argues that it is not merely a critical mass that dissolves the tokenization of women, but the critical acts that occur both within and around the organization. Critical acts, she indicates, include how much support women receive from those in authority positions, as well as how they are able to support each other and recruit further women to intervene as a group. The key to critical acts was the extent to which women’s collective actions could exert control over organizational change agendas. Such theories, however, assumed that women would readily recognize their common interests and act in concert to pursue them, and in most organizations this collective action happened at best spasmodically and in most cases could not be relied upon.

In the 1980s a renewed interest in labour process theory spurred a re-definition of organizational control systems and how they defined workers’ and managers’ ‘realities’ and subjectivities. Labour process theory conceptualizes organizations as consisting of a certain amount of work to be done and one or more control systems to ensure the work is accomplished successfully. The debates that subsequently focused on organizational reality also refocused the problem of gender distortion in organizations (see Cockburn, 1991). By the late 1980s not only gender but also sexuality was becoming an issue for labour process theorists. Peta Tancred-Sheriff (1989), for example, developed the idea of women’s work as ‘adjunct control’ activity for management. In particular she showed how women’s sexuality was utilized in adjunct control tasks, first, to control workers and customers and, second, to control the sexuality of women themselves. Women’s organizational location, she argues, was relegated to the intermediate position between the labour process and management control.

Since Tancred-Sheriff’s focus was on the macro-level of sexual dynamics in organizations she did not examine how control produced masculine and feminine subjectivities. DiTomaso (1989), by contrast, found that men in such occupations feared and resented the competition that came from women and attempted to secure their dominant positions by emphasizing the ‘womanness’ of their female co-workers. She therefore argued that men’s behaviour was as often an exercise of power as it was of sexuality. In a work context in which women were entering traditional male occupations, sexuality provided ‘a licence for offensive behaviour’. Supervisors in particular used their authority to both sexualize the workplace and take
advantage of their positions to characterize women as lacking in the necessary characteristics for success. In turn women in such occupations were more aware of sexual harassment and sexual discrimination at work (even if they did not complain about it) than women in typical service occupations. DiTomaso concluded that sexuality was used as a means to control the demands of women workers through forms of sexual harassment and sexual discrimination.

Patricia Martin (1996) continued this theme of men’s attempts to control women but with an emphasis on ‘gendering episodes’. Martin was interested not only in how management control was exercised at the macro level but also in the everyday moments by which individual men at all levels of the organization produced their masculine identities by seeking to dominate women. In her examples we can see how ‘doing masculinity’ overlaps with organizational control mechanisms. Tancred-Sheriff, DiTomaso and Martin elaborate different aspects of men’s attempts to control women at work. We aimed in our study of Emsite to enlarge this analysis of power as control to include women’s resistance.

How power relations contain and promote employee resistance to managerial directives has been an important question in labour process theory (Jermier et al., 1994) and has also proved fruitful in questioning the agency/structure dualism. David Knights (1990) in particular has used the work of Foucault to develop a theory of the subject aimed at overcoming the limitations of a binary opposition between voluntary subjects and objective structures. Power, as Foucault (1980) notes, constitutes subjectivities through everyday practices (discourses) — not unified, not structured but competing and individualizing. From this viewpoint subjectivity is a contingent, precarious, fluid and contradictory process in which a sense of agency is as significant as constraint. Individual subjects can experience themselves as powerful in one context and powerless in another. Power here is exercised in a context rather than possessed and is not ‘primarily repressive but productive’ (Sawicki, 1991, p. 25), being exercised by individuals over others and on themselves. For Foucault, freedom of action is ‘a necessary precondition . . . for the exertion of power’ (Knights, 1990, p. 319). Power contributes to its own dispersal by setting individuals in competition for the scarce rewards of individual recognition. Hierarchical ordering, normalizing judgements and assessment procedures invest power in individual subjects and simultaneously tie them to an identity based on their success as autonomous agents. Intense competition for recognition and rewards is the power of subjection that renders those identities precarious and generates anxiety over identity maintenance (Knights, 1990). And yet, because action is inherently free, power is never without resistance.

Subjectivities are always gendered, yet tied in with other status factors. The masculine need to control, for example, is outlined by Kerfoot and Knights (1998) as a perfect match for the managerial identity of labour.
process theory, which must strive to control and maximize worker productivity. While the traditional managerial identity offers the masculine subject a secure and ‘comfortable’ respite from identity anxiety, it also demands ‘a sexuality of men that displaces intimacy’ (Kerfoot and Knights, 1998, p. 7). The emotional content of sexuality, therefore, proves a weak spot for the production and maintenance of this managerial identity since it threatens to displace rational control in the workplace. By examining women who joined the ranks of miners we review a context where women were faced with these conflicting demands from others, and a possibility of generating their identity as ‘women miners’ as they stretched the limits normally shaping gender and sexuality. In the background to this contested terrain are the technological and human resource innovations put in place at Emsite.

Control over the labour process

New industrial technology allows Emsite to forgo old ways of mining. Gone are the days of sweat, muscle and grime so vividly depicted in earlier studies (see Bradley, 1989; Douglass and Krieger, 1983; John, 1984; Mark-Lawson and Witz, 1988). Instead, mammoth pieces of equipment, controlled from computerized and air-conditioned cabs, excavate the mountainside, feeding their spoils into a computerized, round-the-clock processing plant. Emsite’s techniques of planning, mining and human resource management are akin to what Cockburn and Ormrod (1993) would call ‘Big T Technologies’: they are operated within large-scale, non-stop production modes and with strong links to and between economic and political institutions. By deploying these regulatory technologies and networks to the full, the mine’s planners aimed to produce a new type of mineworker, an employee fit for a fresh, carefully designed mining culture.

For the company a crucial goal was labour force control via an industrially and economically stable environment. Company documents show that the ideal recruit would be someone previously untrained in mining, socially malleable, politically open to working co-operatively, and industrially non-combative. Although there were no physical or legal barriers to women doing this work, and more than a thousand women applied to work there in 1984, the outcome was nonetheless deeply gendered. None of the women employed at Emsite had children under eighteen, whereas more than half of the male interviewees did.

Exercising control over the labour process also meant controlling the interventions of government. The ‘two week on, two week off’ system of taking workers to the mine by chartered jet was a policy that had to be agreed by governments with a say over how and when mining should occur. The company’s original agreement with the WA government had
included the building of a company town, in line with a policy of decentralization. The mine’s planners bought themselves out of that agreement, however, by a share issue which augmented the coffers of the state government by sales to an eager public. In place of the costly infrastructure of schools, hospitals and shops, which in company towns provide for workers and families, workers at Emsite are based in the distant but nearest city, Perth. Once a month they take a chartered four-hour flight from their city abodes to the mine where they work for two weeks.

Particularly in the early years managers were an exception to this routine of separated work and domestic lives. Rather than commuting from Perth, they were domiciled with their families, a half-hour flight away in a nearby town. This arrangement helps keep a strict division of work and private life between management and workers, with the aim of overcoming the proximity that can build an anti-managerialist intimacy between managers and workers in isolated communities. Employees had their own way of describing the control aspect of this separate domiciling of management and worker. They called the managers ‘seagulls’ saying ‘They fly in from the coast every day, shit on the workers, and fly back home at night.’

A primary aim of the mine’s planners in employing people untrained in mining was to avoid the so-called ‘Pilbara mentality’, a term which refers to the industrial militancy of the seasoned miner, legendary in the Pilbara region of Western Australia (see Thompson, 1984). Predominant in the company literature are terms such as ‘greenfields’, ‘industrially naïve’ and ‘virgin workforce’, as descriptors of the type of employee characteristics wanted. Ideally, this worker would be untrained in mining, psychologically flexible as to the work s/he did and the hours s/he worked, and physically and mentally capable of continuous, on-the-job learning, in a range of mining skills.

Selection was the first step in shaping Emsite’s ideal miner. During the start-up intake in 1984–5 prospective employees went through a rigorous selection process lasting several months, including attitudinal questionnaires, psychological testing and interviews. Recruits were selected on the basis of characteristics such as flexibility, open-mindedness, the ability to handle change, team orientation rather than personal ambition, non-aggressive demeanour, and having wide-ranging interests. The planners aimed to employ only greenfields (untrained) recruits as ‘operators’. Shift superintendents, line managers and skilled tradespeople had to be drawn from the trained mining fraternity, however, and these employees subsequently represented 30% of the workforce. Teams were initially designed to be democratic and self-managing. Within a couple of months of commisioning, however, supervisors had been appointed to most teams.

Integral to the planning was an on-site training centre, in which attitudinal learning and testing were as important as technological and mechanical training. In practices that Foucault would describe as ‘technologies of
power’ worker compliance was not to be directly enforced but generated through a socialized change of attitude on the part of operators, shift bosses and to some extent managers. Close monitoring through research of various kinds was a high priority for this devolution of managerial control. Research results were often used to promote or build acceptance of the company’s ‘core philosophy’. An example is a study commissioned by Emsite in 1987, measuring the attitudes of workers and bosses along Hofstede’s (1983) red and green scale. The result cemented the identities of managers as controllers and workers as those who should be controlled. The study found that operators (the 70% of workers with no previous mining training) came out as ‘green’ on the scale, while superintendents and managers were at the opposite ‘red’ end. Qualities such as competitiveness, aggressiveness, inflexibility, decisiveness, and personal ambition are placed in the ‘red’ category, while the ‘green’ characteristics fit closely with the qualities we have mentioned as sought by the recruiting programme.

In shaping and analysing the 1987 survey the productions of masculinity and control of employees continued their synergy. For example, several superintendents enjoyed telling us how they were the most ‘red’ of all those surveyed, while female workers said they were told that ‘red’ equated with masculine and ‘green’ with feminine. For male operators (workers) the story they liked best was how they had congregated in the pub to fill out their surveys in ways to confound the eventual analysis. Importantly, while the superintendents (who were all men) were seen to be ‘red’, which meant they did not fit the characteristics stated as desirable for employees, they were able to revel in this fact with no intervention from management.

Clare Burton (1991) introduced the idea of ‘masculinity protection strategies’ operating through workplace practices. For superintendents, Emsite’s procedure for training workers was one such practice in which a type of masculinity protection was played out. Many of the workers said Emsite’s ideal of building a participative organization, including the idea of training on the job, had been a major attraction for them applying to work there. While most superintendents were also keen on the on-the-job training, they were adamant that it worked best when under their control and supervision rather than in the training centre. Superintendents were used to a system of command in which they controlled worker training. Their identity as bosses, but also as men, had been shaped by that system. The derogatory nickname for the training centre, often used by superintendents and male workers, was ‘Fairyland’, the allusion being that its ideas were unrealistic, ‘soft’ and thus of doubtful (male) sexuality. Most women, by contrast, wanted the opportunity for more training.

Emsite’s planned model of the ideal worker was gender neutral in that the technology and training facilities could just as well develop women as miners as it could men. The fact that all workers had to leave family responsibilities behind them for two weeks every month was not viewed as
a gender issue. The company had a gendered reason for employing women as miners, however, as will become clear when we examine its involvement in the Prime Minister’s voluntary affirmative action initiative.

Regulating the organizational benefit

When Prime Minister Bob Hawke launched Australia’s high profile Voluntary Affirmative Action Program in 1984, he made much of the phrase ‘a fair go for women’ (Office of Status of Women, 1986). Since the Program was voluntary, it gained qualified support from the Business Council of Australia. The Business Council argued strongly that any equal employment opportunity scheme, if it were to avoid resistance and backlash, should remain non-compulsory (Business Council of Australia, 1986).

Although never in favour of the interventionist thrust of legislation, Emsite’s senior managers claimed they had good reason to join the Voluntary Affirmative Action Program. One of these managers, who was also one of the venture’s planners, outlined for us what was important about the company joining that scheme:

We need to see just what affirmative action and equal employment opportunity is about in terms of importance … having a large number of females has helped [the operation] because it has improved the behaviour of males. I mean they’re just your average peacock and it’s amazing how they dress better, stay cleaner, behave more appropriately, when there are females around than when there are not. [The other planners and I] talked about it beforehand. We argued that … there were some very pragmatic reasons for it.

The human resource management required to effectively run a mine via a long-distance ‘commute’ system posed a particular dilemma for the mine’s designers. With no town or housing for families, and given the usual concentration of male miners, management’s worry was that there would be few women to provide the necessary ‘civilizing influence’. The previous experience of the mine’s planners showed that in company towns where women are included as domestic sustainers, men’s standards of dress and behaviour are kept up. Moreover, when women are part of the workforce, as in the company’s trial alluvial plant, superintendents say better care is taken of the equipment, there is less antagonism among men and the overall safety record improves.

An interesting point here is that when Emsite joined the Voluntary Affirmative Action Program, and advertised for women as part of their major recruiting drive, women already represented 28% of the 104 staff in the alluvial plant. In the new, larger operation the actual percentage of women subsequently employed dropped to 14%. Rather than taking the
percentage of women already employed in the alluvial operation as the base-line for allocating places, the company chose for a guiding yardstick the percentage of women among new applicants — 14%. In terms of numbers of women applying there was no reason to set the percentage at 14% rather than 28%. With 9000 applicants for 400 jobs, the thousand or so of those who were women represented a large surplus from which to set a much higher female complement.

There is no evidence that the mine’s planners were aware of the research on the percentages said to constitute critical mass and tokenism. In her study of critical mass, Kanter (1977) sets 15% as the level up to which the token effect of minorities, which made little or no impact on the ‘normal’ culture, prevailed. What we did find clearly expressed in interviews with managers was that it suited their sense of who they were as ‘man managers’ to keep the numbers of women to a level at which male predominance was unchallenged. Since the pressure to join in the Prime Minister’s Voluntary Program had initially been exerted by senior management in the parent company, Emsite managers also had good reason to place their own stamp of control on the situation by characterizing these events as arising from their autonomous abilities to decide on who should be employed.

Both the planners and managers at Emsite suggested that the introduction of a limited number of women miners was a way of ‘normalizing’ the workforce. Company documents, research reports and media representations of the venture also make much of this propensity for normalization. When a woman goes to work at the mine, she is expected to carry her share of the paid work. But she is also implicitly situated as the locus of affectivity, which places her as responsible for care and control over her male colleagues. Among managers we interviewed there was no acknowledgement or concern that this treating of women as ‘facilitators of management control’ (Tancred-Sheriff, 1989, p. 50) is biased against sexual equality for women. In fact, there was a certain expectation that women would be pleased that the informal and unpaid contribution of their group should be so acknowledged.

Tancred-Sheriff does not investigate how women themselves feel about being props in the process of control. In our study, however, we found that while most women were aware of the expectation on them, they held opposing ideas as to how they should respond. Some felt that, as latecomers to the world of mining, they should go along with the designated ordering of gender and sexuality. Others refused to play the feminine role in addition to their other work. One of the processing crew at Emsite, ‘Lorraine’, stated this succinctly. She said: ‘They expect us to mind “the boys”. They’re always going on about women as miners. What about the problem of women as minders?’

Emsite is not alone in presuming that affirmative action is primarily about enhancing management prerogative. Indeed, the idea of bottom-line
benefits is part of the ‘pitch’ through which government agents and practitioners have had to implement Australian affirmative action policy (Bacchi and Eveline, 1996). The emphasis is on how organizations will gain competitive advantage from the employment of women: the value of affirmative action, according to this logic, is that it increases the human resource pool, and thus enhances an enterprise’s financial and organizational viability. The problem is that the critical and redistributive components of affirmative action are repressed, and any reference to the unfairness of a system giving certain taken-for-granted privileges to men is displaced. Instead, the discourse of ‘women’s rights’ becomes subsumed under one of ‘good business sense’ (Bacchi, 1992).

Since 1999 a conservative government has removed the term ‘affirmative action’ from the legislative arena. The Act has been renamed the Equal Opportunity in the Workplace Act, which further inhibits its symbolic usefulness as a tool for addressing the gender advantage of men.

The gender dynamics of ‘soft’ managerialism

At Emsite, when we move from the executive suite to the mine-face we find a shift in which group is deemed discursively to be primarily gaining from women’s employment. Out in the mining teams and process sheds affirmative action is no longer characterized as a human resource strategy that will enable women to civilize men, with resulting company benefits in terms of labour resource stability. Rather, the stress is placed on how male employees benefit from having female co-workers. The gain is a reinforcement of masculine supremacy.

We found that on the question of whether women’s presence improved the overall environment, the men we interviewed were almost unanimous in their support for women’s employment. All but one said they preferred to work with women rather than suffer the problems of an all-male mine-site. In their induction training, workers were told that all-male sites were uncomfortable places to be, and that the company had employed women so that such disadvantages could be overcome. This rationale for employing women simultaneously positioned men as the beneficiaries of women’s ‘minding’ work. Almost to a man, male workers consented to this designation of women’s housewifely position. With women around, male operators told us, the place was cleaner, women took orders more readily, there were less fights (between men), there was always someone different to talk to, or to discuss family problems with. Tancred-Sheriff (1989, p. 50) noted how women play roles in line with management’s need for ‘reliable workers who can be counted upon, even when distant from management, to act on its behalf’. For the men workers at Emsite it was on their behalf that women’s presence was an advantage.
Women’s sexuality was integral in Emsite’s reworking of affirmative action. Some men claimed that working alongside women lent a dash of sexual excitement to work life, such as ‘painted fingernails and a bit of leg’ (in a hot climate where all workers are required to wear regulation blue shorts and shirts). Management set ground rules signifying men as those whose comfort, self-image, quality of life, and thus position of primacy, were uppermost. Masculine subjectivity still dominated the mining workplace, albeit softened and rendered more manageable. The high-tech workplace, supposedly participatory, had appropriated affirmative action to the advantage of men and management (Eveline, 1994). However, the role of ‘props’ in a male-dominated mine site did not suit all the women miners and their objections to the hegemony of the men soon had a focus.

**Belt shop blues**

The protection of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ (Connell, 1994) was also pursued in more misogynistic forms of differentiation. Space precludes detailing most of the strategies by which male workers and superintendents mobilized their masculinities by defining women as subordinately different (see also Martin, 1996). A few examples will illustrate the point. For instance, three years after the mine was commissioned, equipment on which women excelled, particularly the huge computerized trucks and the difficult-to-handle 824 dozer, were being designated as ‘women’s machines’. Indeed, some women had become proficient enough in their use that they were given the task of training others (Eveline and Booth, 1988). As a result a number of men then refused training in the use of those machines, since they considered it would diminish their sense of manhood to compete, and perhaps fail, against a woman who was a ‘gun’ operator. Other practices by which men generated a sense of masculinist camaraderie included calling women by offensive names, such as ‘bush pigs’ and ‘dykes’, and telling sexually explicit stories and jokes. As DiTomaso (1989, p. 89) has earlier noted: ‘By publicly calling attention to women’s sexuality … men have an especially powerful restraint on the ability of women to fight back.’

Some forms of violence, such as ‘practical jokes’, generated physical dangers for women. For example men would dump ore in places where women had to risk their safety to retrieve it with their loaders and machinery (Eveline and Booth, 1988). Men would also deny female colleagues information about dangers they faced. An example of the latter was the newly employed mechanical fitter who had her face smashed by faulty equipment because her male co-workers decided not to warn her
about it. Co-workers said they wanted to find out if the new employee would check it first and the fact that she did not proved she was unfit for that kind of work (Eveline, 1995). By such methods the few women who went into the heavily male-dominated trades at the mine were all but weeded out within the first three years.

For those who stayed, mainly in the earthmoving, processing and stores areas, undoubtedly the most contentious and long-running issue was the debate over the offensive pin-ups. The work area known as the ‘belt shop’ took centre stage in this dispute. A building where spare parts and tools for equipment maintenance are kept, the belt shop was seen by the male mechanical fitters as ‘our territory’. Women who were assisting the mechanical and electrical fitters had to go to the belt shop for spare parts. Many found it a problem going there, since part of it was lavishly adorned with lewd pin-ups. Men found they could keep women away, or at least to a minimum, with pornography. Some women managed to persuade male co-workers to go in their place, others complained, most simply put up with it. In the end, however, the belt shop became a source of women’s mobilization.

The sexual politics of the belt shop was not simply between male fitters and female workers, however. This small section of the process area was as much off-limits to management as it was to women. The mechanical and electrical fitters were heavily unionized and the patterns of their confrontational relations with management had been forged on other sites. In fact, they were the only groups of employees with previous mining experience, apart from superintendents and managers, so they represented the ‘old guard’ of mining worker and a thorny but seemingly irresolvable problem for Emsite management. At one point while the fitters were on strike over another matter, managers ordered the removal of the pin-ups, under pressure from senior women who visited from the company’s national headquarters. On their return to work the fitters who staked out the belt shop retaliated, however, by literally re-papering the walls and ceiling with pornographic pictures. They threatened prolonged industrial action if the pictures were again removed. Management stalled, hoping the problem might somehow go away.

Once the issue was seen to merit some attention from senior levels, a small group of female miners felt more confident about addressing the topic. Most women felt torn over the issue. On the one hand they wanted the pin-ups removed but they also felt a sense of solidarity with the men over other aspects of management/worker relations. Echoing the agitation over the issue, criticism of what became known as the ‘offensive artwork’ was beginning to extend into other work areas.

Most of the fitters interviewed protested that removal of the pin-ups interfered with their prior rights as the original occupiers of the workplace. That those rights were intimately tied up with masculine identities based on
a marked difference from women was implicit in their stories. One fitter spelt it out this way:

the male behaviour is a result of having women there. You don’t tone it down — if anything you make it worse. If the women want to come into our workforce they can bloody well put up with it. And if they don’t like it they can bloody leave.

Yet the framing of masculine selves as the purveyors of the sexualized gaze were also normalized to the extent that women miners were meant to evince the same sexual enjoyments as men. In some teams it was clear that most women objected to the pin-ups. Yet the myth prevailed that any woman who complained was a minority who inexplicably deviated from the norm of sensible womanhood. According to one male process operator: ‘It’s only a certain type of female that objects. And unfortunately on our panel that’s seven out of the eight.’ Superintendents too, who had pin-ups on the walls of their offices, saw no reason to stir up trouble. Said one: ‘My wife doesn’t object, she likes these magazines. Why should these women be any different?’

The promise and the price of alliances

In an attempt to overcome the stand-off several women pressed for the formation of an ‘Offensive Materials Committee’, a group which would include representatives of all positions in the dispute. The idea was to gain broad-based negotiated agreement for the removal of the pin-ups without the men taking strike action. After many months of discussions the Offensive Materials Committee proved successful. Along the way, however, a woman who had been a key player in mediating the dispute was singled out for a special dose of sexual harassment. This woman, who we call ‘Clarity’, was the mine’s only female shop steward. She had a well-earned reputation on the mine for her advocacy for workers and for her firm style of negotiating with management. But, as Tancred-Sheriff points out (1989), when women are seen by men as active in resisting management, it is doubly likely that sexuality will be brought into play in attempts to subvert the women’s own moves to establish a gender position. Clarity had also been acknowledged and rewarded for her union work by being appointed to the state Women’s Advisory Council (WAC). Her prominence in the broader West Australian community therefore mirrored her high profile at the mine. However, both these credits earned her an angry backlash from male colleagues for the work she did on the Offensive Materials Committee. Clarity describes the incident as follows:

I fell victim to ‘the boys’ for the part I was playing in this melodrama. There was a photo of me in a union journal with an article about my
appointment to WAC. (Some 'boys' got hold of the article and) a naked male body was superimposed onto the photo. The article was altered so that each time ‘woman’ was mentioned it was changed to ‘dyke’. This little number appeared in profusion on notice boards around the site.

Clarity never saw a copy of this piece of dismembering — the reconstituted articles were put up during a time when she was on her two-week break. And the women who did see them insisted that they be taken down before she arrived back at the mine. For the women (and men) who had not so far publicly taken sides on what some called the ‘dirty pictures’ issue, this form of personalized abuse was going too far. The managers who had hitherto been loath to act on the pin-ups were prompt in destroying copies of the abusive posters. It was obvious that this particular piece of ‘offensive artwork’ provided strong grounds for a sexual harassment case under the Western Australian legislation. Before long the weight of opinion was seen as favouring the removal of the pin-ups as a whole, and to the relief of most women the issue was resolved. For Clarity, however, the experience was extremely painful and, as we shall see below, had ramifications for her identity as a worker representative at the mine.

Women’s mobilization

Few women at Emsite felt free of the contradiction between the promise of equal work and their secondary value as women. However, they found it difficult to say this without receiving unwanted attention. As some of the foregoing indicates, there were women who articulated, and to some extent rejected, the pressure on them to be ‘man-minders’. However, within a prevailing discourse of male privilege most tried not to contravene the constitutive norms and conventions that advantaged men. Many women joined men in avowing that ‘this was, after all, a male workplace and women had to learn to fit in’. At the same time they sought to find or to legitimate ways to contest those advantages, like demanding women’s toilets in work areas, small-sized safety gloves, and extra hand-tools training.

Some experienced their time at work as almost continual and unwanted sexual surveillance, from aggressive banter and off-colour stories directed at themselves or other women, to the uncertain dangers of practical jokes and the embarrassment of pin-ups on the walls. For many, however, the attention accorded them as female sexed bodies was not experienced as explicit enough to be classed as sexual harassment. It was more that they felt themselves to be continually on trial, a type of trial in which it was much easier to ‘prove’ themselves as inadequate than it was to gain approval.

This type of sexualized surveillance is what might be called ‘atmospheric harassment’. Bryson in a study of women in the Australian defence forces
(1994) calls this form of hostility to women ‘gender harassment’. When subject to such scrutiny women usually try to be as inconspicuous as possible, and this includes not mixing with other women. Hence they find themselves with a lack of unspecularized space, shared experiences and discursive strategies by which they can voice and assess their feelings of fragmentation and unease. Several of the women at Emsite said they had thought how nice it would be to have women-only meetings to discuss such issues, but they feared the backlash from men if they did. Indeed a small group scheduled a women-only meeting but were told by superintendents that this was an ‘equal opportunity’ workplace and women could not have a meeting that was not also open to men. Eventually, several groups of women began to meet in their off-duty times back in Perth. Their numbers were small, which meant they had to rely on actions rather than numbers of women to press their case for a more inclusive environment.

Among their actions were a number of ‘critical acts’ that brought changes to the gender dynamics at Emsite. Alongside those women who expressed relief that their difficulties were gaining some recognition were others who wanted to tell us that the study was ‘only going to make it worse for women because it was upsetting the men’. Still others, and ‘Lucy’ is an example, decided the best way to prevent ‘the men getting cranky’ was to ignore the study altogether.

The thinking in Lucy’s work area was that the women who were complaining were unreasonable. There were no pin-ups in her workplace but her male colleagues were angry; they wanted no encroachment on prior male rights. As the debate progressed, however, Lucy was increasingly shocked by the outbursts of some of the men. After initially deciding to try and ignore our study, she requested a last-minute interview. She recounted how she had been treated when she complained about the ‘blue movies’ on Emsite’s closed-circuit television and the ‘cruelty’ of her male bosses who then ridiculed and ostracized her. This reminded her of what she called the ‘soft’ side of sexual harassment: how men she worked with ‘shut her up’ by joking about, or sometimes pointedly complimenting her on, some aspect of her body or apparel when she offered advice on how the work might be done. This behaviour, she said, always reminded her that she was ‘a girl’. Lucy went on to say:

I’ve always been pretty good at saving egos. I’ve got three older brothers and I know all about that kind of thing. But maybe I’m losing patience with it. It seems to me everything here is geared around the idea of keeping the boys happy. It’s time something was done.

What Lucy did a short time later was instigate the first of a series of advertised women-only meetings, held at the mine itself. This may seem a minor act in terms of women’s mobilization but it was one that would have
been deemed impossible a few months earlier. This move might be viewed as a ‘critical act’ in Dahlerup’s terms. By studying in specific locations with due consideration of their socio-historical conditions (Knights and Vurdubakis, 1994), the anxieties formed around subjectivity construction we may also find we are studying resistance to ongoing subjectivity construction and a resource for change. For Kerfoot and Knights (1998, p. 8), masculine identities are distinguished by ‘the instrumental pursuit of the control of social relations’. Intrinsic to this is the generating and sustaining of ‘feminine dependence’. In certain contexts women’s identities are framed by resistance to that dependence, which means the constraints of the ‘feminine’ are challenged but also deployed.

The message that it is women’s job to ‘keep the boys happy’ is one to which women have been subject through history and across societies (Pateman, 1989). In Australia, women’s history is linked to the practice of sending women to civilize and tame the ‘wild colonial boy’ — the Australian bushman.

At Emsite controversies over the pin-ups and other forms of harassment, and the highly visible conflict which erupted in and around a study encouraging women to speak up, all helped bring anti-women expressions to a head. Women who had been at pains to prevent men venting their anger found it erupted nevertheless. But they also found they could survive the fallout. The spread of aggression indeed had an opposite effect to what most female workers we interviewed expected. The more vitriolic the men’s antagonism, the more Emsite management was forced to act openly on women’s behalf. This countermanded a message that the women had long internalized: that if the men became too upset the company could decide that women miners were a mistake.

Some women found that at this juncture they had little to lose in voicing their dissatisfactions and demands. Tacitly, they now understood that Emsite’s workplace design was built on the employment of (some) women. Once they began to hear the idea, in women’s groups, dining rooms, or team meetings, that the company’s policy of normalization depended on the employment of women, some became more willing to mobilize and speak out. Others already speaking up were more readily heard. What surfaced in women’s stories was the idea that neither in symbol nor practice were men located as the able executors of the unpaid, unspecified work of normalization. Since only a body sexed as ‘Woman’ was deemed capable of the task of normalizing Emsite’s workplace, women miners could not be removed. Within this contradictory frame of inequality and legitimation, women were able to seize some moments of opportunity.

Women are then not only constituted by the coterminous presence of ‘the public and private, of home and work, of personal and political’ (Katila and Meriläinen, 1999, p. 166). Their identity construction is necessarily formed by competing discourses. Although maintaining a stable identity is inevitably
an unrealizable goal, there is at times the possibility of constructing a new identity.

For a period, then, sexual politics at the mine worked quite differently. Some women insisted that women be recruited onto their teams in place of those who had left. Others approached their state’s Equal Opportunity Commissioner, who subsequently visited the mine-site and gave advice about sexual harassment, pin-ups and sex discrimination and ensured that programmes on sexism and sexual harassment were run for a time. Although only a small percentage of the workforce attended such sessions, there were signs of a ripple effect. For a time at least superintendents, managers, men and women were faced with a message that women were not to be classified as ‘fair game’ for men’s hostility.

### Following Clarity

By turning again to one of the women mentioned earlier, we can gain a sense of the identity challenges and possible subjective rewards the life of a miner can hold for some women. The one place where the subjectivities of women are given a semblance of social authority as women in our society is in the sphere of the home and family. Out in the workplace ‘women’ are then deemed to possess the same intrinsic qualities of nurturing and harmony-building as they are supposed to show in the domestic sphere. Any other basis for authority becomes suspect and can lead a woman’s identity to be questioned. Hierarchy and gender are ‘entangled, or conflated, in the masculinist discourse, perceptions and practices of organizational participants’ (Martin, 1996, p. 188) and can in corporate manipulation place women workers in an invidious position. Yet while located as agents of control women are distanced (and intentionally so) from the male managers, they can also seek through their presence to support the emergence of other forms of authority giving women a place.

Clarity found the experience of the personalized attack on her by her colleagues excruciatingly painful, even though she never saw the disfigured poster of herself. The chopping up of her photograph felt to her like a figurative dismembering of her place within her panel of mining operators. For most of the men we interviewed ‘dyke’ and ‘feminist’ were interchangeable terms. One of the most difficult things for Clarity about the disfigured article, was the inference that ‘dyke’ was a term of derision. She had worked alongside her male co-workers for several years, had been a loyal supporter of a number of their claims and projects and felt she had developed a reciprocal relationship with them. She was appalled to find that their sense of loyalty and comradeship was lacking at a crucial time. Although there was no evidence that her own team had been involved in
defacing her photo and denigrating her sexuality, she discovered that they had done nothing to stop it. She requested and received a transfer to the Training Centre at the mine, where she campaigned for permission to develop an educational video about how people dealt with the shaping and framing of ‘diversity’ and ‘difference’.

The video Clarity produced with the help of 45 employees, called ‘Groundwork’, used dramatic re-enactments of situations to give workers experience in women/men interactions. The video has been packaged for sale to other companies and Emsite sells it without acknowledging Clarity’s direction or role. Post-video production, Clarity decided the enterprise offered her no good reason to continue. She left and formed her own training consultancy. She became a member of the Board of her state’s Employment and Skills Development Authority and Chair of the Community Skills Development Council. She expresses below how her views on the problems of equal opportunity legislation have changed:

prior to this legislation being enacted, we knew what to expect — we knew our place and we followed the rules. After the legislation, I for one expected change. What I’ve found is complacency where I’ve wanted and needed support. Maybe it’s time to assess the impact of the legislation on the working women of Australia. Maybe it’s time to redefine our goals. I want to see the working woman as part of Australia, not just a doormat or a pair of token tits.

Emsite won an award for excellence in affirmative action for the Groundwork video and another award two years later for the firm’s generally high standard of ‘best practice’. The company’s high profile in the community, and the need for the Affirmative Action Agency to promote support among other companies are a key factor in the mine site being given such awards (Affirmative Action Agency, 1992; Affirmative Action Agency, 1993). Yet the public honours also meant that women revolted against the gap between public and insider image. When Emsite won its second honour, for example, three women left the mine in protest, because the company had accepted the award while ignoring their complaints that the numbers of women were diminishing and not being replaced (Higginson, 1994). Of the women at the mine who we interviewed in 1988, 40% had left by 1995. Some have been replaced, but these are usually ‘wives’ or partners of male miners. The company now assumes that women with a male ‘protector’ on site are likely to stay longer and receive less antagonism from male colleagues. A rueful joke among women no longer employed there is that ‘equal opportunity’ means having a male partner on site. By 2000 the percentage of women employed in the mine had dropped to 4%. 
Conclusion

The technologies, structures and narratives that exploit the gendered positioning of women miners in the enterprise are made possible by the symbolic privilege accorded mining as a masculine enterprise. But the concepts underpinning Emsite’s organizational planning included ideals of democratic participation, and these have established certain patterns of response in employees. Among them are women who took on their jobs believing in the promise of new frontiers of equal work and worth. Most have eventually found the barriers to realizing their vision demoralizing and debilitating. Attempts to surmount those barriers can also generate a feminist consciousness, however, encouraging some women to strive for a more inclusive environment, for others as well as themselves. Their attempts to challenge the prevailing meanings lead other women to reject the allocated symbolic and behavioural space that organizational discourses invite them to occupy, yet such ‘misbehaviour’ can carry heavy sanctions.

As Ackroyd and Thompson have surveyed in detail (1999), ‘misbehaviour’ in organizations is pervasive. One aspect of this has been misbehaving men in the presence of women co-workers, and our study readily shows examples of this. Yet in this apparently separate context for misbehaviour, the sexuality of workers is intimately connected with both workers’ attempts to control the anxieties that surround their gendered identities, and managers’ attempts to control workplace behaviour. In recognizing women workers’ responses to these regimes of control we have postulated yet a third development, the positioning that women workers attempt to generate for themselves. Women engage in the discursive construction of their gendered identities and show resistance both to management manipulation of this gendered identity and to male co-workers’ attempts to link gendering to sexuality.

‘Woman’ is not produced in isolation from the shaping of masculine selves but through that formative process. At Emsite, women became workers with a particular identity as adjuncts of managerial control, as the instruments of men’s comfort and the props for masculinities of various kinds. In societies organized around linguistic and economic systems of male authority the social category ‘woman’ is derivative of and subordinate to the social category of ‘man’ and this cannot be avoided even in an isolated workplace, during a two-week commute. Within this system too the masculine is taken as the norm and the feminine is ultimately defined as lacking the necessary drive, force, commitment, skill and competitiveness for authority.

The ‘pervasive anxiety’ that Weiss (1990) indicates among professionally qualified men to perform knowledgeably, and that often leads to a competitive masculinity (see Collinson and Hearn, 1994; Kerfoot and Knights, 1993) perhaps here plays the same role in the mining context.
Compensatory discourses then frame a powerful woman as flawed, a process carefully reviewed in a teaching context with diverse examples in Martin (1996). One of Australia’s most senior academic women once said in a statement that earned her notoriety ‘women go limp when the going gets tough’ (see Eveline, 1996). In politics too success as a woman politician can lead to systematically constructed falls from grace (see Eveline and Booth, 1997, for a well-known Australian case). Identity formation ‘acquires the status of a project to be constantly worked at . . . an end to be achieved, yet where the end is never fully specified, out of reach and constantly in motion’ (Kerfoot and Knights, 1998, pp. 12–13). Individuals who occupy the subject position ‘woman’ therefore ‘are faced with the ambiguities and possibilities that stem from the concept’s instability’ (Katila and Meriläinen, 1999, p. 165).

Because action is inherently free and power is never without resistance, it is as central to this analysis to track women’s responses as to place them as control agents for management. Mine-site recruitment of women may have helped management in producing on site women who serve as ‘props’ in a control drama. Managers seek to lessen the misbehaviour of men (and this can be extended into a passive role in promoting a government initiative of demonstrated inclusivity). We have shown that women at Emsite were skilful at managing their own agenda in mining, and at producing a more active workplace position for themselves as miners.

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References

GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN DISCOURSES OF MANAGERIAL CONTROL


