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Women, careers and leadership roles: lessons for the academy from other professional workers. (0271)

Programme number: N8.3
Research Domain: Academic Practice, Work and Cultures

Background

Much of the research on gender and careers shows that women continue to experience considerable disadvantage. Typically, they remain excluded from the most senior managerial positions, and face a number of structural, cultural and informal barriers to career progress (O'Neil *et al.* 2008). In 2010 women made up 46.7% of US workers, obtained a third of MBA degrees and comprised 51.5% of management, professional and related positions, yet, their representation in *Fortune* 500 leadership positions remains unchanged at around 15% (http://www.catalyst.org/publication/219/statistical-overview-of-women-in-the-workplace). Studies in Europe indicate that the barriers to women's advancement are remarkably similar. Stereotypes and preconceptions about women's roles and abilities are identified as major hurdles to advancement, closely followed by lack of role models, little general management experience, commitment to family and personal responsibilities, absence of mentoring and displaying less confidence than men (http://www.catalyst.org/publication/92/women-in-leadership-a-european-business-imperative).

Research has identified that women and men tend to construct careers differently (Maier 1999; Powell and Mainiero 1992). Various studies indicate that paid employment is often deemed to be more fundamental to men's identities and the family to women's (e.g. Cinamon & Rich 2002). While men typically follow a linear career path, women's relationships and commitments to others can often lead to: comparatively less geographical mobility than men; restricted career choices; a greater likelihood of being the second career in dual-career couples; and career breaks that also limit choices (Forret et al 2010). Men are more likely to conform to organizational expectations of what is required to achieve career success (Collinson and Hearn 1994; 1996). Moreover, patterns of work intensification following major organizational change combined with the drive for efficiency savings and competitiveness tends to demand the continued subordination of personal life to career (Edwards *et al.* 1999; Ford and Collinson, 2011).

The increasing number of role models of successful women may not influence other women who look more to male norms as means for career advance (Gherardi and Poggio 2007). Stereotypically masculine traits are still associated with good management and leadership practices compared with female traits (Collinson and Hearn, 1996; Ford, 2006; Ford et al, 2008; Eagly and Sczesny, 2009). Schein (2007) argues that since her original research conducted 30 years

previously male attitudes have not changed regarding perceptions of men being more suitable for more senior roles (than women).

How much of these findings may be an artefact of the research methods used is open to question; for example, male-defined constructions of work and career success continue to predominate in organizational practices. Theory building and testing of women's career development typically draws heavily on constructions of male work and careers. Despite the semblance of a more inclusive approach, it is still the case that survey based, large-sample, hypothesis-testing investigations of women's career patterns continue to perpetuate a male-defined framing of work and careers. Narrow definitions of career success (still perceived as hierarchical progression to senior ranks) may not accurately reflect women's (or men's) non-linear career progression. Women's careers are often more complex and multi-dimensional, yet work practices lag behind such fluidity in their uni-dimensional upward trajectory (O'Neil *et al.* 2008).

The dynamics described in the literature on professional workers and gendered careers strike chords with the empirical study reported below, notably the importance that professional workers in senior roles continue to ascribe to linear and masculine forms of career progression. Concerned to explore these questions, this paper examines how women in the professions seek to shape their working lives, identities and careers in the context of recurrent change. Our interest stems from the fact that little is known about this group of workers. As women's representation in the workplace has increased, greater attention has been afforded to the role of gender. This is reflected both in feminist literature and in mainstream explorations of women's workplace experiences.

While gender may (arguably) have a lesser role in workplace experiences in early career, its impact in mid-career is well -researched. For example, the substantial emphasis over the past decade on (variously named) flexible working, work life balance and family friendly working practices is one manifestation that taken for granted workplace structures and practices are often based around male norms that do not accommodate women's needs when they have young families. Little is known, however, about women's experiences in later career. This arises in part from the limited understanding that surrounds older workers in general. It also derives, however, from the relatively recent representation of older women in professional and managerial groups. Prior to the 1970s, traditional patterns of education and employment created a situation in which there were relatively few women at professional and managerial level. While their representation has increased substantially since this date, it is against a backdrop in which early exit from employment for these groups was typical. Policy imperatives to extend working lives are now, however, central to professional and managerial workers (alongside other groups) being encouraged to work into their 60s and possibly even 70s.

This research therefore aims to study late-career women in professional and managerial roles. It will allow these women to talk about their experiences of the norms, expectations and experiences of being a late-career professional woman. Its objectives are to explore late career women's:

- day-to-day experiences of work;

- career aspirations;

- work-life balance;

- relationships with colleagues;

- self-perceptions;

- experiences of their changing bodies and appearance;

- assumptions about other people's attitudes towards them;

- views on their contribution to their profession.

Research methods

This study was designed to explore the working lives and experiences of women in professional services roles and data were gathered from within law firms across a county in England and in HR roles across sectors. To date, 8 lawyers and 9 HR professionals have engaged in in-depth interviews as part of an ongoing study. In addition, two focus groups of women in senior roles will take place and will be filmed so as to explore embodied interactions, and that will use visual images to generate discussion.

Interviews were guided by life history approaches that sought to elicit accounts of professional working lives, career histories and future plans (Crossley 2003; McAdams 1993; McAdams *et al.* 2001; McLeod *et al.* 2010). Interviews lasted between 60-100 minutes and were conducted within the professional workers' offices. Participants were provided with a brief overview of the study and were assured of both confidentiality and anonymity. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

It is still too early to draw conclusion from the study, but the SRHE conference symposium presentation will present preliminary analyses of the data and explore the wider implications for women in the academy and (a) the working lives, identities and careers of professionals and how these impact on the doing of their work, and (b) their gendered dynamics.

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