“The cut and thrust of industrial relations” – bullying by another name?

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to offer a feminography, that is a “narration of a female self in a feminist age” (Abrams, 2017) by presenting a conceptual analysis, derived from experience, of email providing a form of discourse – that the author calls finger-speak – through which unexamined gender positioning caricatures a person’s identity. In so doing, the paper provides an illustrative case of a female manager being positioned through email to “know her place, perform it and feel it” (Hey, 2011).

Design/methodology/approach – An analysis of email foregrounds “finger-speak” as a form of digital conversation and through which people in universities may be positioned publicly but without their consent in relation to unexamined norms and assumptions. For women, it is argued, these norms are ageist and sexist. In this paper, fragments of finger-speak are collated to provide a reading of how mixing gendered norms with apparent differences of opinion constructs, via unexamined sexism, a public identity and then undermines it.

Findings – Through the case presented, the author argues that, because of a shared but unarticulated shadow over women as leaders, email lays the ground for subsequent scapegoating in such a manner that the woman takes responsibility for structural challenges that rightly belong to the organisation.

Originality/value – The contribution that email makes to constructing female identity in public is new, complementing other work that publicly characterises women leaders, through film (Ezzedeen, 2015), and through published writing such as autobiography (Kapasi et al., 2016). Emotional work undertaken by women in university leadership is so far under-represented in public, and email is a site through which this work becomes visible.

Keywords  Leadership, Email, Feminography

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

This article offers a feminography, that is a “narration of a female self in a feminist age” (Abrams, 2017) by presenting a conceptual analysis and illustrative case, derived from experience, of email providing a form of discourse – that I shall call finger-speak – through which unexamined gender positioning caricatures a person’s identity. This establishes archetypal gendered expectations of that person, and then, casts a shadow over the extent to which the person lives up to expectations. Thornton’s (2013) archetype of “Benchmark Man” provides a framework for positioning women as “other”, and I argue that media
representations of women in leadership also provide a “Benchmark Woman” stereotype against which women leaders are also assessed unfavourably.

The sociology of disengagement of women as leaders in the managerial academy (Morley, 2014; Blackmore, 2014) arises out of the lived experiences of aspirant women and those watching, and this article shows how this can work in practice. That women leaders experience violence, symbolic and actual, at work in the academy will surprise no-one. The example presented shows how, when under pressure, perpetrators and institution collude with each other in perpetuating unexamined and gendered and management norms, and so that as well as being measured against benchmark man, women may also be assessed against normalised female stereotypes of leadership as well. The case presented in this article is constructed from email, though which the conventional methods of stereotyping and denigration are used to exclude and misrepresent. When I complained about it, I was told that this was the cut and thrust of industrial relations.

The article begins by summarising where we are up to in explaining the invisibility of women in leadership, particularly in universities. This is then extended by showing how women leaders are constructed in the public domain, in film, through their own writing about themselves, and then briefly by considering trolling of women in the public eye. It is argued that, in the workplace, email also provides a public media through which identity is constructed and that this is in relation to societal norms. The article concludes by suggesting that, because of this shared but inarticulate shadow over women as leaders, woman is scapegoated to take responsibility for structural challenges that rightly belong to institution. Email data, fragments of “finger-speak” are presented to show how this positioning took place in one university.

Invisibility of women in leadership
An extensive literature explores the lack of visibility of women in senior positions. Those who are there may be appointed implicitly for their soft skills, particularly in institutions in difficulty (Ryan and Haslam, 2005; Grummell et al., 2009). Practical explanations (Airini and Conner, 2010) pay attention to preparing, via mentoring for instance, women who may lack readiness for leadership. This is the territory of gender equity strategies and takes the status quo of leadership as unproblematical. The gender-neutral concept of “authentic leadership” means that successful leaders are self-aware and have some sense of who they are as people, are able to act in alignment with this self, and are also prompted by a good moral purpose, although this still begs the question of disproportionate over-representation of male leaders (Ladkin and Taylor, 2010). Thornton argues that in the corporate world of twenty-first century universities, leadership and merit are in themselves constructed in masculinist ways, with “Benchmark Man”, a “normative masculinist standard favouring the Anglo-Australian, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle class, not elderly, espouse a right-of-centre politics and a nominal mainstream religion, if any” (Thornton, 2013, p. 128). Thornton notes that when women and others are measured against Benchmark Man they will be found wanting.

Some improvement in conditions for women in universities over recent years coincides with increased competition between universities for reduced resources, and so there is an apparent supply of experienced women ready to take up positions as deans, pro-vice-chancellors, directors of research centres, that is academic groups charged with generating resources (Blackmore and Sawers, 2015). Many women are ambitious (Fitzgerald, 2014, Griffiths, 2012) and so the literature is beginning to be complemented by accounts of the demands on and experiences of women actually in powerful positions (Acker, 2012; Lynch, 2007; Thompson, 2015). These accounts indicate a relatively new phenomenon, that is...
rejection of the structures in which leadership is located (Morley and Crossouard, 2014). Active disenchantment with the corporatisation of university life dominated by managerialism (Blackmore, 2014) is now providing a sociological and critical perspective on the “leaky pipeline” premise that provided enough women enter the academy there will eventually be sufficient for the most senior positions. Deficit of women in leadership is beginning to be understood in more complex ways than merely as a numbers game. Morley raises a critical question about whether the absence of women from the most senior jobs is as a result of women “desiring, dismissing or being disqualified from” such positions (Morley, 2014, p. 114). Fotaki (2013) has pointed to three emergent themes such as misrecognition and misrepresentation of female in ways of thinking about academia; absence of the female body in academic practice and theory and ways that those who are actually there counteract and behave in these gendered structures. Fotaki draws attention to women disguising their bodies by, for example, clothing choices, with Atkins and Vicars (2016, p. 7) referring to “‘managerial drag’ as the conscious performance of gender display as passing as a metaphor that we use to understand the ways in which women in power are able to negotiate the discourse” of hegemonic masculinity and to perform leadership. Hochschild (2003, p. 56) draws attention to “feeling rules” which are ways that a person believes they are expected to feel and be seen to act out feeling in particular circumstances. Beard (2017) invites us to look at Medusa (the Gorgon), her head covered with phallic snakes, beheaded, held aloft by Perseus (a hero) with her guts hanging out, to show how women, if somehow, through disguise or performance, manage to approach power, come to a violent end if things go wrong.

In contemporary universities, neoliberal managerialism means generating more measurable outcomes with fewer resources (Holmwood, 2014). Performativity is key, with academic “leaders” frequently (but not always) paid more and expectations set in the shape of key performance indicators, outputs and impact of the people in the groupings they lead. Scholarship is a performance indicator for academic staff but less evident in managerialist constructions of leadership. These are fearful environments in which all understand that their value to the organisation depends upon meeting these external measures of success. There is a prevailing assumption that when there is “good leadership”, in addition to achieving performative norms, there is also good morale, a sense of collective purpose, shared and known goals, and opportunities for individuals to contribute to and be recognised for their contribution to the collective whole. When this happy state of success does not prevail, part of the burden of the “manager/leader”, whose diplomatic attributes are expected to compensate for the lack of resources, is taking responsibility for the misery of working environments with reduced resources while continuing to reduce the resources. Parker (2016) points out that this work includes regulation and self-regulation of emotion and notes that contemporary universities are characterised by the self-congratulatory accounts of success (as in research assessment or promotion applications) needed to sustain individuals sense of worth and reduce fear.

Public construction of women leaders
The intention of this section is to draw specifically to two studies (Ezzedeen, 2015; Kapasi et al., 2016) that show how women leaders are characterised by media and by themselves. The point of doing this is twofold. First, I am building the case that in constructing and performing identity in public, email complements existing media portrayals of women leaders at work. Second, I suggest that Benchmark Man is not the only benchmark for gendered leadership because there is also a “Benchmark Woman” whose media representation shows her attempting to manage competing and normative socially gendered
demands. Through film and through their autobiographical writing women are largely positioned against societal norms of being in relationships, of balancing career against family commitments and so on; also these media orient us towards appreciating the pressure both to construct leaders in these ways, and for women leaders to conform to them.

Prompted by her suspicion that bombardment of film audiences by a barrage of role-conflict could contribute to “stereotype threat” (Steele, 1997) Ezzedeen (2015) examines how 165 female career women are portrayed in 137 Hollywood films dated 1976-2010. Even though these female characters were also portrayed as being passionate, competent, on the verge of brilliant scientific discoveries, etc., overall thematic analysis showed:

[...] portrayals revealed negative and stereotype-threatening characteristics and contexts of career women, including their mean and conniving personalities, promiscuity, isolation, failures at intimacy and inability to balance work and family (Ezzedeen, 2015, p. 239).

In contrast to deficit approaches to women in leadership that may create gender differences and reinforce them, Kapasi et al.’s (2016) study of autobiographies of successful female leaders, chosen because of the high public profile of the authors and because of high sales figures, shows that these leaders, through their writing, created their identities as well as describing them The autobiographies of British entrepreneur Karren Brady (2013), (now ex) US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, ex-Prime Minister of Australia Julia Gillard and Facebook Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg were analysed for the narratives each chose to tell in explaining their success. Each reinforced in some ways familiar normative lines, such as family support and personal values. It is these representations that tend to be reinforced by media presentation, that they conform, would be just like us but for better resources, elite educations, courage to take opportunities; that they have supportive partners, families, children and find juggling these with career challenging (but less challenging than we do). However each autobiography differs from these norms in two important but less well-promoted ways. These successful women all commit to the responsibility of making the world a better place for other women. They also offer a close examination of the body, refusing (in the case of Clinton and Gillard for example) to be advised about what to wear etc. Thus, we have women as “not man” in comparison to Benchmark Man, and we also see women leaders working to escape the fate of “Benchmark Woman” as well. Not only are their leadership value systems not gender neutral, according to their autobiographical identities, they are positively pro-woman. But these are omissions in their media portrayals and so:

Thus, in the case of authentic leadership, a theory presented as gender neutral, the authenticity of leadership has to some extent been crafted by the media rather than the leader (Kapasi et al., 2016, p. 399).

All four women are subject to unbridled commentary on their womanliness. Googling “sexist criticisms of <name>” generates prolific and furious responses. “Will Americans want to watch a woman get older before their very eyes?” shrieked Rush Limbaugh in 2007 in Media Matters and Gillard was, in The Age newspaper, deemed by Bill Heffernan in 2008 “unfit to lead Australia because she was ‘deliberately barren’”. According to another outlet, Digital Spy, Karren Brady on the TV show The Apprentice “clucks like an old hen when the argy bargy goes on between contestants during the tasks”. Each woman pays attention to responding to sexism, employing wit, critique and humour and each has many supporters promoting her abilities. But sexism is a form of violence and, under some circumstances, violence on the part of individuals transforms into collective and institutionalised violence.
Arguably the fate of Medusa was revisited on Gillard in 2014 and Clinton twice, in 2008 and 2016. That this was democracy in action did not make it any the less violent. 

Hey (2011) and Francis and Hey (2009) discuss the challenges inherent in disguising the emotional work required to head off accusations of being a victim. By being explicit about sexism and misogyny Julia Gillard succeeded in providing a powerful reminder that victimhood should be understood as collective misrecognition (Morley, 2012) as well as acknowledging personal hurt. Her Prime Ministerial fury “I will not be lectured about sexism and misogyny by this man, I will not” (arranged for the Australian Voices, Davidson, 2014) articulated outrage on the part of women everywhere and went viral.

Considering the portrayal of women leaders in the public eye through media (mis)representation provides a platform for thinking about the semi-public world of life in large institutions, such as in universities. What if any might be the equivalents of media portrayals of persons in these environments? I propose that the discourse of email, or finger-speak, provides a medium that exists through which identity is constructed and is in between speech and university promotional web-pages, written reports, etc. Although discouraged by corporate management, academic staff construct their own identities through email as is evident through signature strips, by-lines, lists of publications, links to personal Web pages, etc. In the article the next sections show how email texts may construct the identities of others as well.

What is finger-speak and how does it become data?
Email discourse refers to the “conversation” meaning an exchange in written or spoken form. Email often exists in a space between spoken and written language, with the signification of written words being both sign and signifier, intended and interpretable in different ways by sender and recipient. This is “finger-speak”, a form of language in which spoken and written are inseparable.

Gornall and Salisbury (2012) refer to hyperprofessionality as the expectation on and by academics to work digitally across several environments, including at home, in the office, while travelling and while waiting for trains and boats and planes. Considering email, who writes what, responds to whom, and the circumstances in which these interchanges take place is part of the body politic of industrial relations. Leaders are supposed not only to enact hyperprofessionality but also make it look easy.

I have already written about becoming known through email by considering emails that I sent myself (Drake, 2015). In another study (Kemp et al., 2015) examine emails between researchers to consider how they felt about being scrutinised at work. In this article, I continue to explore email as a means of undertaking and performing identity work, and suggest that university email provides an opportunity for one’s identity to be constructed by others as well as by oneself. In these circumstances readings of identity can become very personal. When participants believe that undemocratic power differentials exists, as is the case in universities where management structures are designed to reinforce neoliberal values, email may also be a medium for inflicting violence.

Ways of thinking about experience
Feminography (Abrams, 2017) provides legitimacy for women to narrate their own lives, explain choices made and also choices about the frameworks for telling their stories. They strive towards honesty and are embedded within the ideological framework of feminism. In 2012 I was delighted, as a single older woman believing myself to be recently released from on-going family commitments, to have the opportunity to move from the UK to align with the ambition of an Australian university. It was only a matter of weeks before the first of what have been an enduring series of financial crises needed to be urgently addressed. This
meant cuts in staffing as well as institutional reorganisation, and uncertainty and insecurity prevailed throughout the organisation. Both professional and academic staff became demoralised, knowledge of process disappeared with faculty staff who were made redundant. Outsiderness played out in the sort of working relations where many believed that institutional policy was covert, secretive and in the hands of external consultants as well as new external employees.

Interpreting direct experience in public means operating in an interesting and situated ethical position. Online communications occupy a grey space, with debates about whether and how they might be constituted as public or private communication. Because emails presented in their entirety are identifiable, in this article available textual fragments extracted from email are pieced together as parts of an incomplete mosaic. Gaps are indicated [...] and while readers may find this device interrupts the flow and renders aspects of context invisible it serves to protect anonymity. Humphrey (2013), when discussing insider-outsider positioning by researcher/practitioners in universities, writes in terms of informed consent and confidentiality; in terms of conflict of role and in terms of crystallising positions among stakeholders. In this case, a key reason for treating email as public and able to be analyzed is that all the emails from which the finger-speak fragments come emanated from a small number of about six staff and were sent to groups of people, not just to me, over almost two years, beginning shortly after I arrived, with some it shown rather than directly addressed to me. I cannot assume that each finger-speaker knew about all the other traffic, but I am certain that some knew about much of it, because they were sent under the guise of union business, or by people with personal as well as professional relationships. All emails from which these fragments are taken were copied to others, some to the entire workgroup consisting of 87 people; others to a more limited group, but I believe I am the only person who has seen them all. Thus, finger-speakers will not recognise all the other finger-speakers, though they may themselves align with the perspectives depicted.

Conscious of taking inside-out, I placed myself reflexively with a group of critical friends from more than one university and engaged with their bracing questions. I also presented a reflexive early oral version for discussion at a conference on another continent attended by no one I knew nor who knew me. I am respecting a key dimension of confidentiality by naming neither authors nor recipients. I discussed the ethical aspects of presenting email data, both orally and as fragments of a mosaic, with the responsible officials of the university and, as a consequence of these discussions and the external reviewers’ feedback, adjusted the way the material is presented. Nonetheless, it is inevitable that some people reading this account will disagree with my interpretation because I am not aiming at verifiable “truth”, but at a credible reading of a complex relational situation.

**Generating a story through finger-speak**

[...] that imperious ego-centric narcissistic self-serving bitch [...].

[...] rich bitch [...] too old.

Openly sexist and ageist, these were shown to me by well-wishers who believed that I needed to know what was being finger-spoken about. I was being positioned against stereotyped female characteristics – if rich then bitch – and too old to take up the position of carer expected of women at work; rather, an ageist assumption of being in need of care rather than being able to provide it. Ego-centrism and self-serving imply selfishness, which is also other to archetypal female selflessness. Imperious carries several inferences one of which is bossy, a uniquely sexist appellation stigmatising assertive girls and women:

[...] quite confident that her highness [...].
This phrase appeared in an email addressed to someone else but then forwarded to me with the forwarder forgetting to delete the trail beneath. “Her highness” makes flippant reference to royal title to suggest someone who is above herself. The use of “imperious” in the first fragment speaks similarly, in addition to meaning bossy as discussed above. The stereotyping is obvious; more subtle may be the reverberation with a political class system used to locate as “other”:

[…], provide clear guarantees that you are not intending to interfere with rights to intellectual freedom and that you respect the intellectual freedom policies of the University [...].

The above came from the union in support of a male member who objected to being pulled up on an unsolicited email sent to the workgroup that openly criticised the research of another female academic in that workgroup. Intellectual freedom is a contestable term in neoliberal universities. One expects the union to support its members when/if they consider their rights as employees are being threatened and there will be sympathy for those challenging institutional norms, in this case “respect” in order to circumvent power structures. I suggest that in the context of other positioning finger-speak, that this fragment had a double meaning. As well as stating an ideological position, it was consolidating stereotyping with the words “interfere”, and further othering by externalising “policies of the University” as being policies I may not “respect”.

I received an email from the Union explaining that there was an irreconcilable conflict of interest between my role and my membership of the college union group. I was told that it was not possible for me to step out of role because other members would continue to see me as their manager and that these other members would not feel comfortable about expressing their views in front of me. This was not discussed in advance with either me or the broader college union membership. I wrote to the college to make a case for tolerance on the grounds that fear escalates when low-level intimidation “masquerades under a banner of reasonableness”, concluding:

[…], political and personal power is exercised through combinations of social class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, economic position and cultural status [...]. It is not simply a case of job definition, of taking hats on and off.

This was a defiant (and possibly incompletely considered) step out of “neutral” management territory on my part. It led to discussion on the part of the broader college union membership, with alternative ways proposed for leaders and managers to participate as union members, but these were not taken up by the union group. At the time I saw the move as a finesse to exclude an ideological basis in which “role” was fixed and disregarded other approaches to thinking about performing power. Exclusion was easier than discussion, but what was expressed as tension between ideological position was lived as personal experience.

As part of the overall response to ever-squeezed resources the university engaged with an ongoing dialogue around workloads. I found myself aligned with policy that I had not been party to developing. I received an email from a finger-speaker who took the opportunity to try to frame my point of view about research supervision, which was different from theirs, as being because I did “not understand normal Australian practice”. The turn here is on the words “not understand” through which eliding the external, explicit, quantified specifics of workload allocation with “Australian practice” serve also to construct lack of cultural alignment or empathy.

Another email exchange that occurred claimed to be about a meeting that I could not remember. A second email was sent to the College, introducing more deficit characteristics, forgetfulness and helpless, in need of “minders” as well as lacking good purpose, duplicity:

Perhaps […]'s ‘minders’ will comprehend the situation better than she does […], not counting on it. It's hard to believe she really doesn't see 'strange remarks and apparent (convenient?) gap in […].
The reason I could not remember the meeting was because it did not take place: people named as attending it did not attend. Once the error was realised, the finger-speaker retracted the email (ensuring that I saw it twice). It constituted a direct personal attack and I saw it as such:

[...] senior managers show such little inclination to put ears to the ground and learn [...].

This fragment is taken from another longer email about workload, sent to the workgroup. I objected to the finger-speaker being critical of other people by email. In response, I was publicly reprimanded via finger-speak. Again constructed under the banner of reasonableness this group email, while protecting the rights of less powerful to speak back to power, was framed in a manner that personalised its intent by repeated use of the word "you" and "your":

It is with some dismay [...] your email seems to imply some kind of admonishment or implied threat [...] very strange your suggestion [...] critical comment about senior management in the kind of abstract way is a form of 'vilification' or 'harassment' [...] policies [...] used in the way you [...] suggest to stop critical comment about senior management, it would severely restrict intellectual freedom.

I had been isolated through email from female as well as leadership norms on the fronts of age, gender, capability and selfishness. I was constructed as forgetful, incomprehending, lacking cultural awareness and autocratic.

And then:

[...] not personal until you made it so [...].

Eventually I complained that I was being bullied by email and that because this acted as a deterrent to staff from also speaking up, the email environment created an unsafe workplace. The complaint was taken seriously by the university and there was a meeting with me of a panel of senior staff from human resources and my line manager at which I was asked for elaboration before the panel then considered my evidence.

My finger-speak complaint:

I am complaining that a) I’ve been treated unreasonably [...] over a period of nearly two years and that this constitutes bullying and harassment; and that b) as a consequence of recent communications [...] that relations for people and their confidence in the workplace have been rendered unsafe. I am a [name of union] member but have been isolated and unsupported by the [...] branch, and constructively demonised and vilified in front of my colleagues with the result that several are now alienated from [...] processes, and nervous about expressing their views in public. As [...] member, I complained in [...] to the [...] branch that I thought that I may need some protection against being bullied [...] group reorganised itself without consulting the membership [...] I was specifically informed that people could not handle my presence. [...] I believe this exclusion refers only to me. [...] No-one should have to tolerate this aggression, cloaked though it always is in some issue over which a difference of opinion would be considered reasonable. I am asking the University to take action.

The finger-speak response:

Thanks for the discussion [...] had with you yesterday regarding the bullying complaint you raised [...] This email provides an overview of the way we propose to resolve your concerns. It articulates the measures and strategies discussed.

This email went on to outline ten actions designed, in discussion with me, to help mitigate the difficulties. They included contacting the union state branch office; assisting with the provision of a communications workshop, an action plan to position the tone of conversation
and a high level cross-university reinforcement of university values; support with progressing academic workloads; a coach; and a more structured approach put into place regarding employee relations’ support with regular meetings encouraged to support me in managing the various employee relations issues which may arise and to help me best strategically and tactically position myself to achieve the outcomes “I seek”. In return for these actions, I agreed that I would not pursue the complaint, for I was advised we do not believe your concerns constitute bullying, more the cut and thrust of industrial relations.

Of these ten actions, one, the coach, was implemented, and another, the communications workshop happened, though I had organised it myself before the discussion. My immediate supervisor, a female pro-vice-chancellor, was committed to progressing implementation and ongoing dialogue, but within four months, she departed the university for an academic post elsewhere.

Discussion
Lack of resources is critically significant in enabling email at work to provide a space for emotional work. That “conversations” exist in finger-speak is a direct consequence of the affordances of technology in speeding up administration and the proliferation of email speaks to conducting “conversations” at all times of the day and night. That conversation takes place without speech also points to a lack of people to actually talk to in the streamlined structures that characterise some universities. Turkle (2015) argues that conversation through email and social media may inhibit the development and practice of empathy in children and adults. Dwyer (2012) discusses the development of trust online, pointing to the need to persuade people that there is “someone there” legitimately to respond to. Cyberbullying works through the combination of lack of empathy and full awareness that there is someone there who will be affected.

Constructing a person’s identity in public, without their consent and without regard for that person denies voice to them and effectively removes them from the conversation. I have argued that this is what finger-speak attempted in this case, made possible because the narrative of gendered violence is a wide boulevard, as are the narratives of ethnicity, class, sexuality; and also neoliberalism, of university corporate management, of factional politics. Navigating these discourses depends on position and point of view and I am aware that others less institutionally privileged will read this account as self-indulgent, as, at an earlier stage in my career, I would have myself. Others who object to the discursive operationalisation of corporate university life will think I was naive. Nonetheless, Benchmark Man I was not, and inferences of personal weakness in these emails served to position as outsider, away from the “normal practice” of Australian universities, casting a pejorative shadow over Benchmark Woman also. Technology, i.e. email, enabled easier collision and entanglement of the personal with institutional structure through caricature that strengthened already existing sociological prejudice.

Bourdieu and Wacquant (2002, p. 167) conceptualise symbolic violence as “the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity” with gender relations in which men and women are complicit in the denigration of female competence providing an example. A specific form of symbolic violence in institutional life is scapegoating, that is attributing blame for the failure of a community on to an individual. Perera (1986) explains that psychologically scapegoating is a form of “denying the shadow”, that is rejecting attitudes, behaviour and emotions that do not conform to some ideal of perfection, and projecting these on to others:

In the Western world, the scapegoat role has often fallen on to Jews and other minorities. It has also been the particular burden of girl children and women. These groups have traditionally been scapegoated – blamed and rejected, or at best undervalued – because the way they function or what they represent is not consciously esteemed by the culture. (1986, p. 13)
The response by the university in offering to provide assistance to address manifestations of this violence was not to address the underlying issues of gendered and ageist personal attack but to collude in normalising these practices by reframing them as “industrial relations”, for which I was responsible in alleviating, in the face of economic stringency, without the institution taking responsibility for any of this structural task.

Conclusion
Within narrative boulevards are disagreeable encounters that sometimes turn into street fights, individuals inflicting pain, recognisable to others as part of public life in that street. Where the boulevards intersect the fights become more akin to road rage, where enforcement of power assures dominance of one individual over another. The subtleties of who is at the intersection, identity, personality, historicity, become an irrelevance to the overall traffic flow, while being of huge significance to the individuals caught up in the trauma of the moment. Not personal? Of course it is personal.

Institutions try to dissipate complaints, for if pursued, defence incurs costs in terms of dollars and time: court cases, appeals to arbitration, work cover and the time taken to process often takes years. From this perspective the best outcome is for the protagonists to leave swiftly and scapegoating individuals is an effective means of achieving this. Workplace behaviour becomes the responsibility of the manager rather than the institution taking an holistic approach to industrial relations, with the whole precarity wobbling on assumptions of acceptable conventions of practice that preserve the status quo. Being female, outside normalised conventions of acceptable womanly image determined by age, audacity, relationship status, class, nationality and ethnicity, opens the doors for outsider-positioning, scapegoating and exclusion. Everyone needs beware of unarticulated norms in institutional life, be these about personal identity, or be they about the institution and what constitutes appropriate management and leadership skills. Normative approaches to leadership are dangerous for those people positioned outside them.

References


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