SENIOR FEMALE MANAGERS IN SMALL CONSTRUCTION FIRMS WITHIN THE NORTH WEST OF ENGLAND: AN UPDATE

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This paper providing an update on the results from an European Social Fund Project investigating "senior female managers in small construction firms within the North West of England." Initial research findings were presented at the 23rd ARCOM conference in 2007 (Lu *et al.*, 2007a). It was indicated that the career decisions of female senior 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. The analysis of subsequent interviews has generally confirmed these findings, as well as crystallising the critical part senior female managers have in being a role model to encourage the recruitment and retention of women into the construction industry. It is the role model function which is reported here. The role appears to be differentiated into two parts: internal mentoring and protection of female staff within the SMEs; and, leadership in external, local business networks.

Keywords: career development model, female senior managers, role models, SMEs.

INTRODUCTION

The under representation of women in senior management positions in construction is well documented. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2007), for example, reports that the construction sector had the lowest proportion of jobs held by women and thirty-five percent of managers and senior officials' occupations held by women. The Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) (2005) further stresses that only five percent of construction managers are female. The very low senior management representation of women is present in the chartered surveying profession (Ellison, 1999 & 2001). 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 in recruitment and retention of women into the industry. 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

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by external factors such as enabling employment law and conducive construction image and culture (Fielden *et al.*, 2001; Dainty *et al.*, 2000). The point of departure for this research is that such assumptions are often placing current efforts in the wrong place. The research findings recorded here indicate that the career decisions of female senior 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 to any discernable degree by any externally driven agendas or realities, such as equality and diversity or construction image / culture considerations.

BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

The project aimed to understand the contextual and specific issues which create barriers to the attraction, retention and development of high calibre professional women in senior positions in small construction companies in the North West region of England. From this understanding, appropriate and high leverage guidance and best practice on eliminating these barriers, as well amplifying opportunities, would be identified. This aim was progressed through:

1. the investigation of the negative and positive experiences of professional women in senior management positions in construction SMEs in the North West. This identified key drivers for, and barriers against, females becoming successful senior managers SMEs. The whole career lifecycle was examined, from initial entry into the industry, through to career progression to senior positions.
2. the investigation of the attitudes of, and policies and procedures employed by, construction SMEs in the region, with regard to recruiting, retaining and developing professional women to senior positions.
3. the indication of the extent, origin and future pathways of these drivers and barriers encountered by professional women, and the attitudes, policies and procedures in construction SMEs.
4. the development and dissemination of the company guidelines and best practice (including training needs) to encourage the recruitment, retention and development of professional women in construction SMEs. The guidelines were supported by company case studies to provide real-world examples.
5. the development and dissemination of the career guidance and best practice to encourage and guide professional women into senior management positions in construction SMEs.

METHODOLOGY

A 'biographical interview' approach was used. This approach has been widely used in gender research, 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 was consistent with our aim to understand more about women's 'lived experience' of their careers, and is also appropriate for our focus on career phases and turning points. Theoretical sampling, data collection and data analysis were carried out within a flexible, constructivist grounded theory framework (Glaser, 1992; Charmaz, 2000) - rather than the more rigid, positivistic prescription advocated by Strauss and Corbin (1990 & 1998). This more constructivist approach encouraged the development of 'process' theory to emerge which focused on the explanation of sequences of temporally evolving events in the

career progression of females to senior management positions in small construction firms, such that changes can be traced to structural and agency conditions.

The research design consisted of iterative, overlapping data collection and data analysis phases to enable the research to be continually refocused towards emergent, interesting questions and to allow appropriate theoretical sampling to take place. In broad terms, the data collection rotated around biographical interviews of between one and two hours in length. The interviews were very much opened ended, with an underlying prompt by the interviewer to understand the career journey in roughly chronological order - from the interviewee's childhood to the present. It became evident that the interviewees' often have 'reflective episodes' when they were talking, which involved retracing their steps to sometime in the past to reinterpret or reaffirm a particular issue they were talking about. In a number of the interviews, the interviewees spoke about very intense, private matters - for example, marriage difficulties and the loss of family members. The deeply personal narratives from the interviews reaffirmed the merit of a constructivist grounded theory approach which had been adopted. Again, in broad terms the data analysis used coding as a way of conceptualising, reducing, elaborating and relating the data and categories to produce theory. The coding was structured using two software packages – 'QSR NUD*IST Vivo', a content analysis tool (http://www.qsrinternational.com); and, 'Decision Explorer', a cognitive mapping tool (http://www.banxia.com).

KEY RESEARCH RESULTS

This section summaries the key results reported in Lu *et al.* (2007a).

Successful female career development model in construction SMEs

The research findings defined four phases of successful female career development model in construction SMEs (see Figure 1). These phases are discussed as follows:
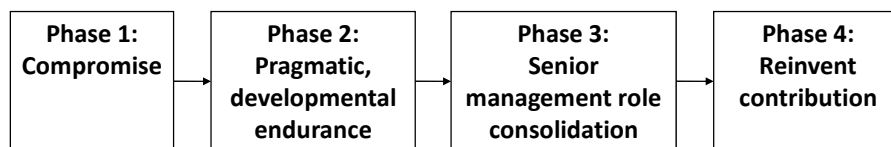

Phase 1: Compromise	Phase 2: Pragmatic, developmental endurance	Phase 3: Senior management role consolidation	Phase 4: Reinvent contribution

Figure 1: Successful female career development model in construction SEMs

Phase 1: compromise (parental relationship context)
This phase appears to be dominated by the parental relationship context. Career choices are constrained by parents' 'world views' as to what constituted appropriate employment.

Phase 2: pragmatic, developmental endurance (personal relationship context)
This phase starts with the change of individual females' circumstances. The stimulus for women career change in this phase is very much influenced by their personal relationship context. It was found that family responsibilities channelled career paths to those which enabled the work-life balance to be managed better.   In addition, career changes are often ad-hoc in nature, but can result in senior management positions being reached.

Phase 3: senior management role consolidation (business relationship context)
Once women have successfully established their senior management positions, they constantly have to confront the explicit male-dominated culture of internal (i.e. male

colleagues) and external partners (i.e. customers). Women in this phase very much concentrated on developing and exploiting their business relationships within the firm and the firm's supply network.

Phase 4: reinvent contribution (society relationship context)
Women in this phase focus on forging society relationship to make a meaningful contribution to the next generation and to society as a whole. They present role models for younger women and ensure that female employees in the company are explicitly supported.

The concept of key turning point model of senior female mangers

The research findings defined a senior female key turning point model (see Figure 2). The variables for this model are discussed below:
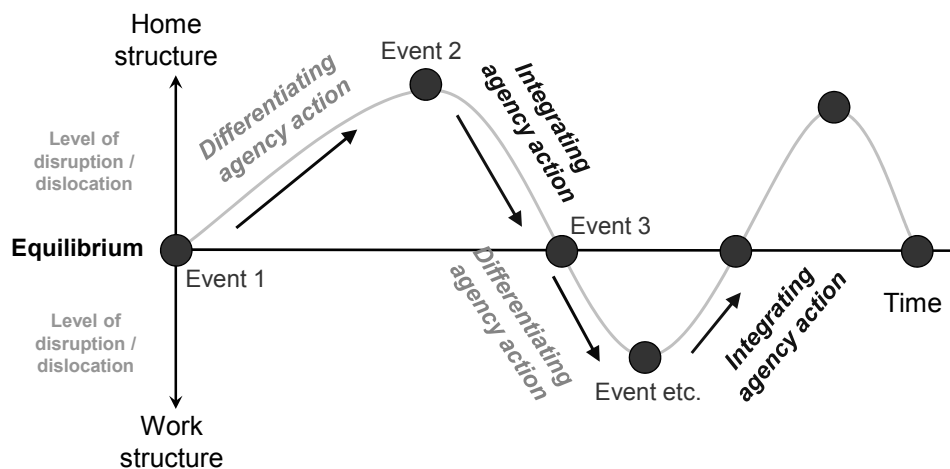

Figure 2: Theoretical turning point model of senior female mangers

1. Structure:
Two types of structure are classified: home (family) structure and work structure.

(1) Home (family) structure:

Family is defined as "persons related by biological ties, marriage, social custom, or adoption" (Edwards and Rothbard, 2000, p. 179). Family structure can be marriage status, number of children and number of care-aged relatives.

(2) Work structure:

Work is defined as "instrumental activity intended to provide goods and services to support life" (Edwards and Rothbard, 2000, p. 179). Work structure includes a range of organisational structures and processes (such as human resource policy, equality opportunities practices) which enable/hinder the movement of females in progressing their careers.

2. Equilibrium
Equilibrium is the balance optimal between home and work. It is different from person to person; and can change over time. The further a person moves away from the optimal balance (a 'differentiating agency action'), the more it adversely impacts on either the home or work structure. An 'integrating agency action' brings the person back into balance.

3. Event

An event starts a key turning point. The turning point is understood to be a complex process produced by the interaction between structure (home and work) and agency (individual choice / behaviour). This interaction is mutually constitutive of each other, i.e. structural conditions influence the direction and nature of individual action. In turn, structural conditions are reproduced (or changed) through that action.

The research findings indicate that career decisions of senior female managers in construction SMEs appear to be primarily driven by unfolding family circumstance and / or ad-hoc appropriateness. It seems that a career changing 'turning point' is reached when the interaction between structure and agency (individual) is sufficiently complementary/abrasive that it results in a decision by the individual which ignites action (integrating and differentiating agency actions). The 'soft focus' goal appears to achieve equilibrium between work and home. These choices appear not to be affected by any externally driven agendas (e.g. equality and diversity). They appear instead to be influenced by role models; either in shaping a person moving away from, or backing into, the optimal balance between home and work. Further analysis of interview transcripts has revealed the dominant influence of role models in directing the turning points. This is discussed more fully below.

The instrumental impact of role models

Figure 3 shows a key turning point model of one of interviewees.
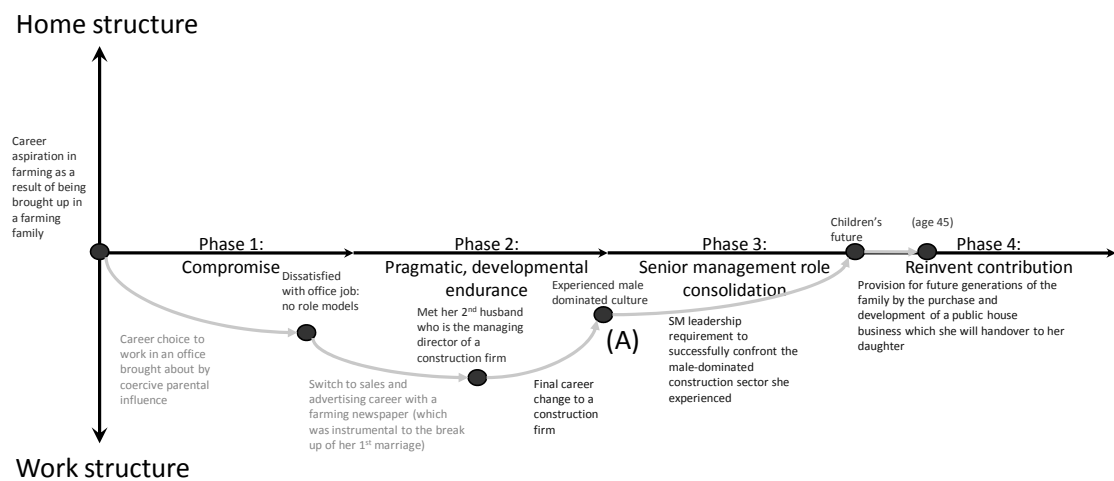

Figure 3: An example of key turning point model of one of interviewees

Key turning point (A) (see Figure 3) shows there was a need to overcome the male bias - an event of experienced male dominated culture. The interviewees described how her husband (the company owner) acted as mentors/role models backed her when facing external partners' challenges:

> "They [customers and supply chain partners] 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."

Likewise, women lack role model support from other people. As a consequence, women need to develop business credibility on their own. The research findings

further identify the role of role models appears to be differentiated into two parts which are discussed below.

1. Internal mentoring and protection of female staff within SMEs

It was found that women in senior management positions send out a positive message to females going up through the profession generally, and the firm specifically. Women can see that they can meet their aspirations and get into the top/senior management levels. Further, women in senior positions are willing and able to champion female issues (e.g. gender stereotypes) and needs (e.g. work-life balance). Taking 'work-life balance' first, there is agreement that women's care responsibilities (e.g. childcare) prevent them from entering work or progressing in work (Caven, 2006; Dench *et al.*, 2002; Liu and Wilson, 2001; Brockbank and Traves, 1995). Women, particularly with young children, find it hard to work full time. When the conflict between family and work life occur, women need extra support. One of the interviewees, for example, provided a role model for younger women and ensured that females in the company are explicitly supported:

> *"...the hardest part when you work and your children were small ... you always think that you were neglecting your kids...you are not giving them the time you should and when ... I got married ladies here with children...I tend to be lenient with them because... I know exactly what they are going through..."*

Moving on to gender stereotypes [1], it appears to be more difficult for female managers to assert themselves because of their gender. The interviewees shared a common story in having had to confront a construction culture which prized male managers above female managers. Most of respondents, again, felt the need to work harder, which sometimes led to feelings of being taken for granted. One of the interviewees gave the following example to demonstrate the existence of the 'think manager – think male' stereotype (Schein, 1973) and had to confront this explicit male-dominated culture within the company:

> *"...the MD make his board in 2002...since when they are gone and it's only me and him left...we got another board now...completely new board and, of course, they are all men, as usual...it's only me to fight the good fight."*

This is consistent with Schein (2007, p. 12), stating that "the strength and persistence of this attitude held by men may explain why efforts to enhance the status of women in management have limited or no success." This resonates with the interviewees' consensus that gender stereotyping is a major barrier to women's progress in management positions in construction. Brockbank and Airey (1994), for example, acknowledge that senior female managers become role models and mentors to encourage still more women to develop their careers to higher levels. This represents a challenge to the notion of male-centred management for as Powell *et al.* (2002, p. 189) assert: "increased strength in numbers gives [female managers] more license to be themselves without having to conform to traditional management stereotypes."

2. Leadership in external, local business networks

The research findings indicate that senior female managers' external, local 'business networks' play an important role in their success. This view is supported by Linehan (2001) and Ogden *et al.* (2006), stating that the "networking" in the industry is an important enabler to female career development. The study by Lu *et al.* (2007b), for example, shows that women in construction innovation circle (women-only network) provided women the opportunity to network with other females in other companies thus strengthening their networking and support base. One of the interviewees, for

instance, described an opportunity to start a company came about through her personal social network:

> "…one day, my very good friend … rang me up…and she said: "I am going to start a business…did you want to join me?"… so….in the May, we started our own company…it was PR, advertising…and yet we did very well."

This resonates with the Catalyst/Opportunity Now study (2000) and Comish (2007) where it was found that senior women themselves perceived that they were excluded from male-dominated networks. As a consequence, "they are denied contacts, opportunities and excluded from the information networks provide" (Broadbridge, 2004, p. 555). Some of respondents, for example, complained that they were not even allowed to participate in some important company activities – even though they jointly owned the firm! It appears that senior female managers needed to join (or fight to join) existing 'male networks.' One of the interviewees, for example, 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 paid 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."

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, the present study offers a grounded model which helps to explain the key turning points which shape the career path of females to senior management practices in small construction companies. The results confirm the interim results reported in Lu *et al.* (2007a) namely, that career decisions of female senior managers are a product of serendipitous circumstances and choices which produce idiosyncratic transitions and turning points in career progression. In addition, the results have emphasised the instrumental mediating part that role models have in encouraging and championing females to develop senior management careers. Policy and practice needs to better recognise that interventions need to focus not only on the career development of women, but on the development of complementary role model capability and infrastructure.

There are a number of limitations to this research which suggest future research directions. First, the grounded theory approach adopted in this research has, arguably, produced 'idiosyncratic theory' (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 547) which has a low level of generality. This is not a limitation per se, but future research could usefully test the results given here by a more positivist approach a wider sample set. Second, and linked with the first limitation, this research investigated senior female managers in a particular geographic area (North West England). It is highly probably that the different structure conditions in different regions and countries will influence the nature and direction of the turning point events. Further grounded theory research, using the theoretical turning pointed presented in this paper as a starting point, would be useful in revealing the moderating role of geographic areas and localised cultures on female career journeys.

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061062NW3). For further details, please visit 'Women in North West Construction SMEs' project website: http://www.buhu.salford.ac.uk/women/smes/.

NOTES

[1] Gender stereotypes are defined as "socially shared beliefs about the characteristics or attributes of men and women in general that influence our perceptions of individual men and women" (Cleveland *et al.*, 2000, 42-43.)

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