

WHAT ARE THE KEY TURNING POINTS IN FEMALE CAREER PROGRESSION? THE CASE OF A SENIOR MANAGER IN A SMALL CONSTRUCTION FIRM

Shu-Ling Lu¹, Martin G. Sexton², Carl Abbott³, Veronica Jones⁴

Research Institute for the Built and Human Environment, University of Salford, Salford, M5 4WT, UK

The under representation of women in senior management positions in construction is well documented. The enduring response to this situation has been a mantra for change which has rotated around a raft of interventions which, *if done to the industry*, will make the sector more attractive to women. The unfortunate (but not surprising) reality is that these interventions have not brought about sustained improvement. This invites speculation that these solutions assume that individuals, in this case women, engage in a process of rational career planning and progression which is solely and significantly influenced by external factors such as enabling employment law and conducive construction image and culture. The point of departure for this paper is that such assumptions are placing our efforts in the wrong place. In this paper we report early results from an ongoing European Social Fund project. The initial findings are indicating that the career decisions of such managers are a product of serendipitous circumstances and choices which produce idiosyncratic transitions and turning points in career progression. Moreover, these choices appear not to be affected by any externally driven agendas or realities, such as equality and diversity or construction image / culture considerations.

Keywords: career development model, female senior managers, SMEs, turning points.

INTRODUCTION

The under representation of women in construction is well documented. Recent statistics show that whilst women account for 45.7 percent of people employed in the UK (ONS, 2006:2), they only form 12 percent of employment in the construction sector (CITB, 2005). This under representation is also evident at senior management level (EOC, 2006). The Construction Industry Training Board (CITB, 2005), for example, stresses that only 13 percent of corporate managers and 4 percent of construction managers are female. There is agreement by government and industry that this position is denying the sector a valuable pool of labour to address the growing knowledge and skills capacity and capability challenges.

The enduring response to this situation has been a mantra for change which has rotated around a raft of interventions which, *if done to the industry*, will make the sector more attractive to women. The unfortunate (but not surprising) reality is that these 'outside in' strategies have not brought about sustained improvement. The UK Government, for example, has introduced a number of initiatives to improve the

¹ s.l.lu@salford.ac.uk

² m.g.sexton@salford.ac.uk

³ c.abbott@salford.ac.uk

⁴ v.c.jones@salford.ac.uk

representation of women in the workplace. An ever expanding portfolio of equality and diversity policies have been introduced to enforce issues related to equal opportunity, such as equal pay, equal promotion opportunity and sex discrimination. In much the same way, it has long been advocated that the prevailing image and culture of the industry limits the attractiveness of the sector to women (e.g. Fielden *et al.*, 2001; Gale, 1994). In response, the common prescription has been for calls to improve the image of the sector which will, its proponents argue, result in women being more attracted in the industry (e.g. DETR, 2000:15-16; Dainty *et al.*, 1999).

Empirical data indicates, however, that such interventions and strategies have had minimal impact (e.g. EOC, 2006; CITB, 2005; Dainty *et al.*, 2001). This invites speculation that these solutions assume that individuals, in this case women, engage in a process of rational career planning and progression which is solely and significantly influenced by enabling employment law and conducive construction image and culture. A growing body of research emphasizes, however, the moderating role that individuals' social context has in shaping career decisions (e.g. Hodgkinson and Sparkes, 1997). The point of departure for this paper is that the 'outside in' assumptions are placing our efforts in the wrong place – rather, we need to better develop and integrate 'outside in' normative approaches with nuanced 'inside out' realities. In this paper we report early results from an ongoing European Social Fund project investigating key drivers and barriers to successful female senior managers in small construction firms in the North West of England. The initial findings are indicating that the career decisions of such managers are more a product of serendipitous circumstances and choices which produce idiosyncratic transitions and turning points in career progression. Moreover, these choices appear not to be affected by any externally driven agendas or realities, such as equality and diversity or construction image / culture considerations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The career development literature relevant to this investigation can be grouped into two principal domains: generic career progression; and, senior female specific career progression. In both fields, the utility to this research is potentially eroded in that the theory and practice within these literatures were not developed within the context of senior female managers in construction small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs).

The traditional concept of career development theory is based, to a large extent, on research based on male only samples (e.g. Orstein *et al.*, 1989; Levinson *et al.*, 1978; Super, 1957). The applicability of these models in studying female careers has been questioned by a number of scholars (e.g. Adamson, 1997; White, 1995). This has led to a number of more female-orientated frameworks being developed, but there are no frameworks specific to female senior managers in construction SMEs. There was a need, however, to ground our investigation on a provisional foundation. We thus adopted and integrated two existing frameworks as a starting point: O'Neil and Bilimoria's (2005) generic female career development model; and, White's (1995:10) senior female management career development model. The synthesis of these two frameworks is given in Table 1 and summarized below.

Table 1: Successful female career development model

Phase (adapted from O'Neil and Bilimoria, 2005)	Stage (adapted from White, 1995)	Description(adapted from White, 1995)
Phase 1: Exploration (before age 24)	Childhood	Character building Developing career-orientation
	Early adult transition: 17-25 years	Early commitment to an occupation Testing of initial choices about preferences for living Identify diffusion caused by role conflict
	Entering the adult world: mid-20s	Development of sense of personal identity in relation to work and non-work Rejection of the housewife role/separation from partner, resulting in growth of career sub-identity among late starters High career centrality among early starters (go-getters) Seek opportunities to practise chosen occupation/profession
Phase 2: Idealistic achievement (ages 24-35)	Establishment: 23-33 years	Period of rapid learning and development Establishing a reputation as a high achiever
	Early-30s transition: 33-35 years	Raised awareness of biological clock – decision whether to have children Decision about motherhood resolved
	Settling down: 35 years	Minimum maternity leave Strive towards the achievement of personal goals
Phase 3: Pragmatic endurance (ages 36-45)	Late-30s transition: 38-40 years	Regret lack of children Family-career conflict Move in response to glass ceiling
Phase 4: Reinvent contribution (ages 46-60)	Achievement: 40-50 years	Resolution of career-family conflict Rationalize decision not to have children Realization of personal goals Develop greater stability and consolidate achievements to date
	Maintenance: 50s onwards	Continued growth and success Cycle of expansion and consolidation

Phase 1: Exploration (before age 24)

Before entering a career, the career orientation of women is very much determined by their early socialization (White, 1995). The factors include family background, upbringing and role models, and education opportunities and experiences.

Phase 2: Idealistic achievement (ages 24-35)

This phase starts with the transition from education to work. A proportion of women experience a sense of reality shock. This phase is about adjustment, and thus the individual's key task is one of orientation to the demands of work. Women in this phase see themselves as being in charge of their careers and are strategically planning how to achieve success.

Phase 3: Pragmatic endurance (ages 36-45)

Once women have moved through phase 2, they continue to adjust to the world of work and, over time, start to make a more tangible contribution to their organizations. Women in this phase are at an age when family responsibilities are most likely to impact heavily on their careers. There are two alternative stylized outcomes at this stage. Either, as White (1995) argues, women find their careers stalling at the *middle management* level (e.g. Meyerson and Fletcher, 2000), and they no longer seek promotion; or women enter a period of early career 'success' and self-affirmation. The differing outcomes are governed by both opportunities to prove one's capability

and by the timetabling of key organizational career age-stage rites of passage (O'Neil and Bilimoria, 2005).

Phase 4: Reinvent contribution (ages 46-60)

Women in this phase see their career as a chance to make a meaningful contribution in a number of areas. For these women, success relates to recognition, respect and living integrated lives. This process is influenced much more by non-work factors (e.g. marriage, family, life ambitions, work ambitions) compared to their earlier career phases.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is using the 'biographical interview' approach (e.g. Gültekin *et al.*, 2003). The intention is to explore senior female managers' career stories and to draw out the key phases and turning points in their careers. The biographical interview approach has been widely used by many researchers in studying gender issues, including: women in ICT professions (e.g. Wagner *et al.*, 2003), women in architecture professions (Caven, 2006); and, entrepreneurship in small firms (Fillis, 2006). The choice of method is consistent with our aim to understand more about women's experience of their careers, and is also appropriate for our focus on career phases and turning points.

Each in-depth biographical interview was between one and two hours in length. The interview protocol is structured into four main sections: introduction, background, the interviewee's story and additional information. The questions under each section are not designed to be specifically question and answer type topics but areas for discussion. This work is in progress and is currently in the interview phase. The findings from a representative interview are reported in this paper, and are structured around the career progression phases shown in Table 1.

KEY FINDINGS

Company A is a family-run business. The father and son went into partnership in 1990 and it became a limited company in 1993. Its core business is structural steel frame manufacturing, and its core market is agricultural buildings. The company's turnover in the last financial year was £ 4.5 million and its pre-tax profit was £170,000. Currently the company have 58 employees – 7 females and 51 males. Two of the female staff are part-time (aged 40 and 52) and the age of the five full-time female employees range from 22 to 32 years old. All the male employees work full-time.

Sally (a fictitious name to ensure anonymity) is 45 years old, married to the Managing Director of Company A, and has a daughter (age 24) and a son (age 22) from a previous marriage. She has been working for Company A for 16 years, and does not have a formal job title within company, instead she is known as the 'boss's wife.' Sally has complete responsibility for all financial and marketing aspects of the company.

Phase 1: Exploration (before age 24)

The upbringing of Sally on a farm and the influence of her parents had a significant impact on her (unrequited) career aspirations and her 'enforced' initial career choice respectively. Sally captured this situation in her observation that:

“I had a very happy childhood. My parents were farmers. We lived on a farm with lots of animals, very outdoor... I wanted to farm, but my father encouraged me to go to office jobs. Then I went into the council office which I did not enjoy.”

Phase 2: Idealistic achievement (ages 24-35)

Sally’s aspiration to have a career in farming did not diminish. Indeed, this unfulfilled career aspiration led to the break up of her first marriage:

“...[it was because of] his family’s pressure which was why we were divorced – because I still wanted to farm...Between his brother and his brother’s wife and his mother - that didn’t happen. So I went off and got myself a career which clearly ended our marriage”

Sally then pursued a career in advertising and sales for a farming newspaper – thus reengaging her career, to a degree, with her childhood aspiration of farming. The move from this career to the construction industry was purely an ‘accident’ as a result of meeting her second husband. She emphasized that:

“No, [my career in construction] doesn’t relate at all to my education. My career I own now is by accident through meeting [my husband]. But because a lot of what we do is with agriculture, I am sort of, it’s my family background, my upbringing, rather than education...you know...put me where I am today actually.”

The stimulus for her career change was a request from her husband to assist him with the growing business:

“He said: “I have so much work to do and I cannot cope and I need somebody to help me to do this.” I just sort of thought I will do it. Because I knew ...its flexibility with children because I will be at home all the time.”

With respect to the image and culture of the industry, Sally did recognize its ‘think construction – think male’ ethos, but did not believe it made any impact on her career. In the early part of her career in the family business, Sally stressed that:

“They didn’t want to speak to a woman and [my husband] was very, very good. Because when they rang up, he would say you need to speak to our agriculture specialist and put it straight back to me. And within 2 or 3 months, people actually got used to it.”

Phase 3: Pragmatic endurance (ages 36-45)

This phase of her career was a pragmatic recognition of the challenges, and the need for a ‘get on and do it’ approach:

“it’s not what you expected, but you learn how to cope with it”

The motivation to continue was very much sustained by the opportunities her role offered to optimally balance her work and family life:

“We were very lucky when the kids were younger because our house is based on the site. So when they came on from school, I was there...the flexibility I got because it’s my husband’s business...”

Sally had established her position to a certain ‘inward focused’ level, but to move to a position of ‘externally recognized’ seniority she had to confront the explicit male-

dominated culture of her immediate clients and supply chain partners. Sally gave the following example:

“I had one issue with a timber company. They had a Christmas Do - it was men only, which annoyed me. Because I did the buying, and I paying them the bills, I did the all ordering at the time....So I questioned the issue ... and they backed down and in the end they made it to mixed event. I am quite forceful like that. If I had a problem I will tell them there was a problem.”

However, Sally believes that the construction industry is intrinsically a ‘tough’ industry, and that this cannot be realistically or credibly changed by any external agents – ‘it is what it is’, and to enter the industry is a personal choice, ‘but don’t expect favours.’ Sally conveyed this perspective as follows:

“ [the construction industry is] a very tough industry. It’s male-orientated. We are seeing more females creeping through. But I think there is a lot of life style to it. It’s not glamorous in the construction industry...you got to be a tough cookie who cannot get upset. ..It’s not glamorous. So I don’t think you will ever see a lot of women actually in the industry.”

Phase 4: Reinvent contribution (ages 46-60)

Sally’s priority is now more focused on her children’s future. She is using her leadership skills, business acumen and her savings to develop and handover a viable business to her daughter. Sally has bought a public house in the vicinity of the company office, which she is building up and expanding to include bed and breakfast trade. She intends to gradually retire from the business as her family expands. Sally summarized this as follows:

“[My] future plans are very easy. As soon as my daughter has children I shall be retiring. Maybe not retiring full time but I will be spending substantially more time with my grandchildren and as well with my children. I have spent a lot of time with them – I was lucky in that way. That is the plan. At least, two days a week to continue the pub - that is the long term issue – that’s a long term expansion plan for the company and the whole thing – all will be continuing forward.”

The key turning points which can be identified from Sally’s story are shown in Table 2. The actual age when key events occurred in Sally’s story are shown in brackets to make explicit the differences with the age ranges detailed in Table 1.

Table 2: Key Turning Points in Sally's career

Phase	Stage	Key turning points
Phase 1: Exploration (before age 24)	Childhood	Career aspiration in farming as a result of being brought up in a farming family
	Early adult transition: 17 – 25 years (Sally - 19 years old)	Career choice to work in an office brought about by parental influence
Phase 2: Idealistic achievement (ages 24-35)	Establishment: 23-33 years (Sally - 28 years old)	Switch to advertising and sales career with a farming newspaper (which was instrumental to the break up of her first marriage)
	Early-30s transition: 33- 35 years (Sally – 29 years old)	Final career change to a family owned construction firm – brought about by her second husband, who is the Managing Director of the firm
Phase 3: Pragmatic endurance (ages 36-45)	Late-30s transition: 38-40 years	Career choice reinforced by recognition of the flexibility of her role to balance family and work commitments
Phase 4: Reinvent contribution (ages 46-60)	Achievement: 40-50 years	Senior management leadership requirement to successfully confront the male-dominated construction sector she experienced
	Maintenance: 50s onwards Sally – current age 45 years old)	Provision for future generations of the family by the purchase and development of a public house business which she will handover to her daughter

CONCLUSIONS

The initial findings appear to portray career decisions of senior female managers in construction SMEs as being primarily driven by the interaction between immediate business needs and family / relationship needs. It seems that a career changing 'turning point' is reached when the interaction between the two groups of needs is sufficiently complementary or abrasive that it results in a decision which ignites action. In Sally's case, for example, an instance of a complementary turning point was the interaction between her husband's company's business need for an 'extra pair of hands' and her need for greater flexibility to enable her to balance her work and family life. In contrast, the turning point to move from her office career to an advertising and sales position at a farming newspaper firm was very much the abrasive interaction between her (hitherto not met) childhood aspiration to have a career associated with agriculture, her dissatisfaction with her existing job, and her marriage break up. Within this personalized context, it is evident that the seemingly amorphous external drivers (for example, the equality and diversity, and the image of the construction sector agendas) played no important part in Sally's career choices, or her senior management development.

The findings are at an early stage, but they appear to be challenging the rationalist locus which current strategies to enhance female representation in construction tend to rotate. The provisional results are perhaps indicating an urgent need to rethink these coarse-grained normative strategies, and to develop flexible, fine-grained approaches which are able to sense and positively amplify behaviourally motivated turning points. The ongoing research will capture further life stories of senior female managers within construction SMEs, and cross 'life history' analysis will be undertaken to reveal and calibrate further patterns and themes in career decision-making and career journeys.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors are grateful to the European Social Fund who funded the 'Women in NW Construction SMEs' project on which this paper is based (Project Number: 061062NW3). For further details, please visit 'Women in North West Construction SMEs' project website: www.buhu.salford.ac.uk/women/smes/.

REFERENCES

- Adamson, S.J. (1999), "Career as a Vehicle for the Realization of Self", *Career Development International*, 2/5, 245-253.
- Caven, V. (2006), "Choice, Diversity and 'False Consciousness' in Women's Careers", *International Journal of Training and Development*, 10/1, 41-54.
- CITB: Construction Industry Training Board (2005), UK Women in Construction Statistics, March, CITB (available at www.citb.co.uk/pdf/supportingyou/diversity/diversitystatistics.pdf).
- Dainty, A.R.J., Neale, R.H. and Bagilhole, B.M. (1999), "Women's Careers in Large Construction Companies: Expectations Unfulfilled?", *Career Development International*, 4/7, 353-357.
- Dainty, A.R.J., Bagilhole, B.M. and Neale, R.H. (2001), "Male and Female Perspectives on Equality Measures for the UK Construction Sector", *Women in Management Review*, 16/6, 297-304.
- DETR: Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (2000), Building a Better Quality of Life: A Strategy for more Sustainable Construction, April, DETR: London. (available at www.dti.gov.uk/files/file13547.pdf).
- EOC: Equality Opportunities Commission (2006) Sex and Power: Who Runs Britain 2006?, EOC: Manchester.
- Fielden, S.L., Davidson, M.J., Gale, A. and Davey, C.L. (2001), "Women, Equality and Construction", *Journal of Management Development*, 20/4, 293-305.
- Fillis, I. (2006), "A Biographical Approach to Researching Entrepreneurship in the Smaller Firm", *Management Decision*, 44/2, 198-212.
- Gale, A. W. (1994), "Women in Non-traditional Occupations: The Construction Industry", *Women in Management Review*, 9/2, 3-14.
- Gültekin, N., Inowlocki, L. and Lutz, H. (2003), "Quest and Query: Interpreting a Biographical Interview with a Turkish Woman Laborer in Germany [55 paragraphs]", *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research [On-line Journal]*, September, 4/3, Art. 20. (available at: www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/3-03/3-03gueltekinetal-e.htm).
- Hodkinson, P. and Sparkes, A.C. (1997) "Careership: A Sociological Theory of Career Decision-making", *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 18/1, 29-44.
- Levinson, D. Darrow, C.N., Klein, E.B., Levinson, M.H. and Mckee, B. (1978), *The Seasons in a Man's Life*, Knopf: New York, N.Y.
- Meyerson, D.E. and Fletcher, J. K. (2000), "A Modest Manifesto for Shattering the Glass Ceiling", *Harvard Business Review*, 78/1, 127-140.
- ONS: Office for National Statistics (2006), Labour market statistics, March, Stationary Office: London. (available at www.statistics.gov.uk/pdfdir/lmsuk0306.pdf).
- O'Neil, D.A. and Bilimoria, D. (2005), "Women's Career Development Phases: Idealism, Endurance, and Reinvention", *Career Development International*, 10/3, 168-189.

- Orstein, S., Cron, W.L. and Slocum, J.W. (1989), "Life Stage versus Career Stage: A Comparative Test of the Theories of Levinson and Super", *Journal of Organizations Behaviours*, 10, 117-133.
- Super, D.E. (1957), *The Psychology of Careers*, Harper: New York, N.Y.
- Wagner, I., Birbaumer, B. and Tolar, M. (2003), *Widening Women's Work in Information and Communication Technology-Professional Trajectories and Biographies*, December, Institute for Technology Assessment and Design, Vienna University of Technology: Vienna. (available at www.ftu-namur.org/www-ict/).
- White, B. (1995), "The Career Development of Successful Women", *Women in Management Review*, 10/3, 4-15.