A critique of ‘new’ rural local governance: The case of gender in a rural Australian setting

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Abstract

Over the past decade rural social scientists have demonstrated significant interest in documenting the new forms of governance emerging in rural and regional areas. However, little attention has been given to examining the gendered aspects of these new arrangements. This paper takes up the issue of gender and governance in rural areas by reporting on the establishment, membership and practices of a new governing organisation in a local government area in a small rural township in Australia. Men hold almost all positions on the 19-member board of this institution charged with facilitating development in the shire. This is not surprising, given women’s exclusion from the male-dominated networks from which appointees are selected. While this numerical dominance is important, it is not just the presence of men’s bodies that is of concern to this paper. Also of interest is the way in which hegemonic discourses of masculinity are privileged by board members. This includes an emphasis on competition, entrepreneurialism, and aggression, and a focus on economic concerns over and above social issues. In conclusion, there may be a lot that is ‘new’ in the governance of contemporary Western rural nations, but what is not is that these forms of governance are gendered, just as the traditional state has always been, in a way that excludes women and feminine subjectivities.

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1. Introduction

In terms of numbers of papers solicited, the workshop focusing on rural governance at the XI World Congress of Rural Sociology in Trondheim in 2004 generated considerable interest. Pleasingly, the gender studies workshop also elicited significant attention from scholars. Here, there was further evidence of the seductive appeal of governance as a topic of investigation as feminists took a gender lens to the subject. The same cross-over was, however, not evident in those papers presented in the governance workshop where gender was noticeably absent from discussion. It seems that there are many studying rural governance who are yet to be convinced of the salience of gender in the reconfigured rural local state.†

The purpose of this paper is to argue for a more gender aware examination of new rural local governance, through the documentation of a case study of new institutional arrangements in a local authority in rural Australia. In doing so the paper makes a contribution to two emerging areas of scholarship in rural social science. That is, rural masculinities (e.g. Brandth, 1995; Brandth and Haugen, 2000; Campbell and Bell, 2000; Little, 2002b; Leyshon, 2005; Ni Laoire, 2002; Saugeres, 2002a, b; Pini, 2005a, b) and rural governance (e.g. Little, 2001; Welch, 2002; Edwards et al., 2001; Herbert-Cheshire and Lawrence, 2002; Edwards and Woods, 2004; Higgins and Lawrence, 2005).

The paper begins with some contextual information on local government and gender in rural Australia. Following

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Amongst those of us concerned with the twin issues of rural governance and gender this omission fostered a debate I already experience as depressingly familiar despite my status as a nascent feminist academic. That is, how do we talk to the (male) stream? There was some agreement when one more experienced colleague suggested presenting two papers at conferences so that the concerns we are addressing are not so easily marginalised within the spaces of a gender stream, but heard in the typically better attended non-gender specific sessions. I reacted negatively to this, arguing it would make one complicit in marking gender specific conference streams as secondary to those being undertaken in the traditional realm, and, further, contribute to gender inequalities in the academy as we took responsibility for educating/changing colleagues as well as pursuing our own intellectual goals. The debate was unresolved.
this, I turn to the literature on men, masculinity and rurality drawing attention to the theoretical concepts informing the study. In the next section of the paper I outline the methodology of the research before detailing the case study. In the final part of the paper I highlight the central argument of the paper. That is, there is little that is ‘new’ in the ‘new rural local governance’ in terms of gender politics. There may be very different institutional arrangements emerging, but these afford power and status to men and masculine subjectivities over women and feminine subjectivities. This is, for rural women, more of the same.

2. Context

There are 692 local government authorities in Australia organised and administered on a state basis. Across these councils, women’s participation has increased markedly in the past two decades. In 1980, women held just 5% of positions. By 1986, this had risen to 13% and by 2000 to 25%. At the end of 2004, nearly 30% of representatives in local government in Australia were women (Ryan et al., 2005).

While the number of women participating in rural local governments in Australia is rising alongside urban women, geographically isolated women have always been much less likely to be represented in the political sphere than their city counterparts. The reasons for this have been well documented in the literature on gender and local government in Australia (e.g. Sinclair et al., 1987; Rew, 1989; Pini et al., 2004b). Collectively, this work has pointed to the way in which traditional and conservative views about gender that are dominant in rural towns, make participation in public leadership problematic for women. The literature also suggests women councillors’ experiences of sexualisation, discrimination, denigration and marginalisation may be more pronounced in country areas and access to support more limited.

Despite this inhospitable environment, rural women are becoming a more visible force in rural local governments across Australia (Neyland and Tucker, 1996; Macgarvey, 2003). However, as they enter this terrain, they find themselves experiencing what Valler et al. (2000, p. 410) term ‘a shift from local government to a more dissolute local governance’. While the reasons for, and numerous manifestations of, such a shift have been well rehearsed elsewhere (e.g. Goodwin and Painter, 1996; Woods, 1998; Peck, 1998), of importance to this paper is the fact that one of the key features associated with the shift to ‘governance’ has been the establishment of distinctly different institutional arrangements which bring new protagonists from the private sphere into the political realm (Goodwin, 1998; Imrie and Raco, 1999). These protagonists include ‘voluntary organisations, private businesses, and corporations, the mass media and, increasingly, supra-national institutions’ (Goodwin and Painter, 1996, p. 636). Informing this practice of bringing those outside of the formally elected to the political decision-making table, are neo-liberal discourses of self-help and self-reliance, and an associated nomenclature of partnerships, networks, inclusion, citizenship and empowerment (e.g. Ward and McNicholas, 1998a, b; Herbert-Cheshire, 2000; Shortall, 2002; Owain and Little, 2000).

The discursive primacy given to notions of participation in new rural governance might, Bock (2004, p. 2) suggests, be thought to afford rural women particular advantages, given their traditional exclusion from mainstream policy and politics. However, her empirical work examining women’s involvement in reconstruction policies in the East of the Netherlands suggests otherwise. While few women hold decision-making positions on the reconstruction committees, Bock’s (2004) analysis goes beyond quantification. This is critical, as her work reveals that gender is implicated in the new institutional governance arrangements in a manner far beyond whether or not there is equal representation of men and women on committees. She reveals that women’s presence is not necessarily indicative of access to power, as those women who are members lack the access to knowledge, political experience, networks and institutional support that are available to male members. As a consequence, those projects favoured by women members (such as those focused on quality of life concerns), were less likely to be funded than those supported by male members.

Bock’s (2004) findings highlight the claim by Shortall (2002) that a focus on the numerical representation on ‘women’ in new governance structures tells us little about gendered power relations (see also, Alvesson and Due Billing, 2002). At best, it may lead to a simplistic analysis, at worst, it may cause us to assume that gender has or is being addressed. In light of these observations, the aim of this paper is to examine gender and new rural local governance using a theoretical framework that is far removed from a focus on gender as a variable. It is to this framework that I now turn.

3. Men, masculinities and rurality

Many contemporary feminist scholars have embraced the radical post-structural critique and reformulation of the subject as fragmented, plural, and contradictory, as a means of providing analytical access to understanding the complex operations and manifestations of gender and power. In this work they have adopted the Foucauldian notion of discourse, as a set of time and place specific, culturally and socially produced meanings, statements, practices or beliefs (Weedon, 1987, pp. 34–41; Scott, 1988, p. 35; Hall, 2001, p. 72). The subject is consequently not fixed or stable, but positioned in discourses (Francis, 1999, p. 383; Davies, 1997, p. 274). Power is intricately connected to discourse in that ‘inherent in the discursive positionings are different positions of power’ (Walkerdine, 1990, p. 5). Consequently, some discourses will produce a more powerful constituted subject than others.
Repudiating the notion of the fixed subject and adopting an understanding of multiple subjectivities produced via discourses, renders implausible any claims to a monolithic or fixed masculinity or femininity. This is well exemplified by the work of rural studies scholars who have revealed that there are a range of different discursive gender scripts available to rural men and women (e.g. Brandth, 1995; Liepins, 1998; Bryant, 1999; Pini, 2005c). Again, and importantly, power is not conferred equally upon these gender discourses. In a patriarchal society it will be typical for those discourses associated with men and masculinity to be exulted and privileged above discourses circulating about women and femininity (Connell, 1995). This is not to suggest that the question of gender power is simply a matter of examining as binaries masculinities/femininities or men/women—as this ignores the issue of gendered power relations between groups of men and women.

In terms of understanding power differentials between groups of men, scholars have adopted the notion of ‘hegemonic masculinities’ first coined by Carrigan et al. (1985). As the term is one that has been subject to recent criticism for being essentialist and reductionist (e.g. see Whitehead, 2002; Jefferson, 2002; Hearn, 2004a), it is useful to be reminded by Gardiner (2001, p.11), that, ‘although dominant or hegemonic forms of masculinity work constantly to maintain an appearance of permanence, stability and naturalness, the numerous masculinities in every society are contingent, fluid, socially and historically constructed, changeable’. An equivalent caveat is offered by Kenway and Fitzclarence (1997, p. 121) when offering a definition of hegemonic masculinity as it is currently manifest in the contemporary West. They suggest hegemonic masculinity currently mobilises around notions of ‘physical strength, adventurousness, emotional neutrality, certainty, control, assertiveness, self-reliance, individuality, competitiveness, instrumental skills, public knowledge, discipline, reason, objectivity and rationality’. Femininities are understood and defined in opposition to hegemonic masculinity so discourses of femininity are often associated with passivity, indecisiveness, a lack of ambition, irrationality, emotional weakness, and the domestic realm (Fitzsimons, 2002).

Rural studies scholars have been comparatively slow to engage the type of theoretical framework outlined above, in order to critique the enactment of masculinities in the countryside. Indeed, as Campbell and Bell (2000, p. 532) editorialised in introducing a special edition of Rural Sociology on the subject, ‘rural masculinity is hardly a typical topic of rural social science.’ This has now begun to change, but at this stage, the majority of work has focused at the level of the farm gate (Little, 2002b). An important exception in relation to the subject of gender and governance, is work evaluating the Rural Challenge initiative (1994–1998) in the United Kingdom, undertaken by Little and Jones (2000) and Little (2002a). Informing this rural analysis is a thorough and engaging gender critique of new governance arrangements in the city of Manchester undertaken by Tickell and Peck (1996). In studying the emergence and legitimisation of non-state bodies in the policy making arena, Tickell and Peck (1996, p. 605) warn against a simple ‘head-count’ noting that one-third of the qango directors in the city are women. They argue instead for a more nuanced and sophisticated gender analysis of these new institutions. Such an analysis focuses on power relations between qango members, and thus asks, where women are located and what portfolio responsibilities they are designated. This reveals the concentration of women in structurally subordinate positions, and in low-status roles associated with normative definitions of femininity, such as welfare and health care. Also critical to Tickell and Peck’s (1996, p. 607) analysis, is an examination of gender as it is manifest in the ‘favoured discourses’ and the ‘modus operandi’ of the new partnerships between the Manchester local authority and business. This leads them to conclude:

Both the privileging of economic over social interests, and the ascendency of decision-making structures based on elite networking rather than consensus building, seem to be associated with the masculinisation of local governance. There is some truth in the assertion that the world of local politics is becoming more like the world of business and, as a result, it is also becoming more of a man’s world.

The description of the masculine gendering of the local state in the city of Manchester resonates in the more recent rural scholarship on gender and the new local governance by Little and Jones (2000) and Little (2002a). In this rural work the writers take as their focus a policy rather than a local government authority, but identify a similar valorisation of the discourses of hegemonic masculinity. The competitive nature of the funding process, the primacy given to hard economic outcomes and capital works over social and welfare concerns, and the dominance of business interests and business men, are all illustrative of what Little and Jones (2000, p. 628) describe as a ‘highly masculinist approach to regeneration’.

The (re)gendering of the state described in both the urban (Tickell and Peck, 1996) and rural (Little and Jones, 2000; Little 2002a; Jones and Little, 2000) case studies of gender and new local governance has, of course, critical implications in terms of the asymmetries of power between men and women, as well as between particular groups of men. This implicit gender injustice has not, however, inspired scholars to afford further attention to the subject. There remains, instead, what Little (2002a, p. 154) has described as a ‘serious neglect of gender in terms of the understanding of formal structures of rural decision.
making, and the broader operation of political power and governance at the local level (see also, Little, 2001). It is therefore the aim of this paper to make a small contribution to addressing this neglect.

4. Methodology

The methodological approach taken in this study is one which aimed to conduct what Bruni, Gherardi and Poggio (2005, p. 79) describe, in their study of entrepreneurship, as an ‘ethnography of gender.’ This meant examining the way in which rural governance is constructed as a gendered practice as well as critiquing the way in which gender is constituted through rural governance. To undertake such an analysis required an interpretive approach where interview scripts were viewed as narratives in which participants construct meaning and knowledge (Czarniawska, 2004). Illuminating how gender was implicated in these narratives as a lived and social process required descriptive and analytical depth, and thus a single case study is reported.

Villa,3 the shire selected for the case study has a population of approximately 15000. There is an indigenous community as well as a significant group of residents from a non-English speaking background. Nearly, a third of the population is not in the labour force. In large part, this reflects the poor economic position of the town and the broader shire of which it is part.

Interviews were undertaken with forty men and women involved in leadership in the town under investigation. All were in formal positions of leadership, but these ranged in type and status. They included leaders from agri-politics, health, education, local government, small business, community development, indigenous affairs and neighbourhood groups. To access potential participants for the research I first contacted the local government office as this is typically a key site for leadership in rural communities (Sorenson and Epps, 1996). These initial exchanges alerted me to the importance of a newly formed group called the Town Enterprise Committee (TEC). The Economic Development Officer (EDO) and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) were in formal positions of leadership, but these ranged in type and status. They included leaders from agri-politics, health, education, local government, small business, community development, indigenous affairs and neighbourhood groups. To access potential participants for the research I first contacted the local government office as this is typically a key site for leadership in rural communities (Sorenson and Epps, 1996). These initial exchanges alerted me to the importance of a newly formed group called the Town Enterprise Committee (TEC). The Economic Development Officer (EDO) and Chief Executive Officer (CEO)

3The case study site was selected according to the principles of purposeful or criterion based sampling common to qualitative research (Burns, 2000). In the first instance, a number of criteria were identified which excluded places as possible sites for research. A key factor was the need to avoid the many sugar industry towns along the Queensland coast as I had focused on these as part of my doctoral research. The funding bodies for this project advocated examining gender relations in other agricultural industries, as well as in emerging rural industries, such as tourism and hospitality. It was therefore necessary to select potential sites according to the diversity in their industry base. It was also decided to avoid those towns that were, at the time the study commenced in 2001, experiencing severe drought as it was assumed this would colour the investigation. Another pragmatic concern was avoiding those towns where the industry partners currently had other large-scale social research underway. Funding limitations were a final practical restraint in determining possible sites.

4This is a pseudonym.

to whom I spoke all directed me to the committee and its members as a first point of call. My research journal records notes from these conversations in which I was told that, ‘you’ll find all the leaders on the committee’ and ‘you’ll get what you want from the committee’.

In total, of the 40 interviews I undertook across the district, 14 were members of the 19-member committee in both their capacity as committee members and as leaders in other fields of endeavour. I also interviewed the Mayor who is the committee chair, the (CEO) who is an ex-officio member of the committee and the EDO who is employed by the committee. While a further 23 interviews were undertaken as part of the case study, these are not reported in this paper. In summary then, data from 17 interviews of persons associated with the TEC are engaged in this paper. Because men hold all but one position of leadership on the committee, only one of the interviews was undertaken with a woman. I also attended one of the monthly meetings of the TEC as a participant observer, and consulted a range of documents related to the formation of the group, such as local newspaper clippings and council reports.

Interviews were ‘lightly structured’ (Wengraf, 2001) in that a schedule of questions was developed, but there was sufficient scope for participants to raise new issues or for questions to be reworded or reordered according to the responses received. Analysis followed a reiterative process of open, axial and selective coding as described by Strauss and Corbin (1998). A qualitative software package assisted with this process, but I continued to return to the full interview transcripts to ensure the integrity of the narrative whole remained intact (Fielding and Lee, 1998).

5. The Town Enterprise committee

In 1998 a new mayor was elected to lead the shire of Villa which was, by this time, severely depressed economically.5 His eight member council included one woman who acts as the Deputy-Mayor. She was newly elected in 1998 along with two other councillors. This reflected a major change in the town’s leadership, as the previous incumbent mayor and deputy had been in their position for nearly two decades.

In a move that has made him legendary, both around the district, and across the state, the Mayor managed to convince the state government to give the shire a one-off untied grant of A$10 million. While the political

5In Queensland, as well as Western Australia and South Australia, all mayors are popularly elected directly to the position by the public. This differs from Victoria, Tasmania, the Northern Territory, and some local government authorities of New South Wales, where mayors are elected by Council members from amongst their own numbers. As such, these mayors perform a largely ceremonial role, and do not carry responsibility for community leadership over and above that of an ordinary Council member. In contrast, those directly elected as Queensland mayors perform a managerial function acting as leaders of Councils. This typically affords Queensland mayors a very high profile as political and community leaders in their own right.
machinations behind such an unprecedented allocation of funding will never be known, the public position the mayor espoused was that the town had simply ‘missed out’. He argued that during the long years of conservative rule in Queensland (1968–1989), the shire had been ignored because the vast majority of its population had different political sympathies. Then, when the Labor Party did come to power in Queensland in 1989 the shire was similarly ignored because it was thought these ‘true believers’ required no political or policy attention to gain their support.

The TEC was formed in 1999 (see Fig. 1). Two official public council documents record its establishment. The first of these documents is an Economic Development Strategy and the second is a pamphlet listing the membership of the committee and its role. Both documents record that the committee emerged out of a steering committee established to oversee the development of an Economic Development Strategy. Its stated aim is to ‘foster the creation of wealth and employment opportunities in the shire’. The way forward to attain such an aim is conveyed in a series of images on the cover of the strategy document. The clear message contained in the photographs of draglines, dozers, brahman cattle and boats is that economic development is about capital works, machines, and production. In interviews there was some evidence to suggest that committee members recognise the value of broader community development. However, economic concerns were positioned as primary and a necessary preliminary to social development. As one member claimed, ‘You need to get people jobs first and then you can start thinking about some of the other types of things you’d like to do.’

Tracing the history of the TEC was much more problematic than is conveyed in the above description. This is because so much of its emergence and development was undertaken in informal spaces. Indeed, there was no official documentation of the terms of the committee, detailed selection or membership processes or operating guidelines. While the two formal council documents on the subject present the establishment of the committee as a predetermined strategy of elected members to build partnerships with business for the economic benefit of the shire, the reality appeared to be much more ad hoc. It was consequently typical for members to describe the start of the group by referring to informal discussions between groups of men.

A couple of councillors and businessmen got together and talked about the idea that with the meat works closing down and the town just flattened we thought we should do something to get the area up and going again (Interview 5).

This notion of self-help and self-reliance recurred throughout the interviews. As Herbert-Cheshire (2000, p. 2003) has claimed, these discourses are central to contemporary rural community development as it is espoused by Australian governments and ‘expert’ community developers. They are also indicative of the shift to governance, and the reconstitution of the state from provider to ‘strategic enabler’ (Imrie and Raco, 1999, p. 47). To hear these discourses articulated by TEC members is therefore not surprising. The two documents produced by the group reinforced and replicated this discursive reconditioning of the local state. One Economic Development Strategy advised the following on its cover heading: ‘governments don’t create community economic growth or change, community attitudes—people do’. This sloganeering continued with the statement that ‘Successful communities are those which take control of their own destiny.’

The fact that the move to establish the TEC came from outside the Council (with some key Councillors’ support) was evident in that members expressed little faith in, or support for, the incumbent council as it was in 1999. They consequently sought a means of circumventing it as the following participant explained:

My thinking at the time was that the council was being poorly led and that it wasn’t progressive enough in its thinking. I was sick and tired of seeing the town being held back. Town Enterprise is a strong team that has energy and vision to make things happen.

This agenda to circumvent the Council also appeared to be central to the Mayor, although he was not overly explicit in making this claim. From interviews I sensed he had a degree of frustration with some of whom he called the ‘old guard’ councillors and was seeking a way to bypass them to further his agenda. He was spoken of very highly by TEC members who reminded me of his former

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Fig. 1.
background as a union organiser and his upbringing outside of the major town in the shire. Businessmen on the TEC recounted that affinities and connections were able to be made across masculine subjectivities in spite of these differences:

I was really dubious about him to start with, his history in the mine and with coming from x, but he has proved me wrong and lots of others wrong too. He’s put all that aside and just focused purely on getting things done for the town (Interview 3).

In describing the rationale for the formation of the TEC, male members suggested the challenge the town faced was that the ‘real’ leaders are those who are busy running successful businesses rather than those who are seeking to participate in public office. The view is that the very people you need to attract to progress economic development can not be convinced to spend what is considered to be wasted time dealing with bureaucracy and regulations. There was consequently a need to find a way to exploit the entrepreneurial spirit of the town’s business leaders without subjecting them to the minutiae of rules and regulations. The TEC was viewed as the ideal vehicle for this as one explained:

It’s made up of people who are used to getting things down. Largely people from a private enterprise background so we’re not used to red tape and it gets very frustrating (Interview 10).

Having only one woman on the TEC caused a degree of defensiveness in a few interviews, but was largely seen as a logical outcome of a rational process of selection. In introducing me at a TEC meeting I attended, there were embarrassed guffaws when the chair pointed out I was studying gender and leadership and there were no women leaders in sight, as the single woman member was not present. This was seen as problematic, but only in as much as there simply were not suitable meritorious women in the community who could be asked to be involved. The following quotation from the EDO is illustrative of this type of comment:

It wasn’t women were excluded. To get it running we needed the people who are there are the opinion makers in town. They’re from a range of sectors but they’re all influential and their role is to bring that influence or access to influence to the table. They are the centre of economic development in that sense (Interview 19).

Male participants drew on discourses of bureaucratic neutrality and gender-free rules, regulations and objectives in explaining women’s absence from leadership roles on the TEC. They legitimised men’s dominance of the committee and women’s exclusion by echoing an committee pamphlet which states that is membership ‘has been carefully structured to capture input and assistance from the key individuals and organisations’ in the shire. Men are on the TEC, not because they are men, but because they are ‘key individuals’ in the district. The discrepancy in men and women’s status was considered by one participant to be reflective of the types of industries that had historically predominated in the town. He suggested that more women might be involved in leadership positions on the TEC when a tourist industry is developed in the region as he thought this was an area in which women were more typically involved. Overall, as Tickell and Peck (1996, p. 608) found in their study of Manchester, no one in the case study actively rejected involvement by women, but the dominance of a discourse of business and entrepreneurship marginalises women. The hegemony of this discourse also legitimates and naturalises men’s dominance of the positions of leadership as the following quotation demonstrates:

People were appointed complete on merit so we could achieve our goals. When we first set up our organisation we had a clear set of objectives and needed to get people together who would drive them. We needed the business leaders in the town who had the networks, the intimate knowledge of the community and the motivation to get things going (Interview 26).

Over the course of the research I met many women who would seemingly fit the masculinised criteria of ‘merit’, in terms of business acumen and success. Indeed, the town boasts one of the most active clubs for small business women in the state. None of these women had, however, been invited to join the committee. This could be explained by the fact that many of the women were involved in smaller enterprises than the male committee members, as well as in more feminised businesses (for example, gift shop, beauty shop), rather than businesses associated with masculinity, economic development, and infrastructure (hardware, agriculture).

Even more important in explaining the almost complete absence of women, is the recruitment process for committee selection. This is a process that relied upon fraternal networks and coalitions, established and sustained in male-only spaces, or, at the least, male dominated spaces. The literature on gender and leadership has highlighted the importance of networks for accessing leadership positions (Pini et al., 2004b). This is a problem that is likely to be exacerbated for rural women given the continued gender divide in rural men and women’s activities (Little, 2002a), as well as the paucity of women in positions of rural and agricultural leadership (Pini, 2002, 2005b).

Even though some of the business men involved were in their late fifties and early sixties, the mayor, CEO and EDO had all just turned forty. This was an issue of which committee members were particularly proud and evidence of what they saw as the group’s energy and enthusiasm. They joked that one of the members was the ‘grandfather’ at 44. Even those male committee members in their late forties or early fifties could still lay claim to relative youth when compared with the men who had previously dominated council decision-making. This, together with
the fact that the business men were from different industries, signalled what many claimed was the committee’s diversity.

It’s a cross section of the community (Interview 28). It’s a body of people from different walks of life from around the district who come together with the council to help create united policy for the good of the area (Interview 6).

These findings add a further dimension to O’Toole and Burdess’s (2004, p. 442) claim that a ‘new generation of leaders’ is emerging in rural Australia as evidenced by the membership of new governance institutions. While the same claim could be made about Villa shire, it tells us little apart from the fact that a particular version of masculinity associated with youth and non-agricultural work is now being prioritised for leadership positions in rural communities. This is predictable given that discourses lamenting the loss of youth from rural areas have enjoyed significant currency in the Australian press (Gabriel, 2002). It is also understandable in light of the number of Australians who have left farming, and the loss of status in farming as an occupation (Gray and Lawrence, 2001). What is perhaps more important than the emergence of a ‘new generation of leaders’ who are young and working in industries other than agriculture, is that men continue to monopolise positions of rural leadership, and further, that these men continue to be those who are Anglo-Saxon, non-indigenous, middle-class and heterosexual. All of the 18 male members of the TEC, the mayor, CEO and EDO are non-indigenous, Anglo-Saxon, married and able-bodied. The significant proportion of people living in the shire from non-English speaking backgrounds and large indigenous population were not represented on the Committee.

As well as discussing the aims and membership of the committee, interviews also canvassed the types of tasks it undertakes. Of particular interest to me was gaining an understanding of how members perceived the TEC to be different from the many other groups that existed in the town. In answering what was ‘new’ about this form of governance one participant suggested:

We identify opportunities for the town. It’s a pretty active committee. In the past the town would have had different groups pulling in different directions. All trying to do the right thing but just not effective. This group is really looking at industry, looking to gain for industry and pounces on that, but in a very professional way. There are few dissenters. The leadership is seen as very decisive. They say this is what we’re going to do and how we’re going to do it and they do it (Interview 17).

The above quotation resonates with what has been identified in the organisational and business literature as a dominant discourse of managerial masculinity focused on aggression, decisiveness, strength, efficiency, action and vision (see, for example, Collinson and Hearn, 1996; Whitehead, 1999). Also articulated in the interviews was the relatively ‘new’ discourse of managerialism and its associated notions of instrumentality, targeting, control, performance and effectiveness (Kerfoot and Knights, 1998; Whitehead, 1998; Blackmore and Sachs, 2003). This is a management discourse strongly connected to the shift to ‘governance’ (Goodwin and Painter, 1996), as well as symbolically and materially embedded in hegemonic masculinity (Whitehead and Moodley, 1999). In validating a form of management mobilising around constructs such as strong-mindedness, goal setting and efficiency, TEC members marginalised processes of negotiation, consultation and building accord. These latter modes of operating were, by definition, associated with ineptitude, dithering and irrationality.

A further attribute of the TEC according to the member cited above is its ‘professional way’. This claim to professionalism was made in each of the 13 interviews with male members of the group, the mayor, CEO and EDO. They spoke of the need for the area to have a ‘professional face’ and ‘professional representation’ as well as the way in which the committee was conducted ‘very professionally’ and peopled by ‘professionals’. The discursive attraction of the identity ‘professional’ in the contemporary western world is interrogated thoughtfully and thoroughly in an edited collection by Dent and Whitehead (2002, p. 3). In their editorial introduction they note the way in which the term ‘amateur’ has lost its noble associations as it is juxtaposed next to the subject position ‘professional’. They write that, ‘to be labelled an amateur is to be condemned as lacking competence and useful knowledge; not a serious player in today’s competitive world.’ It is thus that the discourse of professionalism has become ubiquitous, and we find ourselves all scurrying to chant the mantra of professionalism. It is also an identity. Kerfoot (2002) argues, that has historically strongly overlapped with masculine discourses of management. She explains that the identity of professional is one associated with specialised knowledge, skill, emotional disengagement, instrumentality and rationality. Thus, the embodied discursive subject which is the ‘professional’ is the masculine/man/male.

The theme of one voice and a lack of dissent articulated by the above participant recurred throughout the interviews with members of the committee. Different groups that had been brought ‘under the umbrella’ of the TEC included the two local development bureaus and the tourist development group. Committee members described and justified this process by deploying a very specific discourse of managerial masculinity which is described in the management literature as paternalism (Kerfoot and Knights, 1993; Pini, 2004). This is a discourse which obtains power through covert means by ‘emphasising the moral basis of cooperation’ (Collinson and Hearn, 1994, p. 13) and focusing on the need for ‘group solidarity’ as a means of achieving the greater good for all (McDowell, 2001, p. 184). In their interviews, TEC men described these groups as well-intentioned but unruly who required the
discipline of the paternal father in the guise of the TEC. Being subjected to this discipline was presented as being in the best interests of the groups, whether or not the groups understood this to be the case at the time. Again, they could not necessarily be trusted to know what was best for them, and so patriarchal authority was required. This is conveyed in the following quotation from a TEC member who also edited and owned the local newspaper:

With TEC instead of having things over there and over here we’ve brought it all together. It should be that everything is in the same group under the one umbrella so that there is some control. I feel quite strongly about that. We need a united front. It’s a small town. You don’t need five groups trying to do the same thing or fighting amongst themselves. That’s been the beauty of the TEC (Interview 14).

The discourse of what Tickell and Peck (1996, p. 610) call ‘public-spirited paternalism’ was also deployed in committee members’ descriptions of their involvement as service to the community. They spoke of the time and energy required to fulfil the duties as representatives of the TEC and that, if given the choice, they would prefer to be involved in other pursuits. Their status, however, as community ‘fathers’ made such a dereliction of duties impossible.

This town has been good to me and I want to give something back. I think most would say that. You’ve got a lot of successful businessmen who could be doing a lot of other things with their time but they are wanting to do this for the town and for the future… Use what we know, what we’ve learnt in business for the benefit of the town (Interview 28).

The only female member of the group explained how the TEC differed from the Local Development Bureau of which she was also a part, and which also had equal gender representation. This Local Development Bureau was in a small town that was outside of the local government centre.

Our Local Development Bureau is a kind of local thing. We have Santa in the Park, we have the festival, Australia day celebrations, do community morale here at a local level and get things done. At the next level is where the TEC comes in. They are more the powerhouse. Building dams and doing things at a higher level. We haven’t got enough clout to deal with government but it has. The right people to talk to so that’s why they set it up to attack the bigger issues of jobs, development and investment and that sort of stuff whereas we deal with things locally trying to keep morale going locally (Interview 21).

The role and place that has been designated for women and feminine subjectivities in the new rural governance arrangements in the Villa Shire is at the level of the local and the everyday, while that colonised by men and masculinities is at the level of the district and the strategic. There is also a clear demarcation between the social and the economic along gender lines. The natural and legitimate roles of men are as money managers and economic developers, while women are designated the roles of carers and community builders. In much the same way, but on a markedly different scale, feminist writers have noted the way in which women’s entry into positions of leadership at the national level has been accompanied by the shift in organisational and management power from national to international arenas (Calas and Smirich, 1993). In both instances, women remain at home as the secondary other, fulfilling an extension of their private domestic role, servicing and supporting the men who have moved into the new primary power positions offered, in the first instance, by the forms of new governance, and in the second instance, by the emergence of a globalised market.

The results of this study contrast with the findings of O’Toole and Macgarvey (2003) from their study of women’s involvement in local economic development in the south-west of the Australian state of Victoria, and raise important questions for future gender analyses.6 They note an increased presence of women in leadership roles on committees designed to facilitate economic growth in rural communities, and conclude that this is indicative of ‘a change in gender relations in rural Australia’ (O’Toole and Macgarvey, 2003, p. 173).7 What is assumed in this analysis is that leadership roles and committees wield equivalent power. If we again heed Tickell and Peck’s (1996) warning to look beyond the simple presence of females to question where women are located within the new institutions of local governance we glean very different, and unfortunately, much less optimistic, findings than that of a reported feminising of the local state.8 It is critical to any gender analysis of the findings that the 15 women representatives at the centre of the study are leaders on groups across 13 small towns, only one of which is a local government centre. These are consequently on the

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5There are some important contextual differences between Victoria and Queensland in terms of gender equity as the former has a stronger and longer history of state based equity policies and programs while the latter has a history of social conservatism and resistance to gender equality at the state level.

6The problematic nature of the analysis offered in this paper is perhaps related to the use of the notion of ‘paradigms in progress’ (Henderson, 1995), as it is difficult to engage a gender critique using a theory which does not appear to account for power or resistance. For example, the shift from ‘patriarchal dominance’ to ‘feminine intervention’ is presented as linear and uncontested, yet we have significant evidence to suggest that there has been a severe winding back of gender equity programs, policies and legislation in the Australian state over the past decade (Hancock, 1999; Pini and Brown, 2004; Panelli and Pini, 2005). Women are finding that many of the gains that O’Toole and Macgarvey (2003) cite as evidence of gender transformation are now being undermined, withdrawn or questioned.

7A further question that needs to be asked about the data is ‘what’ women. This is because the increased visibility of women in decision-making positions in rural Australia has, for the most part, been afforded to a very narrow group of women. That is, white, heterosexual and property owning women (Pini et al., 2004a).
periphery of power at the local level. Also central to any gender critique is the fact that these committees are unfunded, and with no paid staff, and consequently women leaders are left with the burdensome tasks of fund-raising for town infrastructure and grant writing. This is very different from the TEC with its full time professional employee, $10 million budget and mayoral chair. Therefore, we could see women’s increased participation on the Victorian committees studied by O’Toole and Macgarvey (2003), not as indicative of a fragmenting of patriarchy, but as a further manifestation of patriarchal power in rural Australia. It could be posited that women are in these leadership positions because power is vested elsewhere. That is, men have moved on to new more prestigious spaces leaving women at home to do the metaphorical housework in the guise of raising/seeking funds and caring for the community.

6. Discussion

What is seen to be promised by the language of governance—partnerships, networks and participation—is that newly established institutional arrangements will lead to a dissolution or redistribution of power, and open up opportunities for state involvement by citizens who have been traditionally marginalised in the public sphere. This is, however, a fallacy. As rural social scientists have found, new forms of governance may, in fact, have a contrary affect and reinforce and solidify existing power relations, further disenfranchising groups who have always struggled to have a voice in the rural policy making arena (e.g. Cloke et al., 2002). One such group is rural women as has been demonstrated in the Villa case study.

As others have argued, women’s relationship to new forms of governance needs to be contextualised. That is, understood in terms of factors such as the under-representation of rural women in local government (Little, 2002a,b), the exclusion of rural women from male dominated networks (Grant and Rainnie, 2005), the lack of recognition of rural women’s groups by power-holders (Shortall, 2004), and the subordinate position of women within rural communities more broadly (Bock, 2004).

Also critical to understanding men and women’s involvement in new forms of rural governance are the gendered binaries of masculinity and femininity. As feminist scholars since De Beauvoir (1975) have argued, this dualism, which colours so many social practices and relations, is not one of two equal parts. Typically what is masculine is prized and superior and what is feminine is subordinate and devalued (Connell, 1995; Whitehead, 2002). The feminine/female/woman is ‘the other’, the ‘not masculine/male/man’. It is through this prism of unequal discursive power that we need to examine what is masculinised/feminised in the interviews. Three issues are relevant.

One of the arguments on which new forms of governance is predicated is that the private sector has a potential and capacity that is missing from the public sector (Jones and Little, 2000; Rai, 2004). This dichotomising of the private and the public is, as Little and Jones (2000) found in their study, gendered. In the framing offered by Villa participants, the private sector is masculinised as efficient, decisive, robust and risk-taking, while the public sector is feminised as passive, inefficient, weak, and slow-moving. In their Manchester case study Peck and Tickell (1995) identify a similar critique of the local state as overly bureaucratic in the narratives of business leaders. They argue that gender is imbricated in this criticism as the local state is positioned as a ‘dithering woman, bound by convention, whose problems can be solved by the purposive intervention of business(men)’ Tickell and Peck’s (1996, p. 609) Similarly in this case study, remedying the ‘problem’ of the troublesome female state has required masculine penetration in the guise of the TEC which will counter her deliberation with action, her lack of productivity with vigour and her fragility with strength.

The secondary set of binaries evident in the narratives is the gendered distinction made between the old and new council. The old council and its leadership is located within feminine discourses as lifeless, submissive and unproductive while the new council and leadership is positioned within discourses of hegemonic masculinity as progressive, youthful, strong and resourceful. Participants recurrently deployed these discourses when describing different aspects of the committee. In its singularity of focus, in its entrepreneurial drive, in its influential and worldly leadership and its competitive edge, the TEC is strongly imbued in dominant scripts of masculinity (Hooper, 2001; Connell, 2003; Bruni et al., 2005). The fact that the previous leadership of the council was all male reveals the importance of taking gender analysis beyond a focus on the presence of men and women’s bodies in terms of leadership, and further, examining gender relations between groups of men as well as between groups of men and women. What was esteemed by committee members was not masculinity in and of itself, but a very particular configuration of masculinity as embodied in youth and business management. It was also a masculinity of able-bodied, English speaking, non-indigenous, heterosexual and middle class men.

The third set of binaries articulated in interviews is the demarcation between the economic and the social. In the Villa shire it appeared that women had a more significant role in social planning and development than their male counterparts. However, this work was not afforded any discursive emphasis by the men in interviews. Again, it was the secondary other. There was, in contrast, a discourse which suggested that the ‘real’ work for the shire was that of economic development. What is obscured by this hegemonic discourse of growth and industry are the private work and community experiences of many rural women (Shortall, 2002). These activities may constitute economic competence and experience but this is seldom recognised given the dominance of narrow masculinist
definitions of regeneration and development (Midgley, 2006). Also obscured by restricted masculine discourses of rural development are issues and concerns that may be of relevance to women. As Skelton (2001, p. 111) reflected when reviewing Swedish policy documents, ‘sexuality, gender relationships, care and different forms of organizing family life are not defined as important questions to regional development policy’.

In their insightful analysis on the subject of new rural governance, Herbert-Cheshire and Higgins (2004) have ably demonstrated that neo-liberalism has demanded a new citizen of rural Australia should people wish their community to survive (see also, Murdoch, 1997; Ward and McNicholas, 1998a, b). The defining traits and characteristics of this refashioned citizen are not, however, gender neutral. Rather, this citizen is situated within masculine discourses of action, entrepreneurship and professionalism (Collinson and Hearn, 1996; Chalmers, 2001; Whitehead, 2003). The question is what does this reconstituted definition of the ‘good rural citizen’ mean for women? It does not necessarily preclude women from being involved as leaders in groups such as the TEC. It is possible, for example, for women to counter the regime of hegemonic masculinity and offer alternative discourses about what rural Australia requires in terms of leadership, rural development and citizenship. Similarly, it is possible for women to reconstitute notions of entrepreneurialism and professionalism so that they encompass discourses of femininity. This does not tell the whole story however, as there are broader gendered discursive power relations at play.

Two issues require highlighting in terms of women’s exclusion from the TEC, and the likelihood of change occurring in women’s representation in the future. First, there is no easy fit between the subject position ‘woman’ and the identities of ‘leader’, ‘business person’, and ‘entrepreneur’ (Sinclair, 1995; Ahl, 2002; Pini, 2005a–c). Instead there is an ‘interchangeability’ between these terms and that of men and masculinity (Mulholland, 1996, p. 122). The gendered nature of these subject positions means that successful business women in the town would be largely invisible, and further, render any attempts by women to take up the identities of ‘entrepreneur’ or ‘leader’ highly problematic. Second, we have seen that that the discourses surrounding the new rural local governance arrangements in Villa shire afford legitimacy and credibility to hegemonic masculinity. Because hegemonic masculinity is not exclusively the preserve of men, women may seek to engage this gender performance. However, the gender literature reminds us that ‘it is not masculinity per se that is valorised in organisations, it is masculinity in men’ (Rutherford, 2001, p. 330). Thus, women may be reviled rather than rewarded for aligning themselves with the dominant masculine discourses that resonate so loudly in descriptions of the TEC.

What I found surprising over the course of the research was the limited resistance to what I saw as the exclusionary nature of the TEC. One older male councillor who was a long-term incumbent in office was critical of the group’s lack of elected status and corresponding decision-making power. He was clearly one of the ‘old guard’ as described by the Mayor and some TEC men.

This was, however, the only overt criticism of the TEC I heard. This should not be taken to mean that resistance is non-existence, or indeed, that resistance is not possible.9 The problem may have been a methodological one. As the overall study was not specifically designed to elicit information about new rural local governance, the issue of opposition to the group may have been obscured.10 Beyond this explanation, there are a number of other issues to consider. Firstly, it is unlikely that any group positioned as offering change would be criticised especially at such an early stage of its development. In understanding this, it needs to be remembered that the district had experienced an unprecedented period of economic hardship over more than a decade and carried significant social scars. A second issue which may explain the lack of public negative reaction to the TEC is the charisma and popularity of the mayor. A related factor is that the committee is indeed made up of powerful businessmen who would be well placed to control the discourses circulating about the committee. For example, affirming stories about the committee’s achievements and plans were published regularly in the local paper courtesy of the editor who was a TEC member.11 A third factor which may explain why the women I interviewed had little to say about the TEC is that they felt dissociated from it. Because the TEC was so strongly positioned as primarily involved in capital works and economic concerns, they may have had little expectation that they would ever be asked to be involved. Unfortunately, all of these reflections are only speculative, and demonstrate again, the need for further research on gender relations and new rural local governance.

7. Conclusion

This paper has presented a case study of new local governance in rural Australia as a means of arguing for a more gender sensitive approach to the subject. There are, of course, inherent problems in the examination of a single case study in terms of generalisations and theory development (Steinke, 2004). The literature on new local governance provides further warning that before drawing

9Contemporary feminist rural social science literature has emphasised women’s agency in rejecting and rewriting dominant gender discourses (Liepins, 1998; Fincher and Panelli, 2001; Pini et al., 2004a; Panelli and Pini, 2005).

10The purpose of the study was to examine the broad question of gender and leadership in rural communities.

11During the interview with the editor of the newspaper he referred me to particular stories that had been published about the TEC. He subsequently copied some of these and sent them to me. I also spent an afternoon browsing through past editions of the paper in order to enrich my understanding of the town and shire. I noted a number of positive stories about the TEC during this time.
conclusions from case studies researchers should recognise the specificity of different contexts and environments (Imre and Raco, 1999, p. 59).12 These observations do not detract from the findings in this paper—that gendered power relations are being articulated and reproduced in the new rural local governance arrangements in Villa—but highlight the need for further comparative gender focused research. There is now a vibrant literature addressing the previously loud 'silence at the centre of contemporary rural studies concerning the ways in which rural areas are governed'(Goodwin, 1998, p. 5), but a body of scholarship from a feminist/gender perspective is yet to emerge.

Integral to this paper’s argument is that if we are to develop a feminist/gender literature on new rural local governance we need to go beyond body counting. This is not to discount the fact that the female and male body are key sites for the practice of gender, and therefore critical to reading gendered meanings and subjectivities. However, to limit our focus to the body is inadequate, as the body is just one of many ways in which gender may be socially, culturally and symbolically produced. To progress the project of gendering new rural governance therefore, our attention should not be on simplistic quantification according to sex. Rather, we need to investigate further the extent to which gendered subjectivities, knowledges and definitions are embedded in new forms of rural local governance. We also need to critique how and why particular discourses of gender have come to occupy a prominent/subordinate place in new institutional arrangements. Further to this we need to examine how class, sexuality, cultural background and other subject positions intersect with masculinity/femininity to include or exclude particular people or agendas from rural local governance, and interrogate points of possible resistance to exclusion. Another important set of questions surround the issue of resistance to dominant discourses of gender articulated through new rural local governance. Finally, attending to the heterogeneity of the new structures characteristic of the shift to governance is also crucial to any gender study so that women’s presence/absence can contextualised in relation to the question of power. Taking up these opportunities would enrich, not only gender specific rural scholarship, but render more fulsome and vitalised, the knowledge we have of new rural local governance.

Acknowledgements

This research was funded by the Queensland Department of Primary Industries and the Queensland Office for Women. I am grateful for their support.

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Gender Studies Workshop of the XI World Congress of Rural Sociology in Trondheim in 2004. I am thankful for the support and advice offered to me by colleagues who attended the gender sessions, and especially to the workshop chairs, Sally Shortall and Bettina Bock, for their encouragement and interest.

References


Further reading
