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Exploring the impact of a formal career mentoring scheme for women professional managers in higher education (0168)

Introduction

The success story of our HEIs has to be considered against the continued poor performance of women in reaching senior management positions in the academy. Research shows (Gander 2010) that women make up the majority of professional management[1] staff at Grades 7 and 8 (60%) but at Grade 10[2] men outnumber women by 60%.

HEIs promote themselves as rational, analytical, bureaucratic, liberal meritocracies with recruitment and promotion based upon merit alone - all qualities which equate with perceived masculine behaviour O'Connor (1999). Equality of opportunity has been enshrined in UK law for three decades and the current Equality Act outlaws discrimination on the grounds of sex - but that does not mean that inequality is not present in organisations as mentioned above. Acker (1990) states that all organisations' structures, policies and processes are inherently gendered. Although it is not an accepted normative behaviour to display discrimination against individuals or groups based on being 'other' than the dominant culture, if individuals do display discrimination it is often based on non-conscious cognitive processes (Reskin 2000; Mathieu 2009) and through the use of micro-politics (Morley 2000). This includes how individuals speak, interact, influence, network and form coalitions in gendered ways and involves rumour, gossip, sarcasm, humour and throw-away remarks. Micro-politics provides an explanation for how patriarchal power is exercised rather than simply possessed. It is this practising of gender discrimination that is rarely recognised within organisations. If we are to tackle inequality we need to balance both the ideas of equality and of difference to overcome the effect of gendered organisations.

Methodology

The study used a feminist qualitative approach that it was hoped would shed light on the possible barriers to women's careers in professional management and the effect of a formal career mentoring scheme. The study took place at one HEI in England with six G9 women and senior manager pairings that met about five times in five months. The data consisted of 45 min unstructured interviews and the participants diary record through the mentoring process.

Results

The results of the interviews showed that there are four main themes that affect a woman's career. The first is her past experience. All the women reported that the sector and the institution were good places to work as a women but that four of them had been surprised at being the target of the micro-politics of gender when they were younger around areas of rumour and gossip related to their success. There was also a feeling that there was ageism at work when the women were younger in terms of non-explicit but pernicious micro-politics. The second factor was their motivation. All participants reported a greater intrinsic motivation as rather than wanting a career for extrinsic rewards they were more interested in doing interesting work and making a difference to the organisation. The third factor was perceptions of senior roles. All of the participants used words to describe being in a senior management role that had negative connotations falling under three main headings: stress (x3), expectations of the work (x6), and work-life inbalance (x4). Other words that were used were 'horror', 'scary' and 'fear'. The fourth factor was physical barriers. It emerged that geography played a large part in women's career decisions. Women that had children, close family

[1] As described by Whitchurch (2007)
[2] G7 £29-35k, G8 £37-44k, G9 £45-52k, G10 £60k+

relatives or family homes in the locale where generally not willing to move for career progression because maintaining relationships was important. This also meant that travelling time to other institutions was also curtailed. Another barrier that was mentioned by a participant was that of 'being present' that although there are many projects across the institution that may aid career progression not all people have the ability to take on extra work because of commitments at home.

The overwhelming response from the mentoring process was that it had a very positive impact on all of the participants (which some are continuing). All participants thought that a similar process would be valuable to them in the future. As in the mentoring literature (Allen *et. al.* 2006; Chao *et. al.* 1992; Dreher and Ash 1990; Kay and Wallace 2009) the mentoring affects can be split into psychosocial and careers functions (Kram 1983) with a difference between female and male mentors seeming to emerge. Within these broad functions some themes also emerged around: lack of confidence and questioning of one's own ability, assertiveness, management style, and having a career plan. In opposition to the mentoring literature discussed above the participants in this study reported more career functions than psychosocial ones. They also reported increased career satisfaction, increased personal professional development, increased confidence in their skills and abilities and increased confidence in gaining a more senior role in the future.

Conclusions

This study has helped to shed light on why there is a glass ceiling for professional management women in HEIs. Although the study is based in one organisation and on a small group of participants I propose that the in-depth interviews provide data that can would fit other female staff in HEIs in the UK. A worrying outcome of this work is the intersection between being young and being female that means that you experience some form of subtle discrimination at the start of your career which stays with you. This can be seen as a direct evidence for non-conscious cognitive processes and micro-politics taking place within the institution that sees itself as gender-neutral and meritocratic. If equality *and* difference can be adopted by senior management within institutions then they can make a direct difference to women's lives by providing a differing support environment for women.

Acknowledgments

I'd like to thank Dr Gwyneth Hughes and the Institute of Education for support during this project.

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