

Inequality regimes in male-dominated trades: What role do apprenticeship intermediaries (GTOs) play?

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Abstract

In Australia and internationally, women continue to be underrepresented in male-dominated trade occupations. A notable barrier is the apprenticeship system, which requires women to overcome obstacles in employment and training. Government and industry stakeholders have encouraged women's apprenticeships in male-dominated trades through the development of Group Training Organisations' (GTOs) that operate as intermediaries between apprentices and employers. Extending Acker's model of workplace inequality regimes, we argue that inequality regimes operate between organisations at an industry-wide level. We ask '*Do GTOs operate to produce and reproduce workplace and industry-wide inequality regimes? Or can they facilitate improved gender diversity in male-dominated trades?*' Drawing on a recent study of regional tradeswomen's employment, we find that although GTOs have an important role in facilitating gender diversity, they have inconsistent results in challenging existing inequality regimes. There is a risk that they may become a vector of transmission for workplace inequality regimes to the broader industry.

JEL Codes: R23, J71, I24

Keywords

Apprenticeships, gender, male-dominated industries, sexual harassment, workplace inequality regimes

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Introduction

In Australia and internationally, there continues to be significant underrepresentation of women in male-dominated skilled trade occupations (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018). The skilled trades are those that require the acquisition of a vocational qualification (i.e. an Australian Qualifications Framework level III or lower credential) as an entry point for employment (Toner, 2006: 172). In Australia, women make up just 3% of those employed in the electrotechnology and telecommunications trades, and only 1% of those working in construction, engineering and automotive trades (Rosa et al., 2017; Shewring, 2009; Women NSW, 2017).

Since the 1980s in Australia, industry, government and the education sector have sought to increase number of women in male-dominated skilled trade occupations to no avail. A range of organisational practices and processes, including informal recruitment processes, gendered workplace policies and a lack of mentors, role models and female leadership, have been identified as key barriers to women's employment in the skilled trades (Bridges et al., 2019, 2020; Fielden et al., 2000; Galea et al., 2020; MacIsaac and Domene, 2014; Smith, 2013; Wright, 2013, 2016). Furthermore, individualised mechanisms of exclusion and the concept of 'borderwork', which includes the use of gender stereotypes, sexual harassment, masculine culture, discrimination and violence, have also been flagged as significant barriers to women's ongoing employment (Denissen, 2010a, 2010b; Denissen and Saguy, 2014; Fielden et al., 2000; Smith, 2013; Wagner, 2014; Wright, 2013, 2016). These elements contribute to inequality regimes (Acker, 2006) that operate at both workplace and industry-wide levels to exclude women from the skilled trades.

Acker (2006: 441) defines inequality regimes as 'interlocked practices and processes that result in continuing inequalities in all work organisations'. She argues that we need to examine the local, ongoing practical activities within the workplace that reproduce inequality. This article's theoretical contribution is to extend Acker's concept of workplace inequality regimes and to argue that inequality regimes operate beyond single workplaces to create industry-wide processes of exclusion for women. This is particularly the case in industries and occupations such as the male-dominated trades, where there is a high level of contracting and sub-contracting, frequent tri-partite employment relationships and ongoing inter-organisational interaction.

A key element in this industry-wide inequality regime, and one of the most significant barriers for women entering the trades is the apprenticeship system (Bridges et al., 2019). As at March 2021, women represent only 5.1% of all automotive and engineering apprentices, 2.2% of construction apprentices and 4.5% of electrotechnology and telecommunications apprentices (The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), 2021). In Australia, apprenticeships in the skilled trades are based on indentured contracts, lasting 3–4 years full-time, which combine on-the-job training and work experience with off-the-job training through a vocational education and training (VET) provider (Oliver, 2010). In contrast to professional occupations, where access is dependent on scholastic endeavour, access to training in the trade occupations is dependent on gaining an employment contract. The apprenticeship pathway involves informal recruitment and employment practices and traditionally relies upon social connections and

word of mouth to secure an apprenticeship. Furthermore, it involves a complex relationship between the apprentice, VET provider and the employer (Oliver, 2010). The distinctiveness of the apprenticeship is also marked by the acquisition of occupational identity through association with the employer and immersion on the worksite. In contrast, amongst professional occupations, identity begins to be acquired while immersed at university (Trede et al., 2012).

The barriers to entry into the male-dominated trades are exacerbated in regional Australia, where labour markets frequently have a narrower range of industries, smaller businesses and a more constrained range of occupations (Haynes et al., 2010). The small businesses that employ and train tradespeople are also more susceptible to economic shocks and regional economic downturns (Bamberry, 2017). Furthermore, recruitment processes in regional and rural areas are more reliant on informal processes and social networks from which women are traditionally excluded (Bridges et al., 2019).

Governments, training organisations and employer bodies have sought to address the regional labour market issues and to encourage women's entry into the trade occupations by developing strategies to support their training through apprenticeships. In particular, they have developed Group Training Organisations (GTOs) or Companies. These organisations may be community, industry/union or training-based organisations, or companies operating for profit, that are the formal employer of apprentices and operate to place apprentices with 'host employers' within the regional labour market.

GTOs are an important element in the Australian VET system and perform a number of roles in the training market, including sharing the costs and risks associated with apprenticeship training across a number of employers, addressing regional skill shortages and promoting economic development (Cooney, 2003). In regional Australia, these three functions become crucial for supporting the dispersed and constrained regional labour and training markets. GTOs have the capacity to increase access to apprenticeship training in local labour markets and could play an important role in addressing gender imbalances in entry-level training in male-dominated industries.

However, in establishing a contingent and tripartite relationship between the apprentice and the host employer, GTOs add an extra layer of complexity to the employment relationship and create a separation between formal employment and day-to-day supervision. As with other forms of contingent labour, such as sub-contracting and labour hire, this approach has implications for workplace health and safety (WHS; Toner, 2006; Underhill and Quinlan, 2011), gender equality and sexual harassment (Jacobs et al., 2015; Krases Rogers and Henson, 1997).

Despite these studies on contingent employment relationships, there has been limited exploration of the role that GTOs may play in intra-industry networking and how they might mitigate or contribute to inter-organisational inequality regimes (Acker, 2006) within male-dominated industries. This article explores the questions: *Do GTOs operate to produce and reproduce workplace and industry-wide inequality regimes? Or can they work to facilitate improved gender diversity in male-dominated trades?*

These research questions are operationalised by drawing on interviews and focus groups with apprentices, GTO representatives, and employers to examine the operation of inequality regimes at the organisational and industry levels. We explore the possible transmission processes between organisations and industry bodies within the industry

and examine the *bases of inequality*, the *workplace processes* and the *mechanisms of compliance and control* that produce and maintain workplace inequality both within organisations and at an industry level. We analyse the experiences of participants to understand how sexual harassment and workplace violence impact individual apprentices, and the management and organisational processes between GTOs and host employers. In observing how GTOs contribute to organisational networks across the industry, we examine how intra-industry inequality regimes resist change through ‘borderwork’ and other forms of social closure. This approach allows us to understand the ‘local ongoing practical activities of organising work that produce and reproduce inequalities’ (Acker, 2009: 201) both within organisations and at an industry scale.

The following section of the article provides more detailed information on the nature and operation of GTOs. This is followed by a review of literature on inequality regimes in organisations and a discussion of the bases of inequality, the organisational processes that produce inequality and the mechanisms of control and compliance such as gendered borderwork, sexual harassment and workplace violence that maintain inequality.

The role of GTOs in regional labour and training markets

GTOs were established to operate as the employer of the apprentice, identifying appropriate host employers to provide the on-the-job component of apprenticeship training. They ‘provide for the collective social provision of vocational education and training . . . and are based on the development of inter-firm networks where the trainee may spend time with multiple employers during the training period’ (Cooney, 2003: 61). There are currently 183 registered GTOs in Australia (Australian Apprenticeships, 2019) employing 20,109 out of a total of 216,913 apprentices (9.3%) in the male-dominated skilled trades (NCVER, 2021). Of these 20,109 apprentices, only 1039 (5.1%) are women. Women are over-represented as GTO employees with 12.7% of all women apprentices in the male-dominated trades employed by GTOs compared to 9.1% of men apprentices within these trades (NCVER, 2021).

Being embedded in a regional labour market, GTOs develop strong inter-organisational networks with relevant government support agencies, training providers and employers across a range of industry sub-sectors. These relationships facilitate good matching of apprentices to employers and enable the GTO to provide a higher level of support or pastoral care to both the apprentice and the host employer (Buchanan et al., 2016; Bush and Smith, 2007).

Employment through a GTO is a formal recruitment process and reduces the reliance on traditional social networks. They also provide a level of protection for apprentices in regional labour markets, where demand can fluctuate significantly, assisting apprentices to continue their training even if their host employer can no longer provide enough work for them. GTOs can protect an apprentice if they have a disagreement with a host employer, by providing the opportunity for an apprentice to be rotated to another host or to focus on their off-the-job training until an alternative employer can be found (Bush and Smith, 2007).

For many of the small-to-medium and micro businesses common in the male-dominated trades (Bryan et al., 2017), recruitment processes and the administrative demands

of managing human resources represent a barrier to employing apprentices. The fact that the GTO provides the employment functions, including recruitment, compliance with industrial standards, WHS and pastoral care, increases employers' likelihood of taking on an apprentice (Buchanan and Evesson, 2004: 48).

Buchanan and Evesson (2004) also identify that GTOs have intervened in the operations of host employers to improve wages, conditions and hours or rostering for all employees, in order to ensure conditions for their apprentices meet industrial standards. In such cases, GTOs take on an educational role with host employers, and even an enforcement role, if necessary, to ensure compliance with standards. Therefore, GTOs function to create an intra-industry organisational network, providing links between disparate elements within the industry to influence culture and practices at the workplace level and throughout the sector.

While these earlier studies demonstrate that GTOs can provide positive contributions to both workplace culture and to apprenticeship completion rates (Buchanan et al., 2016; Karmel and Roberts, 2012), these studies have focused on the overall experiences of apprentices. To date, there has been limited exploration of women's apprenticeship outcomes in the sector and the role that intra-industry organisational networks can play in supporting or undermining these outcomes.

Organisational inequality regimes

To understand women's experiences in the skilled trades, it is necessary to recognise how organisational structures, culture, practices, processes, actions and meanings (Acker, 2006, 2009) contribute to shaping these experiences. Acker (2009) identifies a model for analysing organisational inequality regimes. She argues that it is important to analyse the *bases and shape of inequality* within organisations. That is, how gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity operate within an organisation to shape the degree of inequality and segregation, the size of wage differences, and the differentials in power and authority (Acker 2009: 203). A second component is the *processes* that produce inequality, including the general organisation of work, assumptions of what constitutes a typical worker, how jobs and hierarchies are organised, recruitment and hiring processes, supervision, networking and promotion processes, and informal interactions in doing the work (Acker 2009: 213). To understand how inequality is maintained, Acker contends, it is important to examine the organisational barriers to change, including the visibility and legitimacy of inequality and the '*mechanisms of control and compliance* that preserve inequalities' (Acker 2009: 214, emphasis added).

Bases of inequality in male-dominated trades

Inequality in organisations is fundamentally intersectional. Previous research has highlighted that race (Hunte, 2016), class and sexual orientation (Denissen and Saguay, 2014; Wright, 2016) and gender identity (Chan, 2013) contribute to the shape and structure of inequality regimes in the male-dominated trades. This article focuses primarily on women's experiences of organisational and industry-wide inequality regimes.

Acker (2009: 214) emphasises that ‘beliefs, images and stereotypes based on gender, race and class shape actions, policies and practices throughout the components of inequality regimes’. This is particularly important in the skilled trades where work is constructed as masculine and assigned to men through the gender ‘birthright’ perception (Agapiou, 2002; Pringle and Winning, 1998) or the perception that men innately have the ability to perform skilled labour because of their gender. Women experience industry-wide cultures that do not value female attributes, and associate females with having less ability or skill than men.

Gruber (1998: 303) argues that in male-traditional roles such as the skilled trades, ‘work identity is constructed on gendered behaviour and cultural symbols of masculinity: aggression, sexual bravado, embracing dangerous or risky situations and bonding through rituals that celebrate male superiority’. Furthermore, he argues that ‘work identities that have stereotypical images of masculinity as their basis are doubly male dominated’. The male-traditionality of these occupations creates a workplace culture that is an extension of this masculinity, while the numerical dominance of men in the workplace heightens the visibility of and hostility towards women who are perceived as violating male territory. Masculine identity and workplace culture are key elements in workplace inequality regimes, but their pervasiveness across networked organisations within an industry also contributes to industry-wide inequality regimes. Thus, a fundamental basis of inequality in male-dominated trades has been the perceptions and stereotypes about what women and men can and should do at work and what the gendered body is perceived to be capable of. These perceptions have influenced women’s ability to gain equitable employment, training and promotion opportunities in the skilled trades (Agapiou, 2002; MacIsaac and Domene, 2014).

Processes of inequality

Legitimacy in the workplace is associated with privilege, and in cases where hegemonic practices exclude women, it is necessary to examine the formal and informal workplace practices (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) that both produce and maintain inequalities. Acker’s (2006, 2009) approach highlights how legitimacy and privilege are produced and reproduced through the processes of informal recruitment practices and social networks. Informal practices habitually operate to exclude women and other minority groups that do not fit the dominant masculine norm and homosocially reproduce (Kanter, 1977) the stereotypical tradesman.

Research into the experiences of women in male-dominated trade occupations (Bridges et al., 2019; Galea et al., 2020) has found that women experience inequality regimes prior to entry through poor access to informal networks and information, being excluded from skills-based recruitment activities and other recruitment processes within the industry. Once past the recruitment hurdle, tradeswomen find organisational processes such as inflexible work hours, lack of access to leave and limited career paths that restrict their opportunities for development and growth. These organisational and industry-wide processes contribute to ongoing inequality and high attrition rates for women (Bridges et al., 2020; Galea et al., 2015). In the male-dominated skilled trades, tripartite working relationships between employers, host employers and workers, especially

apprentices, are common. Underhill and Quinlan (2011) find connections between contingent employment relationships and WHS issues in labour hire firms. They have identified that competitive pressures and income insecurity encourage workers to accept poor standards of safety. Krases Rogers and Henson (1997: 215) explored the experiences of temporary and agency workers in relation to sexual harassment and found that the organisation of temporary work actually ‘fosters sexual harassment through the magnification of asymmetrical power relations between workers and their host employers’. Jacobs et al. (2015) have explored how sexual harassment operates at all levels of an agribusiness supply chain and found that temporary and casualised workers were most at risk. However, to date there has been little focus on how contingent employment processes contribute to the inequality regimes experienced by women apprentices in the skilled trades, and how inequality regimes operate both within organisations and across networked organisations throughout an industry.

Mechanisms of control and compliance

Sexual harassment and other forms of ‘borderwork’ are key mechanisms of control and compliance that preserve inequalities within organisations by excluding women from a workplace. Sexual harassment has a corrosive impact on women’s identities and on their financial, social, emotional, physical and psychological well-being in the workplace (Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), 2020; Foley et al., 2020; McDonald et al., 2011; Sojo et al., 2016).

Berdahl (2007: 641) defines sexual harassment as ‘repeated or persistent treatment that pressures, provokes, frightens, intimidates, humiliates or demeans a person’ based on their sex. She argues that sexual harassment is used by perpetrators to protect or enhance their ‘sex-based social status, and that this is made possible by a social context that pervasively and fundamentally stratifies social status by sex’. This view is supported by a recent report to the AHRC, which found that a key driver of sexual harassment within the workplace is the overall level of gender inequality within society (AHRC, 2020; Berdahl, 2007).

Denissen (2010b: 1056) argues that the construction of certain work as an activity that can only be performed by men is ‘borderwork’. Within the skilled trades, at both the organisational and industry-wide levels, ‘men produce and reproduce a kind of masculinity in which a particular male body is used to justify exclusion’ (Smith, 2013: 862). In trade occupations, the tradesperson is constructed as a white, able-bodied, heterosexual male (Smith, 2013), and cultural expectations require tradespeople to fit the normalised body (Potter and Hill, 2009: 135). The hegemonic masculine ideal (whilst not representative of all men see Chan, 2013) aligns attributes – considered to be possible for the male body and impossible for the female body – with the work required. These include strength, competence and skill. Issues arise when women, who do not fit the hegemonic masculine stereotype, are actively resisted and socially excluded based on their inability to be strong, competent and skilful.

The concept of ‘borderwork’ illuminates how the stereotype is used to mark-off the worksite as male territory and justifies the exclusion of women who are then treated with hostility because they have infringed upon male power and privilege and they threaten

the very ‘production of masculinity’ in such workplaces (Martin and Jurik, 1996: 175 cited in Gruber, 1998). Analysis of inequality regimes at organisational and industry levels allows us to understand how sexual harassment and masculine borderwork are used as mechanisms of control and compliance to exclude women from trade occupations (Denissen, 2010a).

Method

Project aims

This article emerged from a broader, qualitative, feminist project (Reinharz, 1992) exploring the lived experiences of women tradespersons in male-dominated industries in regional Australia (Bridges et al., 2019). The broader project explored the facilitators of and barriers to attraction, recruitment and retention of women into the male-dominated skilled trades and sought to identify the strategies women and organisations adopt to negotiate these barriers, cultivate resilience and facilitate the retention of women in trades. As an explorative qualitative study, the aim was not to generalise but to provide a rich and contextualised examination of the experiences of regional tradeswomen. This article focuses on a key theme that emerged from the broader project, exploring the role of GTOs.

Recruitment and data collection

Data was collected from three industry consultation days (60 participants) held throughout 2018 across key regional locations in NSW, which also facilitated attendance by stakeholders from North-Eastern Victoria. Invitations to participate in the industry consultation days were extended to employers of tradeswomen, tradeswomen and women apprentices, employer organisations, unions, women-in-trade support networks, training providers, representatives of GTOs and government representatives.

A total of 23 in-depth interviews were undertaken, 11 with tradeswomen and female apprentices and 12 with key stakeholders including industry representatives, employers, GTOs, vocational education providers, state and local government representatives and unions. One focus group was also held with four women apprentices, empowering the young women to talk in an informal manner and reducing the researcher’s apparent power within the group (Wilkinson, 1998: 189–190).

Interviews and the focus group were undertaken in neutral spaces such as on university or other training campuses or workplaces in the case of government and GTO representatives. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Any identifying material was removed, pseudonyms were provided and the transcripts were thematically analysed (Braun et al, 2019) using NVivo software.

Analysis

The thematic analysis of the data collected provides a comprehensive understanding of women’s experiences in male-dominated trades in regional areas (Bridges et al., 2019).

The theme of GTOs' role in facilitating or creating organisational- or industry-level inequality regimes emerged strongly as a key issue in a number of the interviews and in the industry consultation days. In this way the coding frame developed for analysis of the transcripts evolved to capture emerging issues and complexities from the narratives of the participants (Saldaña, 2016), rather than representing a static framework of imposed knowledge from the researchers' perspective (Glucksmann, 2000). Although the data from the industry consultation days, interviews and focus group informs the broader understanding of the operation of inequality regimes, six particular interviews provide key information that is explored in this context. Three of these were with GTO management staff, one with a tradeswoman in the building construction industry, one with an employer hosting apprentices and one with a policy officer in a government agency responsible for administering the state apprenticeship system. These stakeholder interviews provide the data for the findings related to the overall impact of GTOs on regional apprenticeships. Two examples of sexual harassment, based on the interviews with the tradeswoman and a GTO manager, are explored in more detail. These cases are used to explore the implications of exclusionary practices, such as sexual harassment, for our understanding of organisational and industry-wide inequality regimes. In this way, these examples do not provide a representative sample that contributes to 'statistical generalisation' but rather provide 'analytic generalisation' that contributes to the development of theory (Yin, 2010: 15).

Findings and discussion

Participants identified a range of ways in which GTOs can play a role to change the *bases of inequality regimes* by challenging existing stereotypes and the status quo, improve *workplace inequality processes* such as recruitment and the provision of gender equity and WHS resources, and challenge elements of *control and compliance*. However, participants also identified ways in which GTOs play a role in reinforcing stereotypes, undermining workplace processes and exacerbating control and compliance. These findings suggest that GTOs play a role in the transmission of inequality regimes between organisations within the industry.

Reinforcing or challenging the bases of inequality in male-dominated trades

Industry and government representatives explained that GTOs have the capacity to intervene within the skilled trades to challenge stereotypes and create a supportive network for apprentices. For Alex, a government policy officer responsible for regional apprentices, GTOs can provide apprentices with extra support, resources and pastoral care that government agencies struggle to supply. Alex noted his region serviced approximately 5000 apprentices over a 149,000 km² region and stated:

[GTOs] are an excellent model through which to engage an apprentice and to actually interact with an apprentice over a period of their training contract (Alex, Government Policy Officer).

This view is supported by research on completion rates amongst apprentices (Buchanan et al., 2016; Karmel and Roberts, 2012) which finds that GTOs have higher successful completion rates than other apprenticeship models.

Nicky, the general manager of a GTO noted that, while she had not previously engaged in any form of affirmative action for young women, she was planning to develop more inclusive advertising for the GTO's 'Try a Trade' days, in the future, in order to attract more young women and girls both to the information days and to encourage them to apply for the apprenticeships the GTO advertised. These participants highlighted the potential GTOs had for intervening to provide improved pastoral care and proactive recruitment processes that could challenge the gender stereotypes and status quo that underpin employment in the male-dominated trades. These strategies address Ackers' (2009) *bases* of inequality and *processes* of inequality that can occur in single workplaces and contribute to stronger gender diversity across the industry.

In contrast, Hannah, a 28-year-old tradeswoman working in the building and construction industry, had an experience that demonstrated how GTOs might operate to reinforce gendered stereotypes and acceptance of the status quo. Hannah applied for an apprenticeship in the building trades that she saw advertised with a local GTO. The GTO case worker who interviewed Hannah said that her literacy and numeracy test results were the highest she had ever seen. She questioned why Hannah would want to take on an apprenticeship when she had a good high school qualification that would allow her to go to university. This experience highlights how GTOs can operate to reinforce stereotypical assumptions as highlighted by Gruber (1998), of the ideal candidate for an apprenticeship in the male-dominated trades, contributing to reinforcing the gendered *bases* of inequality.

Reinforcing or challenging workplace processes in male-dominated trades

Participants in the research recognised that GTOs play a role in challenging existing workplace *processes* that undermine gender equality. They can provide more formalised administrative and recruitment systems that host employers – mainly small businesses are lacking. In doing so, they are able to formalise recruitment and other admin processes that otherwise contribute to homosocial recruitment. Pat, the General Manager of a GTO explained the vital role that GTOs could provide to small regional employers:

We do the admin type things for the employer. They're outsourcing their risk. . . because apprentices don't always turn out, and they can hand them back. There's the worker's comp risk as well . . . and some of them don't have the admin. They're a small business, they might be a [single] tradesman and they just don't have the admin functions in place. . .

This was further supported by William, a host employer, who noted:

[it] just seemed a little bit easier to go through [a GTO] so that they could do the paperwork part of things . . . and that keeps it being nice and legal.

GTO representatives explained that as the formal employer of the apprentice, they had an important role in educating and supporting their host employers in relation to WHS,

gender equity and other human resource management issues. Each of the GTO managers identified that they provided a WHS manual and advice on other human resource policies to the host employers. These strategies actively support more gender inclusive workplace *processes*. However, the GTO representatives all indicated that they struggled to ensure the adoption of such strategies to actively challenge the patterns of gendered inequality amongst host employers within the industry.

Hannah provides an example of how a GTO operated to reinforce gendered organisational processes, hierarchies and behaviour. Initially, Hannah's job 'seemed pretty good', her boss appeared proud of himself for having a female apprentice and took to introducing her to all his clients as 'this is Hannah, my female apprentice'. However, over time her boss's behaviour became more uncomfortable for her. Pushed to describe his behaviour she identified that he had no sense of personal space and would whisper comments in her ear while she was working. He also seemed to feel entitled to comment on aspects of her personal life such as boyfriends and family issues. This was a behaviour that seemed to be focused only on Hannah and did not extend to any of his male workers or apprentices. Eventually, Hannah was worn down, and she describes a point at which she felt she had to leave this host employer, although she wanted to continue her apprenticeship. When Hannah reported the behaviour of her host employer to the GTO, their first reaction was to support the host employer and dismiss her claims:

So, the GTO representative came and spoke with me and said 'your boss said that you can come back tomorrow if you forget everything and anything that was said between you and just start afresh'.

Hannah was frustrated that the GTO representative would not support her and address the risk that she felt in the workplace.

[The GTO] just believed the host employer. They never believe the apprentice. It's happened to me and at least two other people that I know that they just went with the host employer, because that is where they're getting the money from. Our opinions were nothing, basically.

The GTO employing Hannah was a for-profit organisation that was paid a commission by the host employer to provide the apprentice's labour. Therefore, it was in their interest that she continued in employment with the particular host. Finding an alternative employer to oversee the completion of her on-the-job training within the region could be challenging. When Hannah insisted that she would not return to the workplace, the GTO took 3 months to find her an alternative employer. During this time, she was able to continue her off-the-job training with the VET provider, and when an alternative host employer was found she did complete her apprenticeship within the time required.

Hannah's experience is illustrative of a number of key themes that emerged from the research. In particular, this GTO was reactive, rather than proactive in terms of WHS and anti-discrimination processes. While they did send a representative out to the workplace to monitor Hannah's well-being, this was intermittent and irregular. Furthermore, when Hannah reported the sexual harassment, the GTO did not respond with a focus on Hannah's safety or well-being, but rather tried to minimise the issue and dismiss the

problem to maintain the status quo, reinforcing the gendered hierarchies of power that operated in the workplace. This experience is supported by research on how organisational processes contribute to attrition rates for women in male-dominated trades (Bridges et al., 2020; Galea et al., 2015).

Pat also provided an example of a host employer where attitudes towards gender equity and WHS were highly problematic. Pat identified that the GTO needed to take a role in challenging workplace cultures and attitudes, to changing the inequality regime that was operating by providing more training in these areas.

I tell the hosts themselves that I don't think they are a mature enough organisation too (laughs) and they agree with me now. . . . 'Can we have a bit of safety and some training and some awareness?' For their managers, some training for their managers! Yeah, so . . . that's why I'm doing work[place] health and safety with this company. . . . So, we're going to try and change it a bit, because we have a fairly strong influence in the employment decision. . . . I think the work, health and safety is more important at the moment for me . . . but I would like to try and, if it was a safe workplace then, work on a bit more gender balance.

As a GTO employee, she acknowledges that she has a role in providing WHS training and gender equity training to managers and other staff within the host employer as well as to apprentices, but her comments also illustrate how the attitudes of owners and managers ultimately impact on staff at a day-to-day level. The GTO is unable to overcome the inequality regime that permeates the workplace culture. These examples highlight formal and informal processes and practices that produce and maintain workplace inequality despite external attempts at intervention (Acker 2006, 2009; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005).

Reinforcing or challenging mechanisms of control and compliance in male-dominated trades

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of inequality regimes for GTOs to challenge are what Acker referred to as the mechanisms of control and compliance that operate both within workplaces and across the industry as a whole. Pat discussed her experience in managing the tripartite relationships between her GTO, an apprentice she employed and a host employer in relation to an incident of sexual harassment and physical violence that led to the apprentice leaving her apprenticeship. Pat describes how the young woman had undertaken 2 weeks of work experience with one of her host employers. Subsequently the employer sought to employ her through the GTO. Pat, who was not involved in the appointment, had serious qualms about the placement of a woman with this particular employer.

Yeah, so, I wouldn't have wanted her to work there . . . it would have been a very particular female to work in this workplace and even then, why would you do it to someone? . . . So, a female wouldn't fit into that 'football and going to the pub at lunchtime' culture very well, . . . Males don't [always] fit into that culture either . . . and people that don't quite fit the norm of what is there. . . they've been bullied in horrible ways. Sexually explicit things on their toolbox when they're away and just things like that.

In this description of the workplace culture, we can observe the way in which a hegemonic masculine ideal underpins the treatment of apprentices and contributes to an overall inequality regime within the organisation (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Pat goes on to describe the sexual harassment and an incident of assault, and the questions that arose after the incident.

. . . all of those normal harassment things happened. You know, the show us your boobs . . . But she was only on our books for less than a week when there was an assault outside work. It was colleagues, and it was organised. They had this party, and so there was an assault . . . there were videos, and you know.

While Pat believed the young woman, and believed that an assault had occurred, the GTO was unable to prove that the specific incident had been a workplace case. The young woman did not wish to be placed with another host employer and quit her apprenticeship. This demonstrates how effectively the 'borderwork' of sexual harassment, as a mechanism of compliance and control (Denissen, 2010a, 2010b), can operate to exclude women, not only from a single workplace but also throughout the industry. This example illustrates how GTOs can struggle to protect their apprentices from sexual harassment, bullying and outright physical harm when they are not present in the workplace (Krases Rogers and Henson, 1997). While the GTO does try to 'vet' their host employers and to match apprentices to appropriate employers, they do identify some employers as 'no go zones' for women apprentices.

Organisational or industry-wide inequality regimes?

Mechanisms of control and compliance are a significant issue for an individual workplace; however, Pat also identifies that the culture of the GTO itself is problematic in contributing to industry-level processes of discrimination and exclusion. While she is planning to deliver anti-discrimination training to her host employers and to the case managers employed by the GTO to recruit and place apprentices, she notes that change is also needed in the GTO from board level down to the case workers.

It's hard to implement some of the stuff with the board that I work with. . .

Interviewer: Is it a male board?

There is one female but she never [attends]. The males often don't, either, and they've been there quite a while and their age demographic is eighty [years old] . . . But one thing I do have on the go . . . is to change our policies and address some of our past histories in a more appropriate manner. So, we've got a bit of cleaning up to do ourselves. . . I think if we can clean up our own attitude and our own dirty linen, then we might be better role models . . . for the companies that we work with.

When asked about how the GTO recruits board members, the response is telling:

It's funny, they want to recruit, they want to recruit like someone from . . . the major customer that nearly killed someone and had a sexual assault.

Older men also seem to predominate on the GTO's Board of Management, and most board members seem to have been recruited from clients within the industry. This homo-social recruitment process has the capacity to transmit the poor workplace culture from industry into the GTO and reinforce cultural assumptions and gendered attitudes towards the recruitment and placement of women apprentices. This process demonstrates how cultural attitudes and inequality regimes may be shared and transmitted across the workplace borders to the broader industry. In this way, the organisational and industry-wide practices may reinforce the individual processes of 'borderwork' and contribute to the exclusion of women (Denissen, 2010b).

The case of this GTO also demonstrates how transmission processes could operate to transfer organisational culture from a single workplace to the GTO itself and then, through the industry-level role of the GTO, potentially to other employers. Pat identified that it was not uncommon for case workers on the staff to be older men who, after a career in the industry, have moved into the GTO role. For these men, recruiting women into the field is not a priority, and in some cases is 'just not on their radar'. Pat notes that some case workers suggest women as the last option or to make up the numbers, but do not actively support their recruitment.

The findings also show that through board appointments, and the employment of case workers from people within the industry, who tend to accept the status quo, existing values and practices are reinforced within this GTO. While some GTOs, such as those represented by Nicky and Lee, actively work to change workplace processes both within their own organisations and within their host employers, particularly through recruitment and training programs relating to anti-discrimination, equity and WHS, this remains a significant challenge for those seeking to implement change.

Conclusion

This article provides an innovative approach to studying gender inequality regimes. While much of the previous literature has focused on particular workplaces or organisational inequality regimes, there has been less focus on industry-level inequality regimes. Furthermore, there has been attention given, in the literature, to the transmission processes between organisational- and industry-level inequality regimes in the male-dominated skilled trades. The findings show that although GTOs have an important role in facilitating gender diversity, they have inconsistent results in challenging existing workplace and industry-wide inequality regimes. By examining organisations as embedded within industry inequality regimes, we can see that strategies directed at individual organisations will only partially address the barriers to women's entry to the industry.

Acker's (2009) model for the analysis of workplace inequality regimes does help us to identify the *bases and shape of inequality* within the industry, the *processes* that produce and reproduce inequality and the *mechanisms of control and compliance* that maintain inequality at organisational and industry levels. In applying this model, we moved beyond the organisational to further explore how the operation of networked organisation can contribute to an industry-wide inequality regime.

This article identifies several key avenues for future research, including exploring how the low status of apprentices and the existing power differentials in organisations

contribute to the apprenticeship completion rates given that employers hold a position of power, not only over the employment relationship but also over the apprentice's access to training, as enrolment in VET is dependent upon an ongoing employment relationship. Further research is also needed to explore how inequality regimes operate and function in networked industries where small-to-medium and micro businesses contract and sub-contract to provide particular services on large-scale construction and engineering projects, as is common amongst the male-dominated skilled trades. The tripartite employment relationship between apprentice, GTO and host employer complicates existing organisational inequality regimes and can illuminate the relationships between employers and industry-wide cultural practices. In understanding these relationships, it may be possible to further illuminate how employers and host employers share cultural elements, practices and processes that reinforce inequality regimes beyond a single workplace.

The experiences of sexual harassment and workplace bullying are particularly illustrative of the mechanisms by which women are excluded and the strategies that can be deployed to reduce women's access to training and employment in male-dominated skilled trades. As Denissen (2010a) highlights, inappropriate workplace behaviour, sexual harassment and even sexual assault are utilised in male-dominated trades to discipline the gender transgressor who has attempted to infiltrate the male bastion. A tendency by GTOs to accept the status quo and not challenge gendered social norms reinforces inequality regimes at both the organisational and industry levels. Gender stereotypes, including community expectations of men's and women's traditional roles, are employed to discourage women from applying, and such attitudes also exist amongst the GTOs' case workers who recruit and support young people through their apprenticeships.

Acker's (2006) exploration of how inequality regimes produce and reproduce legitimacy and privilege within organisations provides an important lens for understanding how the operation of masculinity and sexual harassment contribute to women's exclusion within organisations in male-dominated skilled trades. However, we find that workplace processes and mechanisms of control can not only work against inclusiveness in the host employer, but through board appointments and transfer of employment, these elements can be transmitted through GTOs. While some GTOs actively work to change workplace processes and address mechanisms of control and compliance, both within their own organisations and within their host employers, this is a significant challenge, and the existence of such processes and mechanisms continues to exclude women from employment and training in these industries.

Given the important role that GTOs play in the training and labour markets, and that this role is even more important in regional training and labour markets, it is particularly crucial that they consider gender equality. It is clear that GTOs can provide an important mechanism for reducing gender segregation in male-dominated occupations in regional Australia if supported by appropriate policy settings. The existence of GTOs may provide a strategic entry point for government and other agencies seeking to change the culture of male-dominated industries in regional Australia. A well-directed education and compliance campaign directed at GTOs and industry-level bodies may provide improved leverage for changing the gender balance in these occupations. This in turn could improve the retention of young women in regional communities, reduce skill shortages in regional industries and work towards reducing the gender pay gap in Australian communities.

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