

Lives of the Businessmen. Reflections on Life-history Method and Contemporary Hegemonic Masculinity

Raewyn Connell

Abstract: Life-history research is a difficult and time-consuming but extraordinarily fruitful method of research for social analysis in general, and gender analysis specifically. Its potential is illustrated through two case studies drawn from an Australian project on corporate masculinities. One reveals an older style of local hegemonic masculinity that faces difficulties in a globalizing economy; the other is more technocratic and globally oriented but suggests some of the difficulties in modernizing managerial masculinity. The specifically historical character of the life-history is emphasised, as a key to its usefulness in decoding the dynamics of the gender order.

Keywords: Life-history · Biographical Method · Masculinity · Transnational Corporations · Globalization

„Lives of the Businessmen“. Überlegungen zur biographischen Methode und der aktuellen hegemonialen Männlichkeit

Zusammenfassung: Lebensgeschichtliche Forschung ist eine schwierige, Zeit raubende, aber auch außerordentlich fruchtbare Forschungsmethode, insbesondere in der Geschlechterforschung. Der Beitrag illustriert das Potenzial dieser Methode anhand von zwei Fallstudien, die aus einem australischen Projekt über Männlichkeiten in Unternehmen entnommen sind. Die eine Fallstudie verdeutlicht eine traditionelle Form hegemonialer Männlichkeit, die lokal verwurzelt ist und in einer globalisierten Ökonomie auf Schwierigkeiten stößt; die andere ist stärker technokratisch und global ausgerichtet, deutet jedoch einige Probleme an, die mit der Männlichkeit moderner Manager verbunden sind. Der Beitrag hebt den spezifisch historischen Charakter einer lebensgeschichtlichen Perspektive hervor, dem eine entscheidende Bedeutung für die Dekodierung der Geschlechterordnung zukommt.

Schlüsselwörter: Lebensgeschichte · Biographische Methode · Männlichkeit · Transnationale Unternehmen · Globalisierung

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1 Introduction

This paper takes its title from Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* and Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*, two great books of the Renaissance and Enlightenment that went far to establish biography as a way of understanding culture through narratives about its producers.

Using such stories to understand social structure and dynamics is a more recent idea. Famous early examples are the vivid accounts of working-class life collected in the mid-nineteenth century by Henry Mayhew for *London Labour and the London Poor*; and the extraordinary collection of medical and legal disaster stories that made up Richard von Krafft-Ebing's 1886 *Psychopathia Sexualis*. It was not only in the centres of European empires that such studies could be made. A great classic of anti-colonial critique, Solomon Plaatje's (1916) *Native Life in South Africa*, was based on the narratives of indigenous people expelled from their land, collected by Plaatje.

In academic social science, the most celebrated model for life-history social research was William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki's (1927) *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*. This inspired a genre of social research, especially in the United States, which continued in later generations and spread into new fields. Thus race relations in the United States are illuminated in Bob Blauner's (1989) *Black Lives, White Lives*; and one of the foundational projects in the contemporary study of masculinity is Michael Messner's (1992) *Power at Play*, based on life-history interviews with professional sportsmen. Barbara Laslett and Barrie Thorne's (1997) collection *Feminist Sociology: Life Histories of a Movement* shows the method's reflexive application to an intellectual movement. The scope and flexibility of the life history is emphasised in *Documents of Life* by Ken Plummer (2001), who himself made notable use of the approach in social research on sexuality.

The most important transformation of life-history method came not in social science but in depth psychology. Sigmund Freud's case studies, above all *Aus der Geschichte einer infantilen Neurose* (the 'Wolf Man', 1918), were not only foundational to psychoanalysis as a therapeutic method. They established two fundamental points for life history as a social science method. First, that narratives are not homogeneous; they are sites of contradiction, which Freud decoded in the forms of ambivalence, symptom formation, etc. Second, that autobiographical memory is structured, not simple, and is shaped by motivated forgetting, which Freud theorized as repression.

The relevance of psychoanalytic theory to social analysis was a great theme of mid-20th century social science; but the relevance of psychoanalytic *method* was less examined. The key move was made by the US sociologist John Dollard, whose (1935) *Criteria for the Life History* made a close examination of life-history analysis in both fields. The sequel, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (Dollard 1957), provided a brilliant demonstration of how data from life-history interviewing can be used to build a picture of social structure and social dynamics with an emotional depth unreachable through other research methods. Compared with this, the famous study of prejudice in *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno et al. 1950), with its contrasting case studies of Mack and Larry, offered only schematic social analysis. Any adaptation of Freud's methods runs the risk of importing his mechanical ideas of causation. The famous philosophical

critique by Sartre is helpful in overcoming this; and Sartre's late work *Search for a Method* (1968) offers an illuminating approach to the analysis of a life history in social context. From this I adopt the concept of a configuration of practice as a 'project' extended through time, while holding to Freud's sense of the contradictory structure of personal life.

Life-history method, as Messner (1992) showed, is rich in possibilities for the study of masculinities (and of course femininities). In this paper I hope to show how the method can be used in research on the construction of masculinities in neo-liberal globalization, a topic that has been of interest for more than a decade (Connell 1998). The empirical material comes from a project on masculinities outside the global metropole; specifically a study of managerial masculinities in Australia, Chile, Japan, and South Africa.¹ After discussing these cases, I will return to general questions about method.

The broad intention of this research was to study the way managerial masculinities are constructed in the context of economic globalization. Most of our interviews are with people in the age groups from whom the *next* generation of top business leadership will be drawn. Semi-structured interviews followed an agenda drawn from the background theory of gender and masculinity (Connell 1999). They usually lasted around an hour. They were tape-recorded, with the participants' permission, and later transcribed. The transcribed interviews, together with interviewer's notes, formed the basis of individual case studies, two of which are presented here. These case studies, in turn, are grouped and compared. From these comparisons the main findings of the study are derived.

The two cases show strongly contrasting versions of managerial masculinity in Australia, and show traces of a history in which an older form of hegemony is being replaced. Yet there is no simple succession. Both cases have their contradictions, and both reveal difficulties in constructing and inhabiting elite masculinities.

2 Sloane, a manager in the manufacturing sector

2.1 The interview

Sloane, in his mid-forties at the time of interview, is the manager of a 'downstream' marketing and distribution unit, with a turnover of about fifty million dollars, in a large manufacturing firm, Australian-based but with considerable overseas markets. It is a long and detailed interview, though unevenly revealing. Sloane is exactly what Adorno et al. (1950) called anti-intrceptive; he rarely talks about his emotions and shows little insight into other people's needs. Paradoxically he claims to have lots of 'empathy' and attributes his success in business partly to that. The interview flows well when he is discussing practical matters, almost dries up at other points. The interviewer kept up the flow of questions and got past these problems successfully.

2.2 The life history in context

2.2.1 Life course

Sloane's father was a skilled tradesman from an immigrant community who found a niche in Australia's postwar industrialization. Using family connections and family labour, he built a prosperous, mid-sized manufacturing business – until de-railed by cheap imports after Australia's turn to neoliberal globalization in the 1980s. The father was the dominating presence in the family. Sloane admired and imitated him – a strong, controlling figure who ran the family, ran the business, ran school fundraising, etc. Sloane's mother, though she came from a more privileged class background and taught 'another part of life', was overshadowed. She left her job as a secretary on getting married, and never returned to the workforce. Sloane thus grew up in a family with a classic patriarchal configuration.

Sent to private schools, Sloane despised the teachers as 'weak', and did not study very hard – so he did not qualify for university. However, he was extremely successful at the local code of football, gaining a reputation as an aggressive player and becoming captain of the school's first team. He continued to play elite football for years after leaving school. From school he was immediately brought into his father's business, where he had worked part-time before. After a year learning his father's trade, and not liking it, he was moved around other sections of the firm, probably being groomed as his father's successor as head of the firm.

But after three years, his life changed direction. Probably his father saw the economic writing on the wall, as tariffs came down and Australian firms began to be squeezed by global competition. Father and son consulted about the future, and Sloane took a management traineeship in a large corporation. About this time he got married. He has remained in the corporate world ever since. He has also remained married, but not to the same woman. He and his present wife have young children.

In his first corporation, Sloane specialized in sales, and rose to be a supervisor by his late twenties. At this time his firm expanded overseas, and Sloane was sent abroad as a manager, where he seems to have made his mark, working 'ridiculous hours', running a subsidiary, being flown back by the firm for short university courses in management. Finally he was brought back to Australia and entered a whirl of sideways-and-upwards moves as the firm expanded in a rapid succession of mergers and acquisitions – 'that is my speciality', Sloane remarks.

In his late thirties, however, his progress came to a sudden halt – on his account, because of a boss who was personally antagonistic. Sloane negotiated a golden handshake and left employment for a year at home, 'helping' his wife with their first child and renovating the house. He does not tell us of the circumstances in which he returned to the workforce, but it must have been at a middle-management level. That is where he currently sits, running a sales unit that is trying out a new business model. He earns twice as much as a university professor, probably average for his level of management in the corporate world. I pick up a faint implication that Sloane's position in the company is still a little precarious and depends on the profitability of the new strategy.

2.2.2 Labour process

Sloane gives us a clear picture of the daily life of a neoliberal manager. He normally starts work about 6.30 a. m. and leaves about 5.30 p. m., i. e. he works an eleven-hour day plus an hour of commuting. He starts with e-mails, receiving about one hundred a day. After the emails Sloane spends the rest of his day talking to people:

Then the phone starts. And customers always ring, most of the bigger accounts, the multi-million dollar accounts, the owners of those businesses still ring me, and that will never change . . . So my daily grind would be, probably an average try and do sixty e-mails a day, write proposals, walk the factory floor, audit the place, quickly fix any safety issues, talk to truck drivers, talk to all the operations people, talk to customers, talk to customer service people. Spend the whole time on my feet actually, I actually don't even need an office.

Four or five lower-level managers report to him, but he does not stick to hierarchy:

We are an open floor plan at the moment, everybody comes to talk to me all the time, I must admit, I am approachable they tell me . . . and everybody just keeps coming to talk to me, and I must admit I like talking to people, too.

He does not like to lock himself away because:

I prefer to be driving the business, and the way to drive any business is to drive people, and to keep all of them on-side, and they will have to respect you and work for you. And you want to be sure that when you are not in the business, they are all working at that same pace.

So there is a strong element of control, not just friendliness, in Sloane's open communication in the unit. This comes out in his discussion of industrial relations. He is extremely anti-union – interesting, since his family trade is a union heartland. He puts it in these terms:

My biggest hate is that I can do everything for all the staff in this place, and get the place to such an acceptable level where everybody is committed and driving towards one common goal, and then an outside third party can just physically walk in on the site and disrupt it. That should be illegal, totally illegal.

He works hard to keep these aliens out of his unit, and is proud of having done so successfully, despite the fact that his unit was formed by an amalgamation of two unionized organizations.

One reason for putting great effort into excluding unions rather than incorporating and thus taming them, is hinted at by the term 'disrupt'. A neoliberal organization works by short-term accounting. When first describing his job in response to the interviewer's question, Sloane outlines the corporation's industry, his unit's role in the business, the managers who report to him, and then says 'basically I am responsible for the net profit of this business'. He holds a monthly meeting with all staff on the 'results of the business'. Indeed, this is a *daily* issue:

We have daily meetings with my league team, just to recap how the results went the day before. We are very results-driven, day to day.

Even a short industrial dispute would damage Sloane's figures very visibly. In turn, this would damage his career chances, which currently depend on showing that the new business model, 'that we have to get right', does work.

2.2.3 International connections

In one direction, international connections are rich. Sloane made a big leap in his corporate career by being sent abroad, when his Australian firm began to acquire overseas companies within a particular region. Sloane liked it, the firm gave him a lot of responsibility, he worked very hard, and found this region a good place to do business: 'everything about [country] is easier, you can just pick up the phone and ring the government and get stuff done'. 'To tell you the truth, I didn't want to leave [country], the lifestyle there was very good.'

In other directions, Sloane's international connections are thin; surprisingly so, since his corporation has at least half its turnover outside Australia. He has been sent to Europe and other places to meet suppliers, but this does not seem to be a regular part of his work. His unit's territory is just one city. He meets colleagues from international branches:

We have lots of managers right across south-east Asia, and America and the UK. And I have been to conferences where I represent sort of the Australian bit, and meet all these ex-pats and other international managers of our businesses. And I find the whole cosmopolitan mix just great.

Sloane knows no languages except English. In a rather unfocussed discussion, he suggests that would make it difficult to pursue his management style abroad. He could be sent abroad, and says loyally that he would accept such a posting and so would his wife. But the international dimension of the business is simply not in focus for him. Nothing in his career has created international links beyond the region where he first worked, or encouraged him to develop them.

It is possible that the fact he is not a university graduate would discourage senior management from using him in sophisticated international contexts. Sloane describes himself, twice in the interview, as having come through the 'school of hard knocks'. This is a joking phrase used defensively by people without much formal education. He seems a locally-oriented person in an internationally-oriented firm.

2.2.4 Gender relations at home and at work

From his father and mother, and doubtless his wider milieu, Sloane learnt a model of the patriarchal family with a strong gender division of labour. He seems, over time, to have produced a family on the same lines. His present wife is a full-time mother, Sloane is the breadwinner and in a sense the owner of the establishment:

(Is she working?) No, no she doesn't, and I don't – unless she wants to work, she can, it would help financially, but the bringing up of my boys is probably a paramount thing for me. And to

have faith in the woman that you leave at home is bringing up the boys the way I would like them brought up is just the ultimate peace of mind. So I can concentrate, don't have to worry about any of that.

The current wife meets his criteria. When the interviewer observes that his wife has given him two boys, Sloane responds 'Yeah, how lucky is that?' Without much doubt, the patriarchal succession from his father to himself to his sons is for him the core of family. The women function as adjuncts making this succession possible.

There is some qualification to this picture of early-modern patriarchy. Though his wife does most of the domestic labour, Sloane helps with the housework, for instance putting on a load of washing. He goes to work very early in the day in order to be able to come home before the youngest children go to bed. 'I vow that I will always see them, unless I am away, I see them every day.'

So he has a model of involved fatherhood. But this does not mean he changed the children's nappies. He didn't care to be involved with babies, 'around the zero to six month mark when you are not getting much back. I think the older the boys get, the far better a father I will be . . . I am just much better off when you can reason with someone'. The boys' future is clear: now they are going to school, Sloane has begun to be a coach and referee for the local junior football club.

In the workplace, things are not very different. His field of manufacturing is traditionally a strongly masculine industry. Sloane remarks that this is changing; over the last decade women are becoming more prominent. He notes that he has some women salespeople, and there is one woman in 'a very senior position' in his 'league team' i. e. management group. Sloane thinks that women 'have softened the industry', and that this is a good thing.

This is not across the board, however. A gender division of labour exists within the organization. Sloane explicitly says that most of his customer service staff are women, but does not mention in the same answer his truckdrivers and storekeepers, who are presumably still mostly men – like his group of managers. Every manager above him that Sloane mentions in the interview is a man. 'Women fit in fine, perfectly well, in the company', in Sloane's view. I take this to mean he is happy with the current gender regime.

When the interviewer raises the question of gay and lesbian staff, Sloane is plainly uncomfortable and says 'As far as I know I don't have that issue on this site.' Pushed by further questions, he responds 'I think everybody is politically correct these days, even probably too far politically correct'. One *could* hear this as code for homophobia. But Sloane certainly says nothing of that sort explicitly. He then turns with obvious relief to the theme of treating people as people because people are a business's strength.

2.3 The construction of masculinity

At one level, the analysis is very easy. Sloane is a textbook example of the construction of a locally hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). He grew up in a strongly patriarchal family, identified with his strong, controlling father, and has reproduced many of his father's patterns of behaviour. The depth of his identification is sug-

gested in fine details of his language; for instance when, in the passage about his daily work quoted earlier, he includes 'walk the factory floor'. In fact, Sloane's business is distributing goods; his *father* had a factory.

At school he became a sports star, renowned for aggressiveness, and won peer group prestige. (He gives an excellent brief account of this pattern of hegemony in his all-boys school.) Leaving school, he went into a heavily masculinized industry, and has climbed the corporate ladder with a can-do, combative, controlling managerial style. This has launched him from the small-business arena in which his father succeeded, into the large-scale corporate arena.

Sloane has constructed his own, slightly modernized, version of the patriarchal family. Women play supportive or marginal roles in his life, and are dropped if they don't suit. He has retained his interest in football, along with his school and football peer groups, whom he still meets, in middle age. About five men in each network, he says in combat language, are 'blokes that would take a bullet for you'. He has the folksy, sociable-but-tough Australian masculine style that goes with many friendships (he reckons he has a thousand friends and 'I don't need any more'), beer drinking (customarily with friends), and the 'school of hard knocks'.

However, there are complications. Sloane recalls that as a teenager he 'always had girlfriends' and has 'never really had too much trouble finding girlfriends'. But he has had trouble building relationships that last. Whether Sloane has learnt to negotiate, or it is simply that his current wife shares his outlook, his present marriage has produced a relationship that he feels is 'solid'.

Sloane's success as a sporting hero at school has left long-term problems. Looking back now, 'having it over, I would have done it a bit differently'. He regrets he did not study more, and qualify for university. Twice in the interview he is emphatic that when he applies himself to learning, he enjoys it and does well. But apart from short-term management training programs, he never has gone back to study, even in the year when he was out of the workforce.

Someone with only a high school qualification is certainly at a disadvantage in the contemporary managerial world. And though Sloane is at pains to portray his family links as 'rock solid', he does not have family *wealth* behind him to make up for the lack of qualifications. The previous check to his career suggests he is vulnerable. It may be that he cannot get much higher in business than he is now. The locally hegemonic masculinity is not necessarily hegemonic in the global corporate world.

His sporty youth left him with a fit body, but also with issues and perhaps problems. Fitness and physical strength are part of his masculine self-image. In a curious discussion of corporate dress, he notes that he, and almost all the other men in his unit, prefer to wear an open-necked shirt with a company logo rather than a suit and tie:

Find me someone who really likes to wear a tie every day, and I will call him a liar, or he has got a really small neck; but I don't have a small neck.

This is a more emotional passage than it might seem. 'Small neck' or 'pencil neck' in local football culture is an insult, meaning a weakling. There is a touch of anxiety here, an over-emphatic masculine display. The suit-wearing type of manager seems to be in Sloane's line of fire.

I have mentioned Sloane's peer group practice of heavy drinking, 'that is just pretty common in our industry, and lots of people want to go out with you to have a good night like that'. Sloane now has some worry about this: 'I pace myself though, and as I get older I get concerned about health, so whereas I used to do it a lot, now I don't really drink – if I have to do it, I will, if I don't, I don't care'. Sloane has also continued to smoke. Even his hygiene practices show a touch of anxiety: he showers two or three times a day. So there are signs of anxiety around embodiment; perhaps no more than what is to be expected from the advent of middle age, perhaps a sign of problems still emerging.

There is another passage that suggests an encounter with limits. At the end of the interview, the interviewer raised the question of global conflict involving religion – a highly visible issue at the time of the interview, because of Australia's military support of the USA in Afghanistan and Iraq. Sloane responded very strongly: 'Scary as – I hate it with a passion, absolute passion'. But rather than endorse a military response to terrorism, his actual response is to imagine retreat: 'Every day I think I should pack up and go' to live in Tasmania or New Zealand – i. e. as far away from the problem as one can go. When the interviewer asks whether Sloane would favour becoming involved at a community level in solving such tensions, he says yes, because of his children – but cannot imagine how: 'I don't know'. It is the baldest response in the whole interview, his only such admission. Despite his concern about this issue, Sloane's impressive repertoire of masculine competencies gives him no handle on it. We might read this too as a sign of the limits of a locally hegemonic masculinity, in the face of a global dynamic.

3 Michael, a manager in the finance sector

3.1 Interview

Michael is in his early thirties, a technocrat in a specialized area of financial management, and a sophisticated citizen of the world. He works in a big corporate headquarters building in the city centre. This is a successful full-length interview, fluent from the start. Yet it is curiously unrevealing at a psychological level, compared with many of our interviews. Michael protects his privacy without seeming to. At one point, however, a stark reality appears.

3.2 The life history in context

3.2.1 Life course

Michael was born in another country, into a comfortable professional middle-class family. Both his father and mother had jobs. They lived in an urban fringe area where Michael encountered children from working-class and rural backgrounds. His upbringing seems to have been fairly relaxed. He did well in school, without being highly academic. Following family expectations he went to university and, after some turbulence, graduated with a mathematics degree.

He then looked around for a job, and his maths made it easy to get a job with an accounting firm; Michael does not seem to have had strong ambitions. He lasted several years with one of the major multinational accountancy and management-consulting firms, and got his accountancy qualification. But he disliked the atmosphere, which he found 'stifling', and disliked the firm's exploitation of young workers. He moved to a branch in another country, and there met the young woman he was to marry.

She was on the point of travelling to Australia, so Michael, in his mid-twenties, dropped his job and came too. They married and settled here. He seems to have found it easy to get jobs in Australia, as he has a specialized 'skill set' in a technical area of finance, which is in demand. He has moved through several appointments, at least one with another multinational corporation.

A couple of years ago he was head-hunted by a former boss who had moved to a senior position in a big Australian finance company. Michael was recruited over a cup of coffee, and thus became a middle manager in a well-known local firm. He is very happy here. He and his wife have bought a house, Michael has become an Australian citizen, and they plan to stay for the foreseeable future.

3.2.2 Labour process

Michael describes his job as 60–70% management, 'just generally providing guidance for people', and 30–40% consultation, 'around what are the accounting consequences of doing things'. He gives an unusual answer to the interviewer's questions about the job. Where most people describe their activities in concrete terms (email, meetings, telephone, as Sloane does), Michael describes its rationale, in terms of the logic of the firm's business. At this level, he is not just a technical specialist, but also a conceptual thinker.

The business, he explains, is a high volume, low dollar-value operation. It is highly regulated, and tax considerations are important. Michael's unit – he has thirteen people directly reporting to him, half being qualified accountants and the other half in training – thus operates in a way that balances massive flows of money, very large numbers of transactions, the requirements of regulation, taxation strategies, pricing strategies, the legal arrangements through which the firm operates, and relations among the many units within the firm. It is a 'quite complicated' environment, as Michael remarks, and he enjoys the complexity, and feels able to master the challenges.

We might describe the central task of his unit as transforming information into forms needed by top management. Here is how Michael puts it, when describing the work of his more junior staff:

Basically their responsibility, if you like, is to turn whatever data we end up with around the business, all the systems which are pointing towards us, all the information which comes towards us – whatever it might be – take that core set of data, and do whatever is necessary to get it into a format where it can be used for reporting.

In other passages, he describes the problems of 'capturing' the data that his unit needs, without interfering with the work of the other units of the firm which are actually conducting the transactions. This is, of course, computerized, so Michael has to concern

himself with how the firm's databases operate – and this is a large question as they record several million transactions per year.

His workday is normally 8.30 to 5.30 or 6.00, i. e. about nine hours. When under pressure, the hours go up. For two months in the year, leading up to the firm's half-year reporting dates, Michael works eleven-hour days, and seven days a week. Like almost everyone at his firm, he works in an open-plan office, and he appreciates the ease of communicating:

There are so many different facets to things that go on here, it actually helps, because we really need to communicate and share ideas so much of the time. It is very difficult to sit in your own little cubicle and just carry on – we actually don't even have cubicles, our desks are all ergonomically shaped, and with a few dividing walls between them.

This makes sense, for work that might be described as technical bricolage.

3.2.3 International connections

Michael is a migrant, himself part of the globally mobile professional workforce of finance capital. In his case the migration was not for business reasons. He started his career in a transnational accountancy firm, so in that sense he has been international from the start. Interestingly, though, his recollection of that firm stresses a kind of parochialism – stiflingly conformist and operating by patronage not by merit. He was glad to get out.

In Australia, Michael has also worked for multinational companies, and this involved more travel. He has only recently been recruited to the Australian-based firm he is in now. To the interviewer's joking comment that the building looks like a multinational, Michael replies that until recently it did have major operations overseas; but this proved a 'disastrous venture', and the company has withdrawn from international markets.

Michael goes on to list other big Australian finance companies who have 'got burned' trying to expand into the metropole, and 'quite a few overseas companies aren't doing particularly well over here', including a big finance company he names. This is a useful reminder that globalization of business has an ebb and flow. Not all who try to globalize succeed in doing so.

It is clear, however, that he does not regard this firm as significantly different just because it is Australian-owned. What matters to Michael is the industry, not the firm. He has a view of how the industry is located globally:

There are only a few places in the world where this sort of institution actually resides, you know, where my particular skill set is very well placed. And if I was to go back to [home country] tomorrow, it would be [regional capital]. There aren't very many other spots where – I have no great desire to go and live in [national capital], never have done.

Michael is not a generic manager. He has a specific skill set, obviously one in demand, and has leveraged that into an important position for someone just over thirty years old. But he gives no sign of the kind of ambition that is clear in some other interviews, to climb to the top of the managerial tree.

Michael does, nevertheless, have a broad political outlook. At the end of the interview, to the questions about conflict, he offers a vigorous critique of the (then) Australian government's racially-driven foreign policy, its authoritarian Aboriginal policy, and its biased media. He thinks the country needs leaders with 'vision'. He takes his own political responsibility seriously and has become an Australian citizen in order to have the vote.

3.2.4 Gender relations at home and at work

We do not learn much about Michael's home life. He has no children, and works long hours, so his home life may be limited. His wife works, also in the finance industry. They travelled together, they have bought and managed property together. It sounds like a companionate marriage.

Asked about gender relations in the workplace, Michael gives a quick and sophisticated overview of his firm, 'quite heavily male dominated at the moment':

Most of the senior management in finance are male, so my boss, he is one of three that go along a particular reporting line. He is one of two guys at that level. And their boss is a guy, and their boss is a guy as well. The Board only has one or two women on the Board here. So yes, finance is – and particularly senior levels – male dominated. Lower levels probably female dominated as well.

The gender regime is long established, and slow to change, partly because people tend to stay with this firm once appointed. His boss's boss, for instance, has been in the firm for twenty years, and twenty years ago it had a different ethos, including corporate uniforms. There is definitely a glass ceiling for women.

To qualify this, he insists that his firm is a good employer. It provides a creche for head office workers who have young children, and it has good parental leave provisions, recently upgraded. (Michael tellingly calls them 'maternity leave policies', though with great correctness notes that it is for 'the primary carer be it man or woman'.) The company has a carefully judged staffing policy, in Michael's view. It does not pay high salaries for staff, but tries to foster reasonable work/life balance. Staff compete for bonus payments, but do not feel that their jobs are at risk. There are regular surveys of corporate culture, and it seems that in this firm – unlike some others in the study – management is deliberately trying to limit competitiveness and foster a collaborative culture within the firm.

There is no overt discrimination against women or gay men, and ambitious executives know the line they must follow:

The organization is in a situation where its biggest resource is quality staff. In most areas of the organization where everyone [i. e. every ambitious manager] wants to get their snouts into the trough, and so it is absolutely essential that they demonstrate that they have got a good quality, healthy, friendly working environment for everybody. And I think they're doing an extremely good job of it in all honesty, and that is why I enjoy working here.

This is a nice statement of the corporate rationale for anti-discrimination and family-friendly measures. It is also consistent with Michael's progressive politics.

3.3 The construction of masculinity

Michael was an only child, who was often left to his own devices while growing up. At weekends he went on his bike, with friends, wherever he wanted. He plainly is not closely identified with his parents, and was not disturbed to leave them far behind when he migrated.

He enjoyed physical activity, but didn't like team games at school. The interview implies that he found academic work at school easy. And after one false start he cruised through university too, without any clear ambition except getting a reasonably well-paid job. He went into clearly masculinized fields – physics, mathematics and accountancy. He made a heterosexual choice of partner. Beyond that he says nothing about his own relationships or sexuality. He mentions knowing some gay men at work but implies only a casual acquaintance with them.

In his workplace, Michael manages a team of thirteen. He speaks of his style as 'guiding', not as issuing orders. His response to questions about conflict is revealing. He thinks conflict is endemic, but can be managed and reduced, because in the workplace all are working towards a common goal. His method for handling conflict is to simplify the communication, go back to basics, and de-emphasise emotion.

I try to be objective, if they are thinking emotionally, you know. And it is something I have been trying to do, and I wouldn't say I was very good at it, but I am learning piece by piece – trained by the wife – to actually understand how people who tend to behave emotionally think, or view problems . . .

In the humorous aside 'trained by the wife', Michael accepts the cultural convention that women are the experts in emotion. But there is also a sense in which this expresses his history as a technocrat, a specialist in a sophisticated use of advanced technology where one must 'try to be objective' to solve a flow of technical problems.

These elements of the interview read like a straightforward case of 'complicit' masculinity (Connell 1999) within a modernizing managerial context. This is a pattern which is not itself hegemonic masculinity, but accepts the privileges of the existing gender system. Men following such a project fit in with patriarchal norms but are not strenuous about them. Michael even makes a joke about this. When listing his activities he mentions exercising four days a week and then says:

What else do I do? Obviously, being in Australia, I have to watch sport. It is part of the male obligation, I think – otherwise you can't bore people about sport when you get together at a barbecue. So I am a big Rugby Union fan, so I watch as much Rugby Union as I possibly can . . . (So you are watching a bit of sport on a big plasma TV?) Oh, we go down to the pub for that kind of thing, make it as social as possible.

In fact, Michael does not play rugby, and he is not a football fanatic, though in this passage he jokingly pretends to be. Rather, he plays the violin and the mandolin, which are definitely not common male pursuits in Australia or in his home country. He was taught to play by his father, a music teacher. He also devotes time to visiting wine districts all around Australia, talking to winemakers and growers. He has become a wine connoisseur, with a charming (and uncompetitive) account of its pleasure:

I love the memories it brings back, when you open up a bottle you bought three or four years before, and you remember talking to the person who made the wine.

And behind this not-quite-orthodox embodiment is another story. Michael has ‘some health problems’. In fact, he has a life-threatening disease. He is obliged to take a particular drug, which has serious side-effects, every day. He has to see his doctor regularly for testing and renewing prescriptions, and he has had two or three episodes of severe danger. He has to live, therefore, a controlled life. Part of that is a regular mixed exercise regime – a gym with a trainer one day, cycling another, running another.

In the light of this, Michael’s construction of masculinity takes on another dimension. His apparent lack of ambition as an executive may reflect his awareness that he might not live many more years. He plainly wants to enjoy his life now, finding sources of pleasure with friends and in music and wine. He may not want children if, as is possible, his medical condition is heritable. He doesn’t have the luxury of imagining an open-ended future.

Bringing this back to Michael’s workplace, one can see better why he values the pleasant social atmosphere in his current firm. One can see why he emphasises the intellectual challenge of technical bricolage and the current pleasure in meeting it, rather than his ambitions for the future. This background even makes sense of the fact that he was head-hunted by someone he already knew, rather than looking for a better job on his own behalf.

Michael is no gender radical. He makes only mild criticism of the sexism of his industry, and he keeps the wheels of finance turning. He is a technocrat, associated with the computerization of finance capital and so embedded in an advanced sector of the current economy. But he is also a little distanced from competitive managerial masculinity. He reminds us that it is possible for some to survive in the business elite without adopting the full hegemonic agenda.

4 Conclusion: the value of life history analysis in current gender research

Life history studies are costly, especially in the time spent in analysis. Therefore most qualitative studies in the social sciences, even when they have biographical data, do not focus on specific lives. Especially when they analyze text electronically with a ‘qualitative analysis’ program, researchers tend to scramble together material from different narratives. What do we learn by studying interview data in the slow way required for life histories?

From the start, the life history method requires us to think of the *interview* as a unity. We cannot avoid the interview partners’ perspectives on their own lives, as revealed across the full interview. This allows an attitude of respect, though it does not compel it. (In psychiatric life-history interviews, respect is often lacking.) The passages in an interview transcript that in conventional qualitative research are likely to be cherry-picked, i. e. reproduced in isolation as colourful examples, in life-history research become revealing details in a tapestry. Respect requires attention to the whole story we are told.

This does not require that the interview data be regarded as homogeneous, or as expressing some single origin. That would be a sure way to forced interpretations. As noted

above, psychoanalysis taught us to see lives as contradictory wholes. Though in social-scientific field interviewing we rarely have access to the unconscious, it is often possible to detect contradictions and limits in the configurations of practice that are masculinities.

In these two case histories, the most striking instances concern embodiment. Sloane's sense of embodied masculinity – 'I don't have a small neck' – is at risk as he ages, and from the effects of his own practices. It is also abraded, in some sense, by the tie-wearing managers at the upper levels of his own corporation. Michael's embodiment, in turn, is at risk from a chronic and sometimes acute disorder, which requires him to adopt a complex health regime and limits his perspective on the future. In the different circumstances of managerial life, these cases also show the body as antagonist within hegemonic masculinity, first seen in Messner's (1992) findings of chronic illness and pain in the later lives of professional sportsmen.

In life-history research, the differences that appear in cross-sectional research simply as variation (in quantitative studies) or incoherences (in qualitative studies) become intelligible as divergence and convergence of projects through time. This is critically important in understanding the fact that has become of central significance in social research on the gendering of men: the multiplicity of masculinities.

Consider, for instance, the variation between these two life histories. They have much in common: both are corporate managers in a rich peripheral economy, both are white, heterosexual and married, both are earning at least six times the average income in Australia. Neither is likely to reach the very top levels of corporate power. But there is a difference of trajectory. In Sloane's life, his highly successful practice of a local hegemonic masculinity in his teenage peer group and in school begin to fail him as he moves into a wider corporate world, where qualifications, technical expertise and perhaps also an elite personal style are in demand. In Michael's life, though he has the expertise and style that Sloane lacks, the highly pressured practice of managerial ambition is undermined by his embodiment, including his uncertain health, but also including the pleasures and practice of music and wine. Different domestic gender regimes have been constructed on these trajectories.

'Masculinities' are configurations of practice (Connell 1999). In most gender research the force of this definition is limited because the patterns are seen only cross-sectionally, at one point of time. But in life-history studies we see them unfolding as trajectories through time, and therefore we see them genuinely as *projects*, as patterns of agency.

Sloane's interview is a particularly clear example, because we can see the trajectory developing through three generations. Sloane's father is seen as worker, entrepreneur and patriarch; Sloane himself is seen at school, in the workplace, as a husband; and Sloane's sons are seen in the hands of their mother in early childhood, soon to be launched into the world of football by their father.

Sloane's case is very plainly a class project as well as a gender project. Sloane uses the resources his family has assembled to launch himself into the managerial sector of the Australian ruling class; and he adopts the neoliberal class strategy of confronting rather than accommodating the unions. Life history research allows us to deal with the issues currently called 'intersectionality', such as the intersection of class, gender and ethnicity. It treats this not as a static geometry, but as an interplay of determinations and practices unfolding through time.

Time seen in the life history is not only generational time, the cycle of reproduction, growth and ageing. It is also, crucially, *historical* time. For instance, our current project is concerned with corporate masculinities in globalization. Neoliberal globalization, as I have argued elsewhere (Connell 2007), is not an abstract generalization of an existing modernity (or postmodernity) in the metropole. At the macro level it is a transformation of an older worldwide imperial economy, it involves different trajectories in periphery and metropole, and it achieves specific transformations of local institutions.

These large-scale patterns appear in the life history as situations that the interview partner encounters and must find a way through. Sloane gives another clear example. He seems to have been groomed for succession in his father's business, but that business was wrecked by competition from imports at the time the Australian state went neoliberal and began to abandon its manufacturing industries. Sloane's attempt to rise in the wider corporate economy developed from that situation. But the precariousness of his attempt also reflects neoliberalism, specifically its organizational strategy of constituting units of a company as enterprises and holding their managers individually accountable for local profits and losses.

Michael's history of migration reveals the international dimension of neoliberal capitalism more directly. As the bearer of technical skills much in demand in computerized finance corporations with globally-standardized practices, he is internationally mobile at will. His decision to migrate was a highly personal choice, closely involved with the formation of a new relationship. But the capacity to move so far and so fast was given by the intersection of his personal life and his technical know-how with the making of a new global economy.

I argue in this paper that the life-history is specifically relevant to social analysis, not just psychological analysis. It reveals the collective and the institutional as constructed by practice. The interviews reveal trajectories through an assemblage of institutions – families, schools, companies, clubs and so on. Our metaphors can be a little misleading, because this is not a matter of a traveller moving across an indifferent landscape. Our interview partners are telling us about the *making* of the institutions, or at least, the process of making them work.

In this respect the labour process material in the interviews is exceptionally important. We asked for detailed descriptions of a 'day in your life', and the answers were *always* illuminating. The study catches managerial labour in the act, so to speak, of constituting a certain kind of capitalism. In Sloane's case this is a familiar form, though with new touches; in Michael's case a historically new form, with computerized data-processing at the heart of the business.

This kind of information could be sought without the life-history context; that is done, for instance in recent research on 'knowledge industries' (Barley and Kunda 2004). But it is only through the life history that we really understand how a given labour process is possible. In this study, we see in fine grain some of the practices that constitute a managerial masculinity, and a family gender regime, capable of sustaining long hours of stressful competitive work. And we see how some participants, like Michael, begin to distance themselves from the institutional requirement.

We can, in conclusion, take this argument one step further. Research on gender and globalization has mainly taken globalization as a given, especially as an economic pro-

cess, and enquired what effects it has on gender relations, mainly on the lives of women. But in some studies, globalization itself is seen to be constituted through gender processes; Elisabeth Prügl (1999), for instance, imaginatively uses ILO debates about home-based employment to define the construction of gender in what she calls ‘global space’.

Life-history material such as the present study allows something more. We can see the constitution of a globally-acting institution such as a corporation, with its historically new gender regime, in its daily working. More, through the biographical dimension, we can see the links, and tensions, between such gender regimes in global space and the local gender orders of the societies in which the trajectories of our managers began. To map these connections would take us far beyond the limits of this paper; but the possibilities are inviting, and this is the method that opens them.

Note

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