

# **When following the rules is bad for wellbeing: The effects of gendered rules in the Australian construction industry**

Natalie Galea, Abigail Powell, Fanny Salignac, Louise Chappell and Martin Loosemore

## **Abstract**

The construction industry is known to be highly masculinised and to have work practices detrimental to employees' wellbeing. Drawing on feminist institutional theory and a rapid ethnographic approach in two construction multinationals in Australia, we examine the relationship between the gendered nature of construction and workplace wellbeing for professional women and men employed in the industry. The findings reveal that adhering to the gendered 'rules in use' in the construction industry is negatively associated with wellbeing and is usually endured in silence. We also identify the ways in which the gendered rules have different effects on the wellbeing of men and women. We conclude that the construction industry is characterised by a set of 'greedy' gendered institutions that are inextricably linked to workplace wellbeing for both men and women and that these rules must be broken to improve worker wellbeing.

Keywords: Construction industry, feminist institutionalism, gender, 'greedy institutions', workplace wellbeing

## **Introduction**

In recent years our understanding of workplace wellbeing has shifted from a focus on health and safety, typically characterised by the implementation of Occupational Health & Safety (OH&S) policies and procedures towards accident prevention (Lingard and Turner, 2018), to take account of the 'psycho-social effects of jobs' (Foster, 2018: 187), as well as the physical aspects. In a broad sense, wellbeing is the 'combination of feeling good and functioning well' (Harrison et al., 2016: 10). Like wellbeing generally, workplace wellbeing is a contested concept, but it is typically viewed as a dynamic state shaped by both objective and subjective factors (Cooper and Leiter, 2017; Reeve et al., 2016). While wellbeing is shaped by individual and wider environmental factors, within the workplace it is usually associated with work conditions and practices such as job demands and autonomy, pay and rewards, effective management and inclusive cultures (Carmichael et al., 2014; CIPD, 2016). Intense and stressful work conditions are known to impact negatively on employee wellbeing, and have been associated with increased reports of mental health conditions, such as anxiety and stress (Health and Safety Executive, 2018).

This article looks explicitly at wellbeing in the Australian construction industry. As with other sectors, the focus within the construction industry has historically been on accident and physical injury prevention. Nevertheless, a significant body of literature points to high levels of stress, depression, anxiety and burnout among construction employees (Sunindijo and Kamardeen, 2017), driven in part by a workplace characterised as a 'dog-eat-dog' environment, 'conflict ridden' and 'culture of blame' (Watts, 2009), none of which are good for wellbeing. At the same time, the construction sector is one of the most male-dominated industries, with workplace characteristics frequently attributed to masculine ideologies – norms, beliefs and assumptions (Sunindijo and Kamardeen, 2017). However, very little research has explicitly examined the relationship between wellbeing and gender. This article addresses this gap, examining how entrenched gendered rules and practices in the industry affect the wellbeing of men and women in professional roles.

The article draws on a feminist institutionalist framework to examine the embedded system of gendered institutions operating within organisations. Institutions are formal and informal rules that constrain and enable actors behaviour to produce 'stable, valued and reoccurring patterns of behaviour' that influence different outcomes (Huntington, 1968: 12). Formal rules are written down, published and enforced through official channels and can take the form of contracts and policies (Helmke and Levitsky, 2004). Informal rules are performed through workplace practices and norms and described through workplace narratives that provide actors with an understanding of what to do in any given context. Although tacit in nature, informal rules are often better understood by actors than codified formal rules (Lowndes and Roberts, 2013), albeit difficult to study due to their 'taken-for-granted nature'. Whether formal or informal, these rules are attached to enforcement mechanisms: formal rules are usually enforced by third parties – governments, courts, Trade Unions – while informal rules are informally enforced, through opprobrium, sarcasm, or threats or use of violence (Chappell and Galea, 2017). Together formal and informal institutions form the 'rules in use' that operate within workplaces and are known, followed and enforced (North, 1990: 3). One of the challenges with studying the rules associated with gender and wellbeing is that organisational actors may not recognise their existence because of their taken-for-granted and invisible nature (Chappell and Waylen, 2013). For this reason, this research uses a rapid ethnographic approach to interrogate the effect of gendered rules on wellbeing from the ground up.

While numerous studies have observed the gendered impact of formal and informal institutions in determining the career experiences of women in different types of organisational settings (Denissen, 2010; Gains and Lowndes, 2014a; Galea et al., 2015), none have specifically looked at their relationship with men and women's workplace wellbeing. The purpose of this article then is not to quantify or measure the depth and breadth of wellbeing of construction professionals nor to provide an account of the gendered nature of every aspect of wellbeing in the construction industry. Rather, it is an exploratory study that draws on a feminist institutional lens to make four contributions to knowledge. Firstly, this research reveals how aspects of wellbeing are affected by the formal and informal rules in use. Secondly, it shows that, at least in part, it is the (masculine) gendered nature of these rules that has negative consequences for both men and women's wellbeing, which is compounded by a 'gendered logic of appropriateness' (Chappell, 2006). Thirdly, it demonstrates that men and women, as gendered actors, set and reinforce the rules in use, and lastly, that some of the gendered rules have a gendered effect on men and women's wellbeing.

## **Literature Review**

While there is no clear consensus on a definition of wellbeing (Cooper and Leiter, 2017), it is generally defined as 'a person's relative satisfaction with various aspects of their lives, based on the interaction between the resources they have (both material and cultural) and their circumstances' (Reeve et al., 2016: 7). Wellbeing is not just a sense of general happiness or an absence of concerns but a dynamic state within which objective (e.g. financial resources and life expectancy) and subjective (e.g. happiness and satisfaction with life) elements interact (Department of Health, 2015; Headey and Wearing, 2010; Reeve et al., 2016). In general, thus, wellbeing is derived from 'a sense of satisfaction with one's life' that is best achieved through alignment of behaviours, personal goals and values (Diener and Suh, 1997: 16) – and therefore a 'combination of feeling good and functioning well' (Harrison et al., 2016: 10).

It follows then, that wellbeing in the workplace is also multidimensional. The drivers of workplace wellbeing relate to all aspects of working life, from the quality and safety of the physical environment, to how workers feel about their work, their working environment, the climate at work and work organization (Carmichael et al., 2014; CIPD, 2016). The conditions of work and the workplace environment includes things such as job demands (e.g. workload, working hours, levels of autonomy), and workplace behaviours (e.g. management styles, relationships with peers, inclusivity) (Chen and Cooper, 2014; CIPD, 2016; Karanika-Murray and Weyman, 2013). The outcomes of low levels of

workplace wellbeing are equally varied and have been shown to include low job satisfaction, job strain, poor mental health (including work stress, anxiety, burnout and depression), work-to-family conflict, high staff turnover, leavism and absenteeism (Warr and Nielsen, 2018). As with wellbeing in general, a lack of fit between personal needs and the work environment can also negatively impact wellbeing (Warr and Nielsen, 2018). More specifically, the informal and formal rules of an organisation can shape attitudes, beliefs, behaviours and set out performance expectations as well as the motivation to abide by them (Schermerhorn et al., 2014). While employers are increasingly recognising the need to address wellbeing in the workplace, it is not an easy task. Typically, workplace wellbeing initiatives have been criticised for focusing on ‘improving the individual’ through one-size fits all solutions aimed at changing employees’ lifestyle and behaviours and responses to stress, rather than challenging or changing the structural conditions of work (Foster, 2018).

In the construction industry, masculine expressions and behaviours – e.g. control, reliability and devotion to work – have typically been revered (Styhre, 2011). Job demands such as excessive workload, high job and time pressure, working long hours, unrealistic deadlines and insufficient time with family, are found to be the most frequent causes of work stress and psychological injuries (Sunindijo and Kamardeen, 2017). In practice this means that to prove reliability and a devotion to work, a culture of ‘competitive presenteeism’ is informally enforced and exists even when there is little work to be done (Galea, 2018). Those who display different values are seen as not ‘fitting in’ (Cartwright and Gale, 1995) – for example, employees who manage to take advantage of formally sanctioned rules, such as part-time or flexible work arrangements, or parental leave are often seen as unreliable ‘slackers’ and not fully committed to their job (Watts, 2009). These rules, norms and practices are very much gendered, with only the ‘ideal worker’ – employees unencumbered by a life outside the workplace (Acker, 1990) – able to adhere to the rules. The rules also shape acceptable management styles (Greed, 2000) – predominantly command and control – which organisational scholarship has shown contributes to higher employee stress levels (Samuel, 2015). While numerous studies have observed the impact of work stress on employees’ wellbeing, none have specifically looked at the relationship between the gendered nature of formal and informal institutions and men and women’s wellbeing.

Existing research on wellbeing in the construction industry shows no significant difference between men and women’s experiences (Bowen et al., 2014; Sunindijo and Kamardeen, 2017). However, research to date has not captured the wellbeing of women working in similar roles to men (Lingard et al., 2007). Notwithstanding this, women working across the construction industry do face unique challenges namely ‘fitting in’, negotiating care responsibilities and sexual harassment and discrimination which result in higher work-life conflict leading to work stress, and in turn turnover intentions, burnout and other mental health issues (Deery et al., 2011; Galea, 2018). Women working on construction sites report daily instances of confrontation, close surveillance, sexual harassment and intimidation and feeling emotionally drained (Watts, 2009; Galea, 2018). While gender has not been shown to have a direct effect on workplace wellbeing, it has been associated with workers’ coping strategies (Bowen et al., 2014; Sunindijo and Kamardeen, 2017). This research goes beyond this to show not only gender differences in workplace wellbeing, but how the gendered rules in use throughout the industry have an effect on worker wellbeing. In male-dominated industries, performing masculinity means that workers often believe it is necessary to endure pain and conceal mental health issues so as to display ‘toughness’, self-reliance and ‘prove’ their worth and reliability (Wong et al., 2016). All workers, especially men, are encouraged to reject behaviours associated with femininity; and behave in accordance with dominant masculine norms that emphasise strength, invulnerability, accepting risks and enduring pain (including mental pain) without complaint (Stergiou-Kita et al., 2015). Conformity to masculine norms in male dominated environments is positively related to psychological injuries and negatively associated with help seeking behaviours for both men and women (Wong et al., 2016). The focus of the construction industry on short-term outcomes and productivity reinforces traditional masculine expressions, galvanising and institutionalizing the value of dominant forms of

masculinity. For instance, workers are expected to tolerate adverse work conditions without complaint and sacrifice their health to 'get the job done' (Iaccone, 2005; Stergiou-Kita et al., 2015). In competitive male-dominated industries, workers perform masculinity by putting productivity above safety to meet the ideal worker status (Watts, 2009). On such 'competitive battlefields', help-seeking behaviours are limited and discouraged (Stergiou-Kita et al., 2015).

According to feminist institutionalism scholars, institutions are encoded with gendered values and can affect men and women differently (Gains and Lowndes, 2014b; Mackay and Waylen, 2009). Different gendered values have been allocated to the social constructions of masculinity and femininity. Accordingly, men and women's behaviour is routinely assessed in accordance with these binary constructs of gender. Feminist institutionalists argue that the rules in use operating within organisations are encoded with gendered values that prescribe and proscribe acceptable masculine and feminine forms of behaviour, what Chappell (2006: 229) terms 'a gendered logic of appropriateness'. Traditionally in western nations, for example, men have been measured against clustered expressions of masculinity including strength, rationality, authority, control, technical competence and heterosexuality (Kimmel, 1994). That is not to say that traditional masculine expressions are fixed and unchanging over time – gender scholars acknowledge gender is temporal and contextual (Chappell and Walylen, 2013). Other dimensions, including race, class, sexuality and ability, also intersect with gender constructs to influence behavioural expectations. According to Coser (1974) and others (e.g. Mackay and Rhodes, 2013), gendered rules are held in part by 'the greedy institutions', which 'seek exclusive and undivided loyalty and attempt to reduce the claims of competing roles' and status positions on those they wish to encompass within their boundaries. Their demands on the person are omnivorous' (Coser, 1974: 4). Greedy institutions can be understood as gendered because the total commitment required (long hours, privileging of work over social and intimate relationships, family and social life) keeps men bound to a hegemonic code that costs them their health, their relationships and even their life. This article, thus, examines how gender operates through a combination of formal and informal institutions and how these gendered rules impact worker wellbeing.

## **Methodology**

This article draws on findings from a larger study that sought to examine the interaction of formal and informal institutions on women professional's recruitment, retention and progression in the construction industry (Galea et al., 2015). This project adopted a rapid ethnographic approach to reveal the gendered rules in use and their effects on employee wellbeing. These rules are generally undocumented and often, due to their taken-for-granted nature, unrecognised or invisible for those that live them (Galea et al., 2017). While rapid ethnography has been criticised for being a 'quick and dirty' approach to ethnography it provides an effective solution to the challenge of doing ethnography in time-pressured, project-based environments (Isaacs, 2013; Millen, 2000). In this study it provided practical solutions to the challenges the researchers encountered around getting access to participants operating across geographically dispersed sites (Galea et al., 2017). This approach involved a team of researchers (a mix of 'outsiders' with expertise in gender and sociology and political science and 'insiders' with experience of construction), working in teams of two to undertake short, intensive and focused investigations. The use of insiders and outsiders was an important reflexivity mechanism (Baines and Cunningham, 2013).

In contrast to the broad interactions and observations in classic ethnography, the data collection process in this study utilised more targeted interviews and observations with sampled participants. This ethnographic research took place over a period of eight months and included document analysis of 69 company policies; interviews with 21 senior female and male business leaders; participant observation of 14 company events (e.g. diversity training, graduate assessment centres, mentoring initiatives); onsite shadowing of 44 men and women construction professionals for two to five days; and 61 interviews (37 men and 24 women) with project management personnel across six major

construction sites operated by two organizations which were multinational contractors. In this article, the main focus is on data collected around the construction sites – onsite observations, shadowing and interviews.

While wellbeing was not the primary focus of the original research, the interest in the everyday experience of work and what helps and hinders careers, resulted in capturing a range of data about worker wellbeing. This included, for example, information about job demands and workplace culture and the consequences of this. Interviews, observations and shadowing on site explored common work practices (e.g. what time people arrived and left the site), roles on site (e.g. who does what roles, whether roles were associated with particular work practices such as total availability or leadership, gendered roles), informal and formal workplace expectations (hours worked, presenteeism), the composition and effects of work practices (formal and informal meetings and interactions), who had ‘voice’ within these meetings and group dynamics (how do people participate etc.), narratives (what messages were being reinforced) and the effects of these norms and practices on individuals.

Shadowing individual workers involved accompanying and observing them in their normal day-to-day working lives and provided an opportunity for informal conversations with participants. Researchers made detailed field notes and collected artefacts (photographs of room layouts, corporate messaging posted on walls or issued to employees). All participant interview and observation notes were anonymised.

Fieldwork notes, transcribed interviews and debriefs were coded thematically using Nvivo (a qualitative software enabling the organisation of content-rich data text) (Richards, 2000). The thematic analysis involved ‘structuring’ the data by inductively pinpointing, examining, and recording common themes which related to wellbeing. Following (Guest et al., 2011) this inductive thematic analysis involved several stages starting with: ‘immersion’ in the data (repeatedly reading the interview transcripts to obtain a high level of familiarity with the data); categorisation/coding (organising and generating an initial list of items/codes from the data-set that have a reoccurring pattern as it relates to the research questions); searching for themes (examining how codes combine to form over-reaching themes which are phrases or sentences that identifies what the data *means* in relation to the research questions); refining themes (continuing to search for data that supported or refuted proposed themes and connections between overlapping themes). Sense-making of the data also occurred through the production of rich descriptions; known as vignettes, and typical of ethnographies, they reflect patterns in the observations from the field (Hammersley, 2007). A gendered lens was used for coding and the analysis and drew out of the data patterns and descriptions that reinforced gendered rules and hegemonic masculine behaviours and values including strength, stoicism, and hyper competitiveness (for a detailed discussion of the methodology see Chappell and Galea, 2017; Galea et al., 2017).

## Findings

In talking about the nature of their work, what a typical work day looked like and their career experiences, the participants reflected on two key factors that the literature describes as negatively impacting wellbeing (Chen and Cooper, 2014; CIPD, 2016; Karanika-Murray and Weyman, 2013): job demands and workplace behaviours. While this article acknowledges that these factors are related, they are each described in turn below. This section discusses how they impacted worker wellbeing, which ‘rules in use’ these factors were shaped by and why; why the rules in use can be seen as gendered; and the gendered effects of the rules in use (see Table 1 for a summary). The findings are not intended to be a comprehensive review of all aspects of wellbeing, but rather illustrate the relationship between workplace wellbeing and gendered rules.

**Table 1. Findings summary**

	Impact on wellbeing	'Rules in use'	Gendered 'rules in use'	Gendered effects	Main findings
Job demands	Stress; work-to-family conflict	<i>Formal:</i> construction contract; employment contract; flex work; wellbeing policies  <i>Informal:</i> workplace norms	Long work hours; total availability and presenteeism based on gendered notion of ideal worker	Second shift for women; relationship breakdown for men	Informal rules and norms undermine formal ones, meaning little progress in tackling known issues that impact wellbeing  Wellbeing initiatives by companies do not address the rules in use
Workplace behaviours	Stress, anxiety, help-seeking behaviours	<i>Informal:</i> aggressive, competitive, sexist behaviours	Hegemonic masculinity is rewarded (e.g. strength, self-reliance, aggression) Help-seeking behaviours are sanctioned	Negative effects for anyone who doesn't 'fit'; women's wellbeing impacted by sexist behaviour	Lack of help-seeking behaviours creates self-reinforcing issue

**Job demands**

Job demands were primarily described in relation to the need for long work hours and presenteeism, as opposed to the mental or cognitive effort required. The researchers regularly observed full-time construction professionals working 50-80 hours a week, with most of the sites they visited working at a minimum from 7am to 5.30pm, Monday to Saturday. In addition to working long hours on site, working outside of site hours was also the norm for many participants:

*I work a massive day, early mornings, (then) you come home around six or six-thirty, you have dinner, put your kids to bed and then back on the computer for another couple of hours working. So, you know, 10 o'clock is probably then norm, midnight could be some other nights (male participant).*

**Impact on wellbeing.** Participants described the effects of long work hours on their wellbeing in terms of having no time to themselves and stress. For example, one participant stated:

*I think the hardest part for some people is that not only are they working a 12, 13-hour day but they've got a 30-minute commute in the morning and an hour and a half commute home in the afternoon. And that's the time that really starts to cook you (male participant).*

Others said:

*You eat, you shower, you sleep. You get up. What do you do? You go to work. And there really isn't 20 minutes for yourself (male participant).*

*I've lost a notch on my belt buckle for the first time in about seven years [suggesting weight loss]. Having a cloud over your head or in the back of your mind that there is always stuff to be doing. Almost feeling guilty if you have a, a down moment because you know that there is so much work that you have outstanding or on your to-do list (male participant).*

The data also indicated that job demands resulted in work-to-family conflict, with substantial relationship stress for the participants and their loved ones, often leading to divorce and marriage breakdown. As this male participant's comments show, over time intimate relationships are affected by the workplace demands of construction:

*The problem for me as well is that my wife's not a big fan [of the construction industry]. So, I don't feel as supported. And I think that's because I've spent so long in the industry and the hours that go with it, I think, over time, has just given her the shits. So from that perspective, yeah, we don't, I don't talk about work when I get home. Even if there's something that I wanna talk about.*

For some participants, the negative impact of construction work on their family forced them to reconsider the value of their career in construction. As this male participant stated:

*When we were at [project name], I was working six days a week the whole 18 months plus Sundays for two months towards the end. I didn't see my kids for like eight weeks. You know, and the point where your wife gets sick and pneumonia, and ends up in hospital because she's just constantly with them and can't cope. Had no other family help. So, you know, then I've gotta take time out completely and switch the phone off, and look after them all 'til they're all better again and go back and do it again. That mentality pushes people out of the industry and, you know, I was like, 'I don't care how much you pay me, I don't wanna do that anymore'.*

**Rules in use.** The long work hours and need for presenteeism were driven by both formal and informal rules in use. The traditional fixed lump sum construction contract (a formal rule), for example, places the emphasis on the project completion date and provides for hefty financial penalties should the project not be completed by the contracted date. As a result, project leaders are often incentivised to complete projects on time (another formal rule). In turn this led to behaviours (discussed further below), where employees were chastised for not observing the informal rules of presenteeism and total availability. These informal rules were so embedded that they were usually the norm even on projects where a different type of construction contract was in place and where the companies had introduced new formal rules (policies and initiatives) around flexible work and wellbeing<sup>1</sup>. Such rules were introduced specifically to counter the negative effects of the informal rules around long hours, but mostly to little avail. As one female participant noted:

*Whenever anyone important comes [to site], they stand on the steps on the back deck and present to all of us. [Executive Manager] made a point of saying how well the business had been going and how much profit they had declared, and how the shareholders were very happy. That's when he spoke about the wellness day initiatives and really focusing on safety, and not so much program. Afterwards a lot of people were speaking about the fact that the project director was so livid...he had been pushing everyone for the last year to work to a program and push hard and [Executive Manager] came and told us that we could relax and take four days off a year.*

The existence of the employment contract (another formal rule), which generally stated employees work 37.5 hours a week or as needed, also did very little to counter the influence the informal rules of

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<sup>1</sup> In both the construction companies in this study, there were a range of relatively new formal rules (in the shape of policies and pilot initiatives) focused explicitly on improving work-life balance, wellbeing and flexibility. These were a response to internal company data that repeatedly identified wellbeing as a critical issue for workers. The initiatives and policies at the time of the study included: wellbeing/ flexibility leave where employees could access an additional 4 days paid leave per year; a rostered compressed work week (5 days per week); individual, informally managed, 'give and take' response to flexible work arrangements; mates in construction training on site; group exercise programs and a focus on healthy eating; awareness raising through the publication of a wellbeing booklet circulated amongst employees.

long work hours and presenteeism. This is an example of what new institutionalists call a 'weak rule' (Helmke and Levitsky, 2004).

**Gendered rules in use.** The informal rules of long-work hours and presenteeism demonstrate a shared expectation among construction professionals that their work will be prioritised above all else, as and when needed. This is inherently gendered, since it is based on the notion of an 'ideal worker' able to adhere to such rules, with no commitments or responsibilities outside of the workplace (Acker, 1990; Galea, 2018).

**Gendered effects of rules in use.** While long-work hours and presenteeism took their toll on both men and women's wellbeing, they appeared to impact particularly heavily on women with family, largely as a result of what has been referred to as the 'second shift'. These women had no alternative but to negotiate and execute their own way to balance adhering to the rules and caring for their family. As one woman stated: 'I do what the boys do but then I go home and I do what their wives do as well'. The paid and unpaid workload that women reported having to cope with led them to reconsider whether a career in construction is sustainable for their wellbeing.

### **Workplace behaviours**

When discussing relationships with and behaviours of colleagues and managers, the participants described an aggressive and competitive environment, consistent with other research on the construction industry. Managers were, for example described as using aggressive and sarcastic language, and peers were described as engaging in harassing and other forms of behaviours to pressure workers to 'toe the line', particularly in relation to the long hours described above. The following quote is an example of aggressive behaviour on site:

*Working on-site the foreman came in the site office and he ripped shreds off me for something. I've no recollection now of what it was. I may well have been at fault or done the thing, or not organised the whatever. He just stood up in his big foreman way, stood over my desk, and yelled at me. He just ripped shreds off me. And I was just horrified because, as I'd said, I'd come from an all-girls school and I'd gone through a very pleasant university upbringing and I'd worked in offices before and it was all very pleasant. People may have disagreed on stuff but no-one ever yelled at each other or was really nasty. This was really confronting for me, and I remember afterwards because the site manager or project manager, construction manager was there and he didn't even raise his eyes. Afterwards I thought to myself, 'You bastard. You and the leader should have been doing something different'. It didn't matter if I'd stuffed up. That's not the way to deal with it. That's not how adults deal with stuff like that. And the more I thought about it, I really lost a bit of respect for him...he shouldn't have been allowed to get away with it (female participant).*

**Impact on wellbeing.** Working in this competitive environment was stressful for a number of the participants.

*I have had men of all different age brackets. A 30-year-old, a 35-year-old and a 50-year-old discuss waking up many times during the night with stress associated to the job. One even described having an anxiety attack as he drove to work. When I asked them how they treated this stress, they self-treat by doing or introducing exercise (researcher field notes).*

The behaviours and attitudes of project managers and leaders towards formal wellness initiatives such as the flexibility initiative was found to have a significant impact on the success and implementation of such programs. At the company that introduced an additional 4 days of 'wellbeing' annual leave, employees, while grateful, were unsure if their workload would permit it. Therefore, while seemingly positive, the wellbeing leave did little to tackle the masculine norms associated with total availability.

In other words, the wellbeing initiatives evolved within and opposed a culture based on unrealistic work expectations where early adopters of wellbeing initiatives risked being penalised for doing so:

*One of the things I've learned about [Company name] is, at the end of the day, they do, actually give a shit about their people and their attitude towards people who don't is pretty intolerant. They expect a pound of flesh but to a point. They won't ask you for more than you wanna give so, if you don't wanna give, you don't have to give; just don't expect the same returns of the people who wanna give (male participant).*

**Gendered rules in use.** The aggressive and competitive behaviours at play in the construction industry are gendered because they are based on hegemonic masculine norms and codes of behaviour; what Chappell (2006) calls a 'gendered logic of appropriateness'. These rules become embedded as a result of being rewarded, while typically feminine behaviours (e.g. displaying emotions) are sanctioned. Equally, women who display typically masculine behaviours, such as self-confidence are also sanctioned, as demonstrated in the following quote:

*I was telling [my line manager] one day about how I'd spoken to the project director and informed him that I had actually done construction management, had years of experience and was his highest educated, youngest, only female manager. [Line manager] got all flustered and said he couldn't believe that I spoke with such aggression to the project director (female participant).*

Langford et al. (1995) also argue that these behaviours further reinforce the expectation that it will be men who drive the industry.

The 'macho' environment also had a 'double whammy' effect in both creating stress but also making it difficult to seek help as a result, whether help for the stress itself or help to challenge inappropriate behaviours.

*It's the Australian way of 'She'll be a'right mate. Won't happen to me.' And you end up taking all this pressure on board, you know. And you've got family, relationships, wives and kids and a mortgage, and it's a big juggling match. And it becomes too much (male participant).*

*I was handed the [wellbeing] booklet by a male participant. His image was on the front of the booklet. He told me that each day on the way to site he suffered panic attacks but he was not sure if he would be able to take his wellbeing leave (researcher field notes).*

Enduring stress, anxiety and silent despair appeared as the opportunity cost for being considered stoic, strong and a reliable employee – all part of adhering to hyper-masculine behaviours. This is consistent with other findings in the construction industry that workers are expected to accept risks and endure pain without complaint (Iaccone, 2005; Stergiou-Kita et al., 2015), as well as other research that suggests men especially, often trivialise poor health and avoid help-seeking (O'Brien et al., 2005).

This was not only apparent in terms of individuals, but also what was and was not openly discussed on site. For example, as noted above wellbeing initiatives were introduced and discussed at a superficial level, however instances of suicide on the construction site were often kept secret on site with the focus by the site team often on the consequences of potential delays to program rather than the worker wellbeing.

**Gendered effects of rules in use.** Typically, masculine behaviours were also related to what we observed and were told about instances of sexism, sexualisation and heteronormativity (Galea et al., 2020). For example:

*I've spoken to an engineer here and she said she's had to get her phone number changed because she's been so harassed by people in the past. Another engineer used to get comments about her boobs all the time. She's just maybe one of the unlucky ones. She had*

*another incident where somebody filmed her in the shower [at work]. The partition had a gap and she saw someone with a phone.*

*I mean the stuff you hear when people don't think you're listening is unbelievable. And it's probably not as bad as it used to be. Like, when I started on-site in 2007 you could walk around the site and this is as a chick, not as a lesbian, but you'd see people would have their toolboxes open. There'd be naked pictures of chicks everywhere (female participant).*

In terms of the impact of this behaviour, this participant went on to describe feeling unsafe in the workplace:

*It's disgusting, very unsafe. Like a very unsafe feeling work environment I don't know if anything would ever happen but it doesn't make you feel very safe. And then when you hear the casual homophobic slurs and people don't even realise they're homophobic, it does sort of knock you back a little bit (female participant).*

Other women described feeling isolated, excluded and physically exhausted as a result of the sexist and sexualised culture, which in turn undermined their enjoyment of work and their confidence in the workplace. This was not something that appeared to impact on men's wellbeing.

## Discussion

This article has used an institutional framework to examine the relationship between workplace wellbeing and the 'rules in use,' that is, the practices and narratives that both constrain and enable actors to behave in certain ways. The informal rules in particular – long work hours and masculine coded behaviours – reveal the construction companies in this study as 'greedy institutions'. This research demonstrated that existing, but weak, formal rules such as the employment contract and new formal rules introduced to support wellbeing did little to counter the strength of the informal rules. With regard to wellbeing policies, this was partly because company initiatives placed the onus on individuals to take control of their wellbeing without acknowledging the informal rules operating on site. For example, a wellbeing brochure issued to all employees encouraged employees to take responsibility for their own wellbeing by eating well, keeping active, drinking sensibly, maintaining good relationships and taking lunch breaks.

The use of a feminist institutional lens has revealed that, at least in part, the *gendered nature* of the rules in use impacts on the workplace wellbeing of both men and women, as well as the rules in use having *gendered effects* on workplace wellbeing. This is a significant contribution, demonstrating the application of the theory beyond the political sphere, where it has predominantly been used to date (e.g. Krook and Mackay, 2011; Lowndes, 2020). Specifically, the findings demonstrate that the negative effects on wellbeing resulting from the gendered rules in use are compounded by a 'gendered logic of appropriateness' (Chappell, 2006). This logic prioritised masculine codes of behaviour (commanding authority, being competitive, confident, decisive, ambitious and aggressive) and was routinely performed by managers and professionals across the construction sites the researchers visited. Consistent with other literature, such aggressive behaviour raised employees stress levels (e.g. Deery et al., 2011). However, the gendered logic of appropriateness also meant that responses to issues that negatively impacted wellbeing (long work hours, presenteeism, aggressive behaviours), were routinely endured in silence by both men and women. In other words, issues around wellbeing (especially mental health) were frequently internalised and kept private. Such behaviours are traditionally masculine behaviours and expressions, demonstrating strength and rationality. Furthermore, it appeared that this behaviour was often rewarded (Styhre, 2011; Wong et al., 2016), while typically feminine behaviours (e.g. displaying emotions) were sanctioned (Chappell and Galea, 2017). This is similar to previous research that demonstrates that employees in construction are expected to tolerate adverse work conditions, with help-seeking behaviours discouraged (Stergiou-Kita et al., 2015). It is also consistent with Olofsdotter and Randevåg (2016) who found that norms of masculinity

in the construction industry result in both men and women adjusting their working styles to 'fit in'. Subtle differences were also identified in the effects of the gendered rules for men and women's wellbeing. Men and women both described the impact of wellbeing on their family, albeit in different ways, with women emphasising the double bind of the unpaid workload alongside long hours of paid work and men more likely to discuss the detrimental effects on their intimate relationships. Women's wellbeing was also more likely to be impacted by the experience of sexualisation, harassment and feelings of isolation in the workplace (Dainty and Lingard, 2006; Watts, 2009).

The companies in this study demonstrated an awareness of some of these stresses and have started introducing measures, including wellbeing leave to alleviate some work pressures. This article argues that although well intentioned, these formal wellbeing measures do little to address the structural issues underpinning the formal and informal gendered rules in use. In particular, they do little to counteract the 'greediness' of construction organisations, especially when it comes to the frenetic period before completion of a contract. It is at this time that the informal rules within these companies demand total availability of workers and when the gendered rules in use are mostly strongly enforced. As this study reveals, this is the period where there is a premium on 'heroic masculinity' requiring traits of reliability, control, strength and stoicism. These are the rules perceived as necessary to deliver complex and difficult projects, and are a side effect of the construction contract that stipulates financial penalties for late project completion. In sum, despite the best efforts of human resource managers and others to challenge the rules in use and introduce a more balanced work life through wellbeing policies, the way the industry continues to manage contractual demands overrides these efforts and reinforces the existing gendered logic of appropriateness.

Successfully implementing formal rules (including policies and initiatives) around employee wellbeing is challenging in the construction industry. In large part, the data shows this is because the formal rules are frequently undermined by the informal rules (practices and narratives) described above, but also by competing formal rules such as the construction and employment contracts (see also Galea et al., 2020). This means companies seeking to address employee wellbeing need to consider how they may challenge the informal rules and readjust competing formal rules. The challenge of implementing such initiatives is compounded by the fact that, as shown by previous research, most workplace wellbeing programs focusing on individual lifestyle changes (e.g. access to gyms, healthy food, better ergonomics, stress audits and recognition of risk factors for poor mental health) have limited benefit (Carmichael et al., 2014). These types of programs have been heavily criticized for individualizing the issue and holding employees responsible without taking into account the role of external factors such as physical (e.g. facilities, buildings, furniture etc.) and psychosocial workplace features (e.g. social support, management styles) (Dickson-Swift et al., 2014; Foster, 2018) and the informal rules in use that drive workplace practices. Rather, this research shows that workplace wellbeing programs need to be targeted at the individual, organisational and institutional level, taking into account the impact of informal workplace practices, routines and norms and the way that they intersect with formal wellbeing policies (Cotton and Hart, 2003). Failure to do so means that informal rules are likely to continue to undermine more formal rules around wellbeing. Successfully challenging the entrenched informal rules requires more than an occasional seminar on employee resilience. One possible solution is ensuring that construction projects are setup from the outset with wellbeing in mind, for example, ensuring resource planning includes employee leave allowances and flexible work patterns. It also means monitoring and measuring the outcomes and holding site managers accountable, in order to ensure efforts to achieve better employee wellbeing are not undermined by efforts to save time and/or money, for example by rewarding site managers who successfully deliver projects that value worker wellbeing.

Future research and practice may investigate whether there are lessons to be learnt from the industry's largely successful record of implementing (physical) safety requirements on construction sites, which, in this study, appeared to be consistently prioritised over psycho-social wellbeing by both companies and employees. On each construction site visited by the researchers, physical safety

measures were ubiquitous but there was little about mental health. On arrival to site the researchers attended a safety induction, participated in safety walks, observed safety zones and wore safety equipment. Although some have questioned the extent to which construction sites observe physical safety, the focus on safety has been driven by a combination of government legislation, organisational safety management systems, effective organisational communication strategies and safety culture programs (Sherratt et al., 2013). As this study was primarily exploratory, future research should also examine the gendered nature of wellbeing in greater depth, teasing out different objective and subjective elements of workplace wellbeing beyond job demands and workplace behaviours.

## Conclusion

Using a rapid ethnographic approach, this research shows that the construction industry's 'greedy' gendered institutions are inextricably linked to workplace wellbeing for both the men and woman and that these rules work against their wellbeing. Although many of the effects on wellbeing were similar for men and women, there were also subtle differences. These institutional forces intensify at later stages of construction projects when managers and employees push to get projects finished on time and budget, seemingly at any personal cost. These accumulating institutional pressures exacerbate already damaging wellbeing risks for professionals working in the industry, especially in project-based roles where they are most acute and where the gendered institutions are most apparent and intense.

To improve worker wellbeing, then, these informal, often taken-for-granted, and gendered rules must be broken. At a practical level, the results also indicate that current efforts to counteract these rules through individual based approaches such as wellbeing leave are no match for the greediness of these institutions whose work practices are premised on and through the reproduction of traditional gender relations. Construction companies swallow their workers time and commitment, with an ever-expanding appetite throughout the lifecycle of a project. The findings indicate that recognising the gendered aspects of worker wellbeing is the first stage for construction companies to change these sometimes life-threatening behaviours. The second stage is for the industry to undergo structural reform to better regulate its contractual timeframes and work pressures so that its employees are not forced into heroic masculine roles that are so dangerous to their wellbeing.

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