**Doing Safer Masculinities: Addressing at-Risk Gendered Behaviours on Mine Sites**

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Articles

To date, there has been no significant attempt to address the impacts of gender on safety in the mining industry. The reluctance to address this issue is arguably the result of an embedded masculinity which benefits many of the industry’s employees (Abrahamsson & Somerville; Collinson & Hearn; Mayes & Pini). A link between gender and risk-taking behaviour has nevertheless been recognised in research into driving (Harré *et al*.), sport (Albury *et al*.), leisure (Harris *et al*.), everyday life activities (Pawlowski *et al*.) and the workplace (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work; Scotchmer). In this research, men are consistently seen to take more risks than women. This is therefore surely an important topic for the mining industry where, in countries like Australia and Canada, approximately 85% of the workforce is male.

In this article we outline a proposal for two new workplace programs which we have designed to address at-risk gendered behaviours on mine sites. Our aim is to encourage curriculum development of programs that will ensure mining companies and their employees pay closer attention to the impacts of gender on safety, and vice versa. The development of the programs we describe in this article draws on existing notions of gender auditing and action research; and on information gathered during workshops facilitated with more than 400 employees of the mining industry as part of the 2010 mine safety roadshow which is run annually by the Resources Safety Division of the Department of Mines and Petroleum in Western Australia. In applying these concepts and this available information to the issue of gender and safety in the mining industry specifically, we hope to encourage mining companies to investigate seriously how gender impacts on the behaviours of people working in dangerous environments when contemporary cultural meanings of what it means to be a man often encourage—and sometimes dictate—risk-taking.

**Practices of Gender in Mining**

In 2008, Factive—a cultural research consultancy—launched the “Mining for a Safer Masculinity” research project. In undertaking his consultancy work for Factive, one of the authors of this article, Dean Laplonge, had recognised a total lack of attention to the link between gender and safety among personnel working in the mining industry, as well as a limited and limiting perception of the role of gender in the workplace in general. Through ongoing discussions with key personnel in the mining industry, including presentations at numerous national conferences and the publication of articles in national mining magazines in Australia and Canada, Laplonge sought to broaden understandings of gender in this industry beyond an existing focus on “women in mining”. (A range of articles and background information related to this work and research can be found on Factive’s [Website](http://www.factive.com.au/).) This existing focus is very much contained within narratives of equity and affirmative action, often assuming “man” and “woman” to be stable subjects. The aims of the “Mining for a Safer Masculinity” project were to promote an awareness of gender as performative—as a “doing” rather than a “being”—and to encourage mining companies to ensure their safety personnel and operational crews were involved in work on gender. In 2011, Factive received funding through the Australian Federal Government’s Researchers in Business grant program to develop suggested responses to the issue of the impacts of gender on safety in mining—the results of which are outlined in this article. At this time, the second author of this article, Kath Albury, was employed by Factive to assist.

In his work and research into the issue of gender in mining more broadly, Laplonge has identified a range of gendered behaviours which occur regularly on mine sites. These include the use of derogatory language aimed at indicating and/or correcting a perceived excess of femininity in men, with phrases “don’t be a wuss” and “toughen up princess” being common examples. They include additional verbal comments about and physical contact with the body parts of male co-workers, through a homosociality which seeks to erase or evade any hint of homosexuality within closely knit groups of men. They include stereotypical views about the low capabilities of women alongside stereotypical views about the high capabilities of men. They also include acts of aggression, sexual harassment, bullying and intimidation. These behaviours—in so much as they are aligned with what many working in the mining industry would consider displays of normative masculinity—fail to attract attention, scrutiny or criticism. These behaviours occur at all levels within mining organisations and have been identified to have negative effects on workplace safety (Laplonge, "Site"; Laplonge, *Roadshow*; Laplonge, "Vision").

Currently, no formalised system exists to capture information relating to the impact of gender on behaviours which may lead to a mine site fatality. Despite evidence of a link between gender and safety (Harré *et al*.; Harris & Glaser; Pawlowski *et al*.; Scotchmer), it is not considered an important part of the role of safety personnel who work in mining to contemplate the impacts of gender in any of the work they do. Gender tends to be deemed of concern only to personnel in human resources where it is linked to organisational values around “diversity” and to individual company goals in relation to the number of women in the workforce. Men engaged in operational work—those who work with large machinery and in the most dangerous environments on mine sites—are also not expected to have any understanding of how their behaviours are affected by gender. The safety of people working on mine sites is in actual fact rendered genderless in an industry which is nevertheless highly gendered and where practices of non-normative masculinity, namely non-toughness, are regularly monitored and corrected (Abrahamsson & Somerville; Laplonge, *Roadshow*; Somerville).

There are a number of reasons why we see a failure to recognise a link between gender and safety in this industry. People studying occupational safety at tertiary level in general are not required to take courses that will help them understand the connection between risk and gender, let alone basic concepts of gender. Their ability to bring gender into their work on safety in mining is therefore undermined by the formal education process. Senior managers in the mining industry are not used to having to address issues relating to gender. They therefore do not have the experience to understand how gender relates to men and have not been expected to reflect on their own gender practices. Gender is also wrongly viewed as something of a “soft” issue which does not relate in any way to the primary aims of this industry: production and profit. It is therefore not considered as part of the normal processes of business planning, budgeting, mine site design or the practice of mining as a business.

Our general approach to gender builds on a range of ideas from within feminist theory, sociology, cultural studies and queer theory that have been introduced and explored to contest traditional understandings of gender. Our understanding of gender and its application to particular contexts such as the workplace have been heavily influenced by the likes of Judith Butler, Michel Foucault (*History*) and Rob Connell, to name but a few. In summary, we understand gender not as a stable state owned by men and women; but rather as a fluid, contextual and often contradictory method of seeking to attain, refute, practise and perfect given biological sex. Such an understanding of gender is not evident in the mining industry today, where emphasis is placed simply on seeking to bring more women into the industry with no attention to the gender practices of men (Laplonge, *So You Think*).

By focusing on the performativity of—and therefore mutability of—gender in our programs, we seek to encourage changes in gendered behaviours where employees see the benefits of such change without the change impacting on (or negating) their existing sense of masculinity. To do so, we first look to previous studies of gender at work. Drawing on Joan Acker's work, Meyerson and Kolb identify five sets of gendering processes in organisations. These are seen not simply as “problems”, but as sites open to the possibility of “experimentation and change” (563). They include “formal practices and policies” (job descriptions, recruitment and sick leave procedures), “informal practices and policies” (group meeting timetables, rewards and recognition), “symbols and images, “everyday social interactions” and “internalisations and expressions of gender identities” (564-565). Following on from this and recognising the importance of the “doing” of gender in the workplace (Carlson & Crawford 360), we see existing practices of at-risk masculinities on mine sites not as problems to be solved but as opportunities that allow mining companies and their employees to explore a range of issues not simply related to the gender of men and women in this industry, but also their physical and mental safety.

**Gendered Behaviours Review**

Our first proposed program aims to ensure safety personnel on mine sites can integrate gender awareness into their work. We call this program a “Gendered Behaviours Review”. The focus on “gendered behaviours” highlights that we are not looking at issues of sex specifically; our focus is not on essentialist notions of “man” and “woman”. Rather, we are interested in considering how men and women engage in behaviours which might support, negotiate or reject their given sex, but which nonetheless put them at risk. To this extent, we draw on Judith Butler’s reading of the relationship between sex and gender in which she argues that it is the existence of a gendered culture which produces the need for a binary of sexes. We are interested in gendered cultures (the wider national culture, local workplace cultures etc.) and the way these cultures produce imperatives to act out a given sex.

A typical Gendered Behaviours Review involves a number of workshops with safety personnel to help them understand why a focus on gender is important for safety, see what their organisation’s existing safety culture looks like through a gender lens, and know what they need to do to improve on areas where a lack of focus on gender is driving at-risk gendered behaviours in the field. As part of the training, safety personnel will conduct reviews of key safety documents, participate in focus groups and conduct interviews with employees. As they undergo this training, they learn not only theoretical knowledge about the organisation’s gendered safety culture but also practical and sustainable skills in how to deploy a gendered approach to safety.

As a tool, a Gendered Behaviours Review offers a mining company a strategic means of assessing the extent to which gender is considered integral to the safety culture of the workplace. It provides safety personnel with an awareness of how effectively gender is, or can be, integrated into its safety systems and all its safety-related activities. Because the process for conducting a Gendered Behaviours Review is participatory, it also provides safety personnel with practical skills they can use in their everyday tasks to ensure there is ongoing attention to gender in all aspects of the mine site safety. The review provides a means of researching the existing safety practices of safety personnel through a gendered gaze and then building corresponding actions to ensure these existing practices include more thought and discussions on gender.

The concept of a “gender audit” is common in organisations with strong links to the United Nations and government. Its aim is to provide organisations with visibility of what they are doing and what they can do to “mainstream” gender—a process defined as “efforts to scrutinize and reinvent processes of policy formulation and implementation across all issue areas to address and rectify persistent and emerging disparities between men and women” (True & Mintrom 28) or as “a new strategy or tool that will benefit feminist interests by challenging gender inequalities (Guenther n.p.). The important contribution that existing approaches to gender mainstreaming have for the development of a Gendered Behaviours Review is that the former recognises that “even policies that appear gender neutral can have a differential impact” and therefore “calls for examination of the potentially gendered effects of policies before they are implemented (Guenther n.p.). The purpose of a Gendered Behaviours Review is similarly to ensure that seemingly gender-neutral safety systems and processes are considered in terms of the how they may impact on gendered behaviours in the workplace and how understandings of gender among employees and within the organisational culture may influence responses to these systems and processes.

In developing the Gendered Behaviours Review, we have recognised that the concept of gender mainstreaming has not been without its problems. Gender mainstreaming is not universally accepted as the best solution to addressing issues of gender within organisations (Moser & Moser). What is clear, however, is that any strategic plan (as developed in the gender audit process) intent on driving cultural change within an organisation in regard to gender needs to be matched with gender expertise, staff resources, commitment on the part of management, an awareness of the differing forms of resistance, and a willingness to judge the outcomes not purely in terms of changes in the ratio of men to women but also with “the *terms* of their participation” (19; emphasis in original). When we seek to apply the gender audit methodology to the assessment of gendered behaviours in relation to safety in the mining industry, we are equally cognisant of the need to emphasise that simply conducting a review will not produce a cultural change in the way safety personnel respond to at-risk gendered behaviours; an action plan with adequate resources to implement this plan is essential.

In developing a methodology for engaging safety personnel to consider the impact of gender on safety in their workplaces, we have also had to consider the differences between a gender audit that focuses on the rights of and opportunities for women (often viewed as a stable subject) and a Gendered Behaviours Review that looks at the mutable behaviours of men. Because the former is often concerned with increasing participation opportunities for women in the workplace, there is a risk that women often become ghettoised in the process (Mukhopadhyay *et al*. 12). Gender auditing may seek to ensure gender mainstreaming is concerned with an analysis of and change in gendered outcomes, but the reality of the general status of women vis-à-vis that of men often means the focus is very much on what can be done to provide greater opportunities for women to improve their status (True & Mintrom 33), thereby rendering the subject positions of “man” and “woman” unchanged. In a Gendered Behaviours Review, however, the percentage of men to women in the workforce is irrelevant. Instead, this review is concerned with performances of gender. It focuses on exploring the way men behave in the workplace in general, including their relationships with each other, women and management, the language they use, their use of space and the body within space, and their general feeling of health and wellbeing. In this sense, our approach can be considered one of “displacement” through which we seek to “deconstruct those discursive regimes that engender the subject” (Squires 368).

The purpose of a Gendered Behaviours Review is to find out the extent to which the gender interests of men are being supported through the implementation of the organisation’s safety management, and to ensure safety personnel have visibility of these and the tools to respond. Seemingly gender-neutral safety procedures or initiatives may, in actual fact, be encouraging the very behaviours which place people at risk. Understandings of what constitutes normal masculine behaviour may be driving at-risk behaviours which, while possibly visible to safety personnel, are not being tackled through a focus on gender. The narrative of safety as it is told in the mining industry is generally a feminised one (Laplonge, "Telling"). By ignoring gender in their work, therefore, safety personnel may well be unwittingly delivering safety solutions that miss the mark.

**Establishing Mentors through Action Research**

Our second program targets those working in operations areas on mine sites. Our proposed action research-based mentoring program—what we have called the Gendered Behaviours Mentor Program—invites employees to increase awareness of gendered behaviours in their specific workplace culture and to develop strategies for improving their own experiences of their workplace.

As Martin ("Practising") observes, “knowing how and around what issues and in what settings men and women practise gender collectively is a high priority goal” for researchers working in highly gendered organisations (Martin, "Practising" 269). Yet despite this priority, she argues, most organisation research focused on gender has reduced “multi-faceted dynamics to static forms”, by omitting the stories, details and nuances of workers’ collective experiences of doing gender (Martin, "Practising" 269).  In order to answer Martin’s call for “experimentation with new ways to conceptualise, observe and record [gendered] dynamics” (Martin, "Practising" 269), we propose to draw on action research methodologies to involve operational employees on mine sites directly in the research process. To this end, the proposed Gendered Behaviours Mentor Program commits to Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulson’s framework of action research as a process of “productive not-knowing” that necessitates a willingness to “meet the unexpected” in the research project; and revise the project in response to participants’ input to the iterative process (465).

Action research methods are frequently deployed to advance gender equity; and some seek to challenge stereotypical beliefs about gender. For example, Weaver-Hightower used action research methods to encourage South Australian high-school teachers to interrogate simplistic or generalising approaches to masculinity, boys and reading, stemming from “popular-rhetorical” trade books. In this project, teachers participated in an initial workshop that introduced them to more nuanced theories of masculinities and then participated in writing workshops with authors of books popular with boys. They also conducted research with their own students, using diverse techniques such as questionnaires, interviews and video production. Weaver-Hightower observed that while teachers often drew on generalisations or stereotypes about gender and education, the action research process allowed them to engage positively with their assumptions, by using them as base hypotheses to be interrogated or tested (351).

The most relevant predecessor to our study is a feminist action research-oriented project documented by Coleman and Rippin, Meyerson and Kolb and Ely and Meyerson. This project aimed to promote organisational change in relation to gender equity within a manufacturing plant through interaction with a specific work group. The project emphasised a “dual agenda for change”, hypothesising that by addressing workplace inequity, the host organisation could also increase “instrumental capacity to meet business goals” (Coleman and Rippin 574). The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews in which they asked participants to tell them a “story” about the workplace and they implemented a participant observation exercise where researchers spent a day on the assembly line. Following an analysis of observation and interview data, the researchers conducted a feedback session with the working group, reflecting back the themes they had identified through the research process, emphasising that the session was intended to be a collaborative process in which the researchers’ “constructions” of the workplace would be amended by the workers/participants (who responded with anecdotes that extended into what Coleman and Rippin term “fragile” (or tentative) discussion of gender that re-framed familiar or unexamined experiences in the workplace). While this project focused on women’s participation in the organisation, their approach and challenges to (and framing of) gender are all relevant for the Gendered Behaviours Mentor Program.

Our project fits into the dual-agenda framework, as it aims to encourage individual and collective change at the level of gendered behaviour and meet organisational needs for enhanced workplace safety. A focus on gender and gendered behaviours should be maintained throughout the program through a process of feedback and collaboration between not just research participants and field researcher, but by external consultants. The off-site consultants would undertake a coaching role with both field researchers and participants/mentors which will promote not just “single-loop” problem solving, but a reflective process of transformative learning and cultural change (Argyris and Shon). Key to our program is the ability to maintain focus on gender, and specifically gendered behaviours, for this is where we will be able to see evidence of transformational success as discussed above, this time on the shopfloor.

Our proposed program also draws on Stephen Brookfield’s (*Developing*; *Becoming*) work on promoting critical thinking among adults. Many action research projects are overtly emancipatory; that is, they are aimed at empowering those who might be seen as marginalised or oppressed. Men whose actions or behaviours can be read as “hegemonic” (i.e., blokey or hyper-masculine men) are in many ways privileged within cultures that support and encourage those kinds of masculinity. This doesn’t mean, of course, that they feel empowered to control their own lives, or their workplaces (see Albury *et al*.). Our aim in the delivery of the Gendered Behaviours Mentor Program is not to “de-gender” men, but to support them in recognising which gendered behaviours currently support their safety and well-being at work, and which do not; and in developing their own strategies for positive behavioural and cultural change. Participation in an action research project is, in itself, a form of cooperative education in which the researchers and the participants collaborate in a learning project. In the process, both researcher and participant can be challenged and surprised.

While there is no direct precedent for a Gendered Behaviours Mentor Program, there is ample evidence that “traditionally” masculine men with a strong investment in potentially risky (and even violent) behaviours respond strongly to leadership from other men around behaviour change. For example, Beckwirth observes that a US-based mining union with a traditional culture of violent strikes and clashes with police moved to a policy of non-violent collective action via a 14-month process that Beckwirth describes as “gender re-framing” (308). In this instance, union leaders acted as champions of behaviour change. Firstly, they changed their rhetoric on strikes to de-centre “men” or “workers”, and re-focused on “family” and “community” (309). Secondly, they acted as exemplars of masculinity, associating “manhood” not with violence and physical force, but with discipline and self-containment (309).  Non-violence was discussed in terms of “toughness” (an ability to withstand police provocation), loyalty (including willingness to go to gaol) and pragmatism (i.e. acknowledging the futility of an un-armed striker engaging with an armoured truck) (315).

As Beckwirth's study suggests, demonstrations of gender re-framing by respected male leaders can support all-male groups in transforming their culture, and behaviour, without completely undoing their gender identity (323). Similarly, Katz and Albury *et al*. have designed and facilitated successful educational and mentoring programs for all-male groups such as professional athletes and members of the military that allow men to question their assumptions around sexual assault, and engage as “ethical bystanders” (Banyard *et al*.) against gendered violence without relinquishing their sense of themselves as men. In all these studies, male champions and mentors from within the participant group were essential agents of change. For this reason, the Gendered Behaviours Mentor Program seeks to identify and support men within mining who have a desire to learn more about the role gendered behaviours can play in the workplace. These men may already be critical of certain riskier behaviours and are likely to have their own strategies for promoting a safer culture. The Gendered Behaviours Mentor Program aims to identify these men and to encourage them to formalise these strategies so they can be shared. Proposed methods include ethnographic participant observation, semi-structured interviews, large group feedback and discussion sessions, small group intensive workshops, and one-to-one coaching and mentoring.

**Conclusion**

We do not know at this stage whether these programs are—to use what has become somewhat of a marketing buzzword in the mining industry—“best practice”. We cannot say with absolute certainty what impacts they will have on safety in individual workplaces. There is a temptation to claim such certainty even before we have fully engaged in the trials and pilots that are necessary to test out the programs. This temptation comes not only from a commercial imperative to see a return on the investment that has been put into the research, but also because of a culture of certainty one often finds in the mining industry where claims to certainty feed into both cultural and gender imperatives of workers; that is, a cultural imperative to claim power through knowledge, and a gender imperative to maintain a “strong” masculinity.

The alternative to the programs we have developed—and this is an alternative that we have been called on numerous times to offer—is a contained and complete package which promises to “solve” problems associated with gender and safety by training men how to behave “less badly”. Commercially, we recognise that such an approach is viable and that money could easily have been made by going down this path. Ethically, we see that this approach would simply not work and, in fact, would do more damage to the debate on gender in the mining industry. The idea that even we—as researchers of gender and practitioners of gender solutions in organisations—know what kind of man is going to be the safest or “best behaved” man in any particular workplace is absurd. The suggestion that we can show people how to do gender more safely than they are doing it right now utterly discards the existing doings of gender among work crews and assumes, quite wrongly, that we personally somehow manage to do our genders without engaging in risk-taking behaviours at all. In our approach, we are keen to highlight that we are not and we do not know the meaning of “good gender”. Instead, we are more interested in asking the question: What does it mean to recognise a link between gender and safety? Through asking this question to safety personnel and crew members working on mine sites we can start to discover ways of “doing” gender that support safer choices and behaviours in the workplace.

These programs are now being discussed or partially implemented on two different mine sites in Western Australia. We anticipate that the results of this work will be available in 2014 and will be written up for publication at that time. As we continue to work with mining companies to help encourage recognition of a link between gender and safety, and to discover how the programs we propose can be adjusted to meet the needs and demands of the mining industry, we hope to be able to further develop the two programs we have proposed here. During this initial pilot phase, we will need to take into account specific issues which are relevant to the environment and work context of individual mine sites, including work rosters, fly-in-fly-out operations, existing safety training and initiatives, and existing “gender diversity” work. Our ultimate goal is the development of sustainable programs which can help ensure integration of gender into the safety practices of employees of the mining industry.

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