

Gendering Trade Negotiations: Elite Spaces of Work as Regulatory Nodes in the Global Economy

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Abstract

I argue that free trade negotiations function as a regulatory node in flows of global capital, revealing that social relations of power including gender and nationality mediate the production of elite spaces of work. Negotiations of the Free Trade Area of the Americas Agreement and World Trade Organization are considered.

Résumé

J'argumente que les négociations de libre-échange fonctionnent comme des nodules réglementaires dans les mouvements de capital global. Cela révèle que les relations sociales de pouvoir, y compris celles qui impliquent le genre et la nationalité, servent d'intermédiaires en ce qui a trait à la production d'espaces de travail élitistes. Nous prenons en considération les négociations telles que l'Entente de l'espace du Libre-échange des Amériques et l'Organisation mondiale du commerce.

This paper examines the creation of elite spaces of work through the understandings of those who hold a stake in the process of negotiating a free trade agreement. I discuss the material construction of elite spaces of work through social relations of power as experienced by Canadian and Caribbean Community (CARICOM)¹ negotiators during the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) negotiation process (1994–2005). I also consider trade liberalization negotiations more generally at the World Trade Organization (WTO) in that same time period as experienced by the 15 trade negotiators interviewed for this research. Feminist geographers Nagar et al. (2002) suggest that a focus on elite sites of work has typically reified a Eurocentric and masculinist focus on global capital while neglecting alternative sites in which the gendered processes of global capital are evident, such as informal labour and the home. Feminist interventions, however, increasingly support and suggest the need for further investigation into spaces of corporate capital and elite sites of work. For example, Hooper (2001) insists on an examination of gendered struggles between groups of men and privileged women, which “are taking place at the top” (59). And as Mullings (2005) concludes in her research on Caribbean banking industries, not all women experience these elite spaces as oppressive, while not all men find them liberating. In this paper, I argue that the transnational location of elite sites of work reveals the complexities of how a privileged group of men and women of many nationalities figure in the production of such spaces. Exclusivities characterizing many elite sites of work are not given but accomplished, lending strength to feminist projects that seek to undo the inaccessibility of these spaces to the public and to negotiators from so-called “smaller economies”²

such as those of the English-speaking Caribbean.

In order to ground my claims, I first define more clearly what I mean by “elite spaces of work” as regulatory nodes by turning to the ideas of feminist and economic geographers. I then explore the diversification of the positionality of trade negotiators in these spaces. Interviews with negotiators from differently positioned economies, including Canada, and from “smaller economies,” such as those of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), a trade bloc, demonstrate that performances of gender and national identity mediate and diversify the positionality of this elite group of men and women. I conclude that social relations of power such as gender and nationality are not only present in the work lives of trade negotiators, but position them differently in elite spaces of work.

Elite Spaces of Work as Regulatory Nodes

Roberts (1995, 1999) considers trade to consist of a network of spatial flows within which there are many creative spaces, or nodes of activity, contributing to the overall process of hemispheric trade. Far from being a global-national space that is “discrete, bounded, and separate” (Nagar et al. 2002, 265), elite sites of work, such as the process that animated the FTAA negotiations between 1994 and 2005, are part of such a network. Roberts (1995) describes elite spaces of work as “regulatory nodes” in the routine circulations of capital (239); that is, they are points at which flows of capital are shaped, facilitated, or even confounded. The existence of these nodes offers an important opportunity to examine both the fallibility and expressions of power inherent in the trade negotiation process. This study envisions trade negotiations as dependent upon “spaces that are anchored in but extend beyond the borders of any one nation-state,” in other words, the transnational (Mahler and Pessar 2001, 44). Elite spaces of work—like those spaces that support the process of negotiating a free trade agreement—are spatial expressions of power between and within nations and act as regulatory nodes in the global economy.

Within the FTAA trade negotiations, I focused on Canada’s relationship to four of

the English-speaking CARICOM countries, namely Barbados, Guyana, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago. These relationships were investigated because, at the most basic level, trade negotiations are representative of past and present power struggles between nations and regions. As Canada’s own history includes both overt and benevolent colonial interest in the Caribbean (Johnson 2008), the existence of regulatory nodes in Western/Northern countries as well as in the global South should be considered as integral to the production of transnational elite spaces of work. Complex histories of colonialism and neo-imperialism have produced inequities in these different nations’ participation in free trade negotiations, with significant inequities both between Canada and CARICOM countries and within this trade bloc of comparatively smaller economies. Viewed as an expression of power within a process of trade liberalization, the work of the trade negotiator is to participate in a regulatory node that shapes flows of global capital. It is through an analysis of the experiences of both men and women negotiators working on behalf of Canada and (post)colonial nations like those of CARICOM that the complexity of elite spaces of work can be more fully understood.

Understanding Elite Spaces of Work

Elite sites of work serving the interests of corporate capital are sometimes described as the “clean” environments from which global economies are orchestrated (England 2002; Mullings 1999; Roberts 1999; Sassen 1998). These can include the trading floors of major banks, stock exchanges, or the boardrooms of private organizations. Certainly mandates to regulate, police, and conduct surveillance on informal and illegal economic activities emanate from government and the private sector, but these are also interdependent upon the racialized and feminized labour forces employed there; elite sites of work exist in part to regulate, but also because of their reliance on poorly paid workers and unpaid social reproductive labour (Biemann 2002; Mohanty 1999; Mullings 1999; Scott 2004). While elite sites of work associated with free trade negotiations are spaces from which the legalities of inter-

national trade emanate, they also voice the interests of large private sector organizations. For example, the state acts as a filter for the private sector when it authors market “intelligence” gathered from the private sector and reshapes it to attract new investments in the national economy.

Elite spaces of work also include the spaces in which elected and appointed officials carry out their work, insofar as the state has a hand in facilitating, regulating, and participating in the global economy. Thus the spaces from within which trade agreements are developed and which create the very regulations by which other spaces of corporate capital are governed are a good example of the interconnectedness of these regulatory nodes in flows of global capital. Many spaces that support the existence of ongoing trade negotiations are highly mobile within the global economy, including the day-to-day work spaces of trade negotiators and their circuits of travel between countries. Elite spaces of work can be mobile spaces of productivity and consumption in their own right that exist to facilitate and regulate the mobilization of capital, goods, and services (Sassen 1998). Efforts to create these particular elite spaces of work in the service of corporate capital are an attempt by states to assert entitlement to a place in the global economy, if only as actors in the negotiation of state liberalization. Surprisingly, these nodes of activity and the spaces they open up are themselves quite fragile, having relied for a long time on the assumption that less powerful nations will continue to participate in them and that civil society organizations will remain external to the process.³ The recreation of these sites must be accomplished over time and place with brutish reliance on material forms of security. A defining feature of elite spaces of work is, then, that they are exclusionary in degrees and that exclusions must be accomplished intentionally or through taken-for-granted practices; they are not a given. The production of elite spaces of work is therefore a point of urgent feminist inquiry; what can be created can also be undone.

Methodology

In an effort to pursue this line of inquiry, I met with 40 interviewees selected through purposive sampling⁴ during two trips within Canada (Ottawa in October 2005 and August 2006), and two trips to the Caribbean (Kingston, Jamaica; Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago; and Georgetown, Guyana, from December 2004 to January 2005; and Bridgetown, Barbados in February 2006). Although the scope of research at that time included interviews with negotiators, private sector, labour, and women’s organizations with a stake in the outcome of the negotiations, as well as analyses of both policy documents and cultural texts on the negotiation process at the FTAA and WTO, I limit my discussion here to findings from qualitative interviews with trade negotiators working for CARICOM countries and Canada. The wide range of experiences that trade negotiators had at various scales of engagement in these flows of trade is very important in shaping the identities of trade negotiators. Of the fifteen trade negotiators in my interviews (six women and nine men), four Canadians and eleven CARICOM negotiators had had experience negotiating at other fora besides the FTAA. Most had negotiated at the WTO and some had been involved in negotiating the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the Caribbean Single Market and Economy (CSME). Geographically, they had experience negotiating in the Middle East, Europe, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean within the span of their careers. Their duration of experience ranged from two to thirty years as observers, technical support, junior and career negotiators and, among them, three women and five men were very senior in their fields. Their knowledge and experience of trade negotiations is extensively mapped onto multiple geographical and political contexts, offering important perspectives on the spatial flows of trade in the global economy and relations of power between nation states.

The interviews with negotiators focused first on their professional history and then on the placement of their negotiating team in the hierarchy of nations at relevant negotiating sessions. That I would avoid specific questions on negotiating positions was a

requirement for obtaining the interviews. Most of the questions focused on relationships between countries or trade blocs and these elicited information on the way in which negotiations are embedded in a network of power relations (e.g., "Is there a country/trading bloc that you could say has a significant supporting relationship to your country? If so, how?"). Open-ended questions on what constitutes a "strong" negotiator and instances of "conflict" then produced rich narratives on negotiating tactics and numerous references to the ways in which their experiences were gendered and racialized (e.g., "In your experience, what are the qualities of an ideal negotiator? Who do you think makes a strong negotiator?" and "Can you recount a moment of conflict in which you acted as a negotiator?"). Towards the end of the interviews, I asked negotiators two specific and equally important questions about gender: "Do you ever recall negotiators having an interest in the gendered impacts of trade liberalization?" and "Do you feel that gender ever plays a role in the way some negotiations proceeded?" These questions resulted in a discussion of gender as a factor in either the attempts of civil society organizations to intervene in the development of negotiating platforms or in the negotiations themselves. Interviews were concluded with the collection of some demographic information, which often spawned further conversation about the background necessary for becoming a negotiator.

The Exclusionary Power of Elite Spaces of Work

One form of exclusionary power in elite spaces of work is sexism. Two career negotiators put it to me succinctly:

CARICOM negotiator: "Gender is a major issue... particularly in trade. It's still a very much male dominated field, very male dominated and very macho in its whole."

Canadian negotiator: "Like maybe in a context where it's predominantly males, that they might not—without getting into specifics—I'm aware of cases where because some people are women,

the other side may not take you as seriously." (Interviews, 2004–2006)

The sexism and anti-feminism of elite spaces is often subtle, but the relative exclusion of women from these spaces is telling. There is extensive literature to demonstrate that elite spaces of work, including work inside private corporations, the banking and financial services industries, and the negotiation of trade agreements, whether in complex multilateral arrangements or bilateral negotiations between only two countries, are exclusive of gender considerations in a variety of ways (Barriteau 2001, 201; England and Ward 2007; England 2002; McDowell and Court 1994; Massey 1995; Patil 2006; van Staveren et al. 2007, 33). First, gender representation of both men and women at the level of negotiations and technical support can be unbalanced (Hassanali 2000; Peebles 2005). Despite the fact that many public and foreign services have become gender-balanced in certain fields, and that in particular countries women have been highly represented in the public service, the atmosphere of trade negotiations as a masculinist one persists.

Second, the everyday sexism some negotiators described in their interviews reflects whether gender will be taken seriously as an analytical category in the development of negotiating platforms and the norm is that it is not. The existence of systemic discrimination in pay, the delegitimization of something broadly termed "women's issues," as well as individualized interactions that support the exclusion of a more complex understanding of gender as an analytical category for determining the impacts of trade liberalization all contribute to gendered exclusions (Barriteau 2001, 28; Heyzer 2005; Nordås 2003; Swamy 2004; Wedderburn 2002). Feminists from both the global North and South have tried to insert mechanisms for studying and measuring the gendered impacts of free trade negotiations, particularly at the WTO, as well as at the national level in their own economies (Roy 2004; UNCTAD 2004; Williams 2007, 2003; Wyss and White 2004). These efforts have had some impact. For example, two of the most senior and powerful negotiators I interviewed from Canada and CARICOM,

both men, noted some interventions on gender and trade liberalization—one even pointed me to the relevant feminist researchers who had attempted to sway his unit's negotiating positions. But in large part, feminist interventions are under-recognized. For example, when a high-level female representative working as a specialist in her field was approached by a women's organization to speak publicly about her work, she responded,

CARICOM negotiator: "I said 'trade liberalization and gender...would gender have something to do with it?', because I had not thought of it before to be quite honest. I don't think many of us had." (Interviews, 2004–2006)

McDowell and Court (1994) argue that occupational sex typing is distinct from occupational segregation by sex, explaining why some types of jobs may often be performed by both men and women, but are still constructed through sexist ideologies (233), which may partially account for this negotiator's reaction.

J.K. Gibson-Graham (1996, 2006) points out that an assumption about who exactly orchestrates the global economy is implicit in mainstream discourses of globalization and neo-liberalism. In these discourses, it is assumed that power automatically accrues to persons holding positions in their national governments, global financial institutions, and multinational corporations, impermeable environments where economic policy is created to suit the interests of elites.

Mullings (2005) departs from other feminist studies of the exclusivity of elite spaces of work in that she explores contexts where whiteness and a singular dominant nationality cannot be taken for granted. Mullings finds that select groups of women with advanced levels of education have and continue to benefit from global restructuring by virtue of class-based differences. For upper-class women in Jamaica with advanced education, this has meant new access to managerial positions in industries that previously favoured men and people of European descent, their numbers relatively outstripping those of women in Northern industrialized countries

(2). She also recognizes the significance of racialization in divisions of labour on a global scale and within the Jamaican financial services sector. These class-based advantages launched the most elite of my interviewees from relatively small elite communities onto a global stage in a way they found liberating:

CARICOM negotiator: "Now when you actually move into the international community, all those things fall away. And this will also be the same for women I find. I find internationally there's less of a concern with the family, where you came from, what race you are, what gender you are if you're dealing with issues at the international level. That's what I find." (Interviews, 2004–2006)

What is most important about Mullings' study is that she acknowledges a global division of labour in the work of elites and the ways in which the upper classes of postcolonial countries, like those of the Caribbean, may have benefited from some aspects of global restructuring. These benefits are clearly limited, however, particularly when the complexity of social relations of power at work in the negotiating room are considered.

Social Relations of Power at Work in the Negotiating Room

In the process of trade liberalization, elite spaces of work are normatively constructed as the workplaces of "large" and powerful economies whose representatives may be marked through whiteness and masculinity with nationality being the central relation of power. Gatekeeping and politeness function in these contexts much as they do in other elite office environments (England 2002, 207). It was with great interest, then, that I noted the use of "politeness" to both exclude and achieve access to invitation-only "green room" negotiation sessions at the FTAA and WTO. In the world of theatrical performances, the "green room" is where actors prepare and return after performances, relaxing out of character and out of sight of the audience. The green room approach to negotiations is especially pertinent to multilateral negotiations where increasingly smaller concentric circles of invitees participate in private negotiations and then return to the larger group to

offer their conclusions. This approach is commonly used at the WTO and was transposed to the FTAA negotiations without much discussion, according to the negotiators I interviewed. Achieving access to inner circle negotiations is quite straightforward if one's national identity already credits the negotiator with access; simply being a member of a large country helps keep you in the room. In those instances when national status alone did not circumvent gatekeeping, negotiators had to use other methods, and these were limited for women. Whereas a young woman, a junior CARICOM negotiator, was prepared to take her exclusion for granted, a more experienced negotiator, who the interviewee identified to me as a person of colour, used his knowledge of the social terrain of negotiating rooms to gain access:

CARICOM negotiator: "You know you're a small country so you're not invited to the...bigger things sometimes...so I had heard about it and I said 'There's this meeting going on and we're not invited so we can't go.'

"He just turned up. 'I'm sorry I'm late! I'm sorry I'm late.' 'Yes, we're discussing so-and-so', and I mean nobody could ask him to leave...[laughs]. He's gone to meetings and sat on the floor when there were no chairs because this was what he was here for, this is what he needed to achieve and this is what he was going to do." (Interviews, 2004–2006)

In this case, the junior negotiator was affronted by the exclusion of her country from an invited session on the basis of its economic size. Using the business culture of negotiations to his advantage and polite masculine assertiveness, the senior negotiator pretended their exclusion was a simple oversight. Nevertheless, sitting on the floor just to gain access indicates the power imbalance between nations and deeply racializes this hierarchy. In order to function successfully, or just to survive, trade negotiators might be required to suppress their reaction to personal insults and racism/sexism. This experience also underlines that elite spaces of work in which trade liberalization is negotiated are

normative for those who are unmarked by race and post-coloniality.

National identity helps determine the confidence with which trade negotiators enter a negotiation and this is also mediated by gender. For women whose gender identity might have made them a less powerful opponent, their nationality, if synonymous with whiteness, carried a great deal of influence. For example, one Canadian negotiator recalled being the only woman on a Canadian team seeking the liberalization of the telecom sector in a Middle Eastern country:

Canadian negotiator: "In 1998 I was in my mid-20s, and here I was telling this group of 8 men that they should change their economy. It was great. I loved it...[laughs]. And there was this one guy that was at the end, he looked at me and he had such contempt. And everybody else was very polite, but this guy you could read in his eyes, 'Who the heck do you think you are!' But I've seen worse." (Interviews, 2004–2006)

For this young white woman, her nationality accorded her some leverage in dealing with an elite group of all-male trade representatives from the Middle East. It was an experience in which she perceived gender inequality to have been turned upside down by virtue of Canada's relative advantage in these particular negotiations. Also at work in her story is the unwillingness of the men to be perceived as patriarchs and perhaps appear "backwards" in the face of their Western opponents. To say, then, that being a white female Canadian trade negotiator obviates the sexism of male trade negotiators is incorrect. Rather, nationality marked by whiteness works problematically to advance a kind of gender "equality" for some female negotiators by ameliorating their relative influence with certain countries. One female career negotiator with extensive technical experience was adamant on this point but offered the perspective of negotiators who are women of colour or who negotiate for countries from the global South:

CARICOM negotiator: "And there have been some very powerful women...from the U.S. and from

Latin America. But those women have to just... forgive my phraseology, 'kick ass' in order to get the same respect that the men get... There are two things: (1) when you come from the U.S. I guess you get an automatic respect because with the U.S. you're big. But even then you have to be much harder than you normally would be because you're in a man's world. And (2) there are a lot of things that the men take advantage of or do [or] say that are inherently offensive. But you just learn to ignore it." (Interviews, 2004–2006)

Women of colour in this negotiator's experience do not have the privileges some white female negotiators enjoy as a result of their national affiliation. The fact that both white women and women of colour might be required to ignore sexism underscores the normative construction of the negotiating room as a masculine space. "Just learning to ignore it" may mean that female trade negotiators can function effectively in their job, but sexism never disappears as a result of any advantages they might enjoy as a result of national hierarchies, and women and men of colour always contend with racism.

Regardless of their nationality, most male negotiators tended to be completely unaware of the sexism experienced by their female colleagues. One interesting observation was made by a CARICOM trade negotiator who argued that nationality, gender, or any other personal characteristic was less relevant than when negotiators had a common past work experience. My sense is that he felt these issues of difference *should* not matter, as well as that they *did* not matter. His induction into sites of free trade negotiations at the WTO was more relevant and useful in creating alliances at hemispheric negotiations of the FTAA than was his national identity. "We were great buddies...and we were able to understand each other...[Our experience at the WTO] was the link that got us to talking, and seeing each other's positions, frankly, rather than with a flag on our chest" (Interviews, 2004–2006). This negotiator's ability to cast off the "flag on his chest" indicates that nationality need not be a limiting feature of the working environment, at least in networking with other male trade negotiators. It is important to note though that

his experience was at odds with more senior CARICOM negotiators from an earlier generation who were interviewed and who experienced nationality primarily as a racialized category in the early post-independence period. Whether women trade negotiators can reap the same benefits of common work experience is not guaranteed. The national identity of trade representatives is a flexible identifier that changes over time and according to the gender of the participants.

Gender, Nation, and the Ideal Negotiator

The "ideal" negotiator in such settings is anything but a feminine consensus builder. But neither is he a hyper-masculine patriarch who stubs out expensive cigars on the desk of the opposing party or storms from the room two days before the expiry of a deadline in order to have his way (Greenaway 2008), nor is he the aggressive bully (Jawara and Kwa 2003, 149). Interviewees from Canada and CARICOM nations asserted that negotiators achieve their objectives by choosing appropriate negotiating techniques. Many negotiators emphasized the ability of the ideal negotiator to create consensus, especially in assisting two or more others to reach an agreement. "The art of negotiation is making sure that you can both get the best of what you want without hurting the other. It's not personal. It's all about your country's interests and that's what you're there for," said one CARICOM negotiator (Interviews, 2004–2006). A number of negotiators described similar situations and admired those who could orchestrate these types of agreements and have all the parties move on in an amicable way to the next item under discussion. The characteristics of the ideal negotiator that many of my interviewees valued, such as being able to arrive at consensus, or persistence and politeness, did not render male negotiators "effeminate" in any way and were admired by both men and women alike because such a quality signified an understanding of the complexity and technical difficulty of their work.

There is another facet to the identity of the ideal negotiator, which is that he or she is able to leave family life behind or at least marginalize family responsibilities so that they can follow the never-ending schedule of

meetings. There were distinct differences in the points of view put forward by male and female negotiators on this issue, although all felt constrained by it. Trade negotiators who had children all lamented the time spent away from home. But women cited the amount of time they were required to travel away from family as one major reason for leaving the field. One former negotiator noted that men might not be similarly disadvantaged if their spouses were willing to parent on their own, implying that many male partners are not as willing to take on the role of the single parent and underscoring the heteronormativity of elite spaces of work:

CARICOM negotiator: “[I]n my case you have a child and things tend to wear a little differently. Men can travel all the time because their wives are at home looking after the children. When you’re the mother you don’t really have that...Some people may but I didn’t feel I had that freedom to do my job and go off. And so that’s why I quit...because I just was constantly on the road...So it still continues to be a very male dominated field and most of the women either don’t have children or have grown children.” (Interviews, 2004–2006)

The opportunities for younger women to apply themselves fully in ongoing trade negotiations are limited by requirements of their work if they want families. Marginalizing family life has long been a part of workplace requirements in elite spaces of work where reproductive work is constructed as extraneous to paid work (Massey 1995, 490–4). My interviews revealed that the same is true of the ideal negotiator, who has historically been male. Women who make these sacrifices are forced not to have children, to severely curtail their participation in social reproduction and substitute their own with paid care (or both), or to enter the field of active negotiations at a later stage in their careers. Largely unpaid reproductive work thus subsidizes the participation of male negotiators in elite spaces of work, adding to the range of “invisible” economic interactions such as domestic, emotional, and sexual labour that are unaccounted for in flows of global capitalism (Maliha and Graham 2010; Bakker 2003).

Conclusion

Trade negotiations are one of the key nodes of activity that shape transnational flows of trade between countries. My research reveals that there are concentric circles of exclusion mediated by gender, nation, and class. Their work is one of the points at which the state continues to be a relevant force in its attempts to regulate global flows of commodities, services, labour, and capital. But social relations of power, such as gender and nationality, affect how men and women of different nationalities and, by implication, racialized identities, experience negotiations while social relations of power such as class have tended to admit elites from CARICOM countries to the negotiating process. I found that trade negotiators may find commonality in their class and educational backgrounds but are differentiated through their nationalities and by virtue of their membership in states which have undergone periods of colonialism. As such, gender, nation, and class are social relations of power that mediate the construction of these particular elite spaces of work. It is through the experiences of negotiators themselves that the spatiality of trade negotiations is most visible. Through their observations, the fallible process of creating spaces of negotiations, and the types of gender performances that are acceptable in these spaces are differentiated.

Endnotes

1. CARICOM includes fifteen member countries: Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Belize, Republic of Costa Rica, Commonwealth of Dominica, Dominican Republic, Grenada, Cooperative Republic of Guyana, Republic of Haiti, Jamaica, Federation of St. Christopher and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Republic of Suriname, and the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

2. The term “smaller economies” was used to describe any participant in the FTAA negotiations whose market size (population) and Gross National Product were significantly less than others. I have problematized the genealogy of this term in more detail elsewhere (Johnson 2008).

3. Extensive protests by civil society organizations stand in contrast to the degree to which such organizations are actually permitted to participate. In 1998, ministers involved in the FTAA negotiation process envisioned civil society organizations constituting a special committee to study the impacts of free trade, among other things, *after* the agreement was concluded, (FTAA 2003: Chapter XXI, article 4). By 2001 and at three sessions after that, civil society organizations could deliver position papers to the convenors of the FTAA at large and have their views recorded and published on the FTAA website.

4. Purposive sampling is the practice of seeking research participants who offer insightful perspectives on the focus of the research, rather than attempting to recruit a representative group. This method is often employed in the study of elites (Carnevale et al. 2005).

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