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Reality checks for career women: An interpretivist paradigm

Mary Anthony

Werner Soontiens

The University of Notre Dame Australia, werner.soontiens@nd.edu.au

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Reality checks for career women: An interpretivist paradigm

ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on the latent organisational process that leads to scarcity of women in senior positions. Utilising characteristics of legitimisation, institutionalisation and self-determination theories the paper observes how women manage upward mobility. Subsequently, it was important to investigate the mid-level cohorts, as there lies the critical question triggering the anomaly. Focusing on public sector with an interest in gendered organisations, the study examines law enforcement. Conversely, the aim of this paper is to focus on why there is a continued dearth in the number of policewomen at top level positions in USA and Australia. A qualitative study with phenomenological approach is applied. Semi-structured interviews are conducted with 40 policewomen in mid management positions in American and Australian law enforcement. It further aims to explore the linkages of the ongoing paucity of gendered leadership in organisations, questioning how these will influence women's ability to advance to higher-level positions.

Key words: mid-level leadership, leader identity, career progression, self-determination, gendered organisation

Introduction

Historically studies (Schuck, 2014; Haslam & Ryan, 2008; de Pater, van Vianen and Bechtold, 2010; Evans, Edwards, Burmester & May 2015) have reported, amongst others, a lack of support from the male management cohort. The organisational behaviour limits the women to progress at the same rate as the men, thus attributing to an under-appreciation of diversity. It is simplistic to conclude that gender inequality in workplaces or lack of opportunities alone account for the individual's slow career progression. Despite significant progress in entering into senior leadership roles, women generally face difficulties. Hence justifying the exploration of latent organisational process that lead to the paucity of women in senior positions. Building on this the study examines the strategies that mid-level women apply in managing their career progression.

There is a dominance of research into the persistent dearth of women in senior positions. Traditional investigation often reports on gendered organisations and the barriers preventing career progression. Noticeably research into corporate western democracies, often focusses on the paucity of senior women in boardrooms or women collectively in an organisation. Furthermore, studies are predominantly on secondary data or quantitative methodology as opposed to a qualitative phenomenological study. The growth in awareness and importance of diversity of women in organisations highlights the need for better understanding.

Media applauds women having made inroads to jobs that were previously inaccessible (England 2010), contrasting with the continued paucity of women in senior positions. While past research focussed on women's leadership style, this paper focuses on strategies women apply in managing their careers. Hence, a key requirement is understanding of the individual's quest for career progression and managing the barriers that they face. The research question at hand here is if there is a clear set of attributes. That which characterises the promotion journey

of women, in gendered organisations. Too often research cites work life balance, gender equity or glass ceiling as key challenges that women face when seeking senior positions (Eagly, Wood and Diekmann, 2000; Ellemers et al., 2012; Pampell & Shoemaker 2008). This paper however delves deeper by identifying challenges and investigating how women deal with them in a career progression and promotion context. Tentative conclusions are drawn as to the context contributing to women being successful or unsuccessful in their quest for senior leadership roles. Unless the stagnation at middle level is addressed with a clear change in direction, the anomaly will remain.

Uniquely, this study turns the focus to a cohort of women who have the potential to create leadership style changes within. The paper proposes that key elements of change in career decisions, underpinned by self-determination theory (2017), and lies at the mid-career level appointment, hence the interest in examining this particular cohort. Alongside the challenging nature of the work that women face in gendered organisations, extant research (Kanter, 1977; Billing, 2012; Stainback, Kleiner & Skaggs, 2016; Sayse, 2012; Rindfleish & Sheridan, 2003; Williams et al., 2012) is predominantly around women as an entity in a gendered organisation. Noticeably, limited focus has been on a particular cohort in policing and we propose that female police officer promotion narratives have a specific set of crucial components, therefore making this phenomenological study unique.

Literature review

Theoretical framework and research questions

The primary focus of this study seeks to explain how individuals apply various theories to support their career trajectory. The individual tends to apply hybrid strategies that are relevant and available to them in their given circumstances. Lending to an area of concern, namely limited specific application of theoretical frameworks to women, the considerations are

specifically for training and developing women's skillsets, which are also restricted in both research and practice. Ely and Rhode (2010) argue that, despite extant literature on the paucity of women in senior positions and leadership frameworks, there is however a lack of discussion on women's capability and capacity.

UNEVEN CAREER PROGRESS – THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper anchors partly in self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), partly in organisational citizenship behaviour theory (Organ, 1997) but mostly in job-crafting theory. Essentially job designing reflects how workers reshape their roles, including relational boundaries and includes an improvement in the social environment and social resources such as support and informal guidance (Berdicchia & Masino, 2018). It refers to 'physical and cognitive changes individuals make in the task or relational boundaries of their work (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001, p.179). Part of this is pursuing new tasks and responsibilities and seeking challenges to realise job stimulation, in practice often reflected in pursuing career promotion. Interestingly, Bipp & Demerouti (2015) determined that individuals pursuing promotion also show organisational citizenship behaviour, arguably suggesting a willingness to adopt existing organisational dynamics. Niessen, Weseler & Kostova (2016) argue that job constructing both contributes to improved meaning of work and a change in work identity. As such, the main target of job designing is the self – in the context of the role, its dynamics and the organisation. Job crafting in the context of police officers shows a distinct focus on individual adaptivity benefitting both the employee and organisations (Petrou, Demerouti & Schaufeli, 2016)

There is a new wave of reality in the corporate world overtaking past research on commonalities of gender issues and paucity of women in senior positions (Carter & Silva, 2010; Melero, 2010; Wirth, 2010). Stainback et al, (2016) espouse that senior women are not

fully equipped to promote other women into senior roles for various reasons, in extreme cases risking being competitive as per the queen bee syndrome. Therefore, consideration is given to the impact of the organisation as a key driver in the pursuit of a career, mostly through policy formulation.

Concisely, the decided view of gendered leadership research is that women continue to trail men in senior positions (see Billing, 2012; Chugh and Sahgal, 2007; Stainback et al., 2016; Sayse, 2012; Rindfleish & Sheridan, 2003; Williams et al., 2012). Mayer, Caruso & Salovey (1999) established that both male and female respondents agree on the same skillsets needed for career promotion, begging the question why there remains a paucity of women at senior levels. Generally, policy rhetoric is that both men and women are eligible to apply for senior positions. However, specifics indicate that men more frequently win the positions over women (Lonsway et al., 2003a). While both men and women hit a plateau at the management level, it is mostly men, whose career trajectory develops further, ultimately occupying the senior leadership roles (Rindfleish & Sheridan 2003). In addition, O'Neil, Hopkins & Bilimoria (2008) determined that frameworks of women's careers are significantly different from men's, particularly characterised by accommodating careers reflecting both aspects of self and other considerations in their career decisions. Petrou et al., (2016) argue that promotion focused employees display a learning orientation at work.

The anomaly is widespread across industries confirming the view of the imbalance between men and women in top positions. Fox (2005) notes that higher education institutions work in a 'gendered institutional culture', contributing to a dearth of women in senior position, marginalising women and leading them to feel disadvantaged compared to their male counterparts. Hence, the gendered organisational culture organically creates a barrier for women to reach senior positions. Conversely, this picture echoes internationally (Carter and Silva, 2010; Cross & Linehan, 2006; Wirth, 2010).

Against a backdrop of inherent challenges, women create a unique and exclusive prototype that positions them to take shape their future by shaping their work environment. One way is the queen bee phenomenon, evidencing how women distance themselves from other women at work and begin to present themselves, often unconsciously or unintentionally, mirroring their male counterparts (Kanter, 1977; Staines, Tavis & Jayaratne, 1974). This behaviour can be attributed to mentorship, networking and embracing the traits of the organisation. As an individual the women start developing a prototype of themselves by positioning the 'self' in the organisation and a suitable 'leader' identity. Whilst the queen bee phenomenon has a propensity to be more present in gendered organisations where there is a gender inequality (Ely, 1994) it reflects how women shape their career and work by selecting various traits that work best for the individual while meandering within the organisation and career. The result is a prototype of leader identity that the individual uses in applying for senior positions.

INSTITUTIONALISM, LEGITIMACY, SELF DETERMINATION THEORIES AND GENDERED CHARACTERISTICS

The theory of institutionalisation refers to normative and cognitive behaviours taken for granted (Powell, 2007) reflecting environmental forces and resulting in accepted behaviours embedded in society.

The normative pillar of Scott's institutional theory (2004) begins at recruitment in a gendered organisation where through selection criteria only a select group pass through the academy. Statistics show that more women fail the test in entry into law enforcement during this process (Lonsway et al., 2003b) as the rigorous physical testing weeds out those unable to withstand the set of normative, regulatory and cognitive-cultural pillars embedded in policing.

Legitimation in an organisation points to it being an outcome of society's collective perception of the organisation's processes (Brown and Jagananda, 2007; Lim et al., 2009;

Toornet et al., 2011). As a key driver and determinant in gendered organisations. Kaplan & Ruland's (1991) argue that legitimacy adds importance to gendered organisations where social systems play a large part in accountability and transparency. By legitimising its processes, behaviours become norms and collaboratively with the decision-making process, taxonomy hierarchy, and eventually policies, form the organisational culture (Acker, 1990; Connell, 1987; Piterman, 2008; Ridgeway & Berger, 1986; West & Zimmerman, 1983). Contextually, organisations authorize the approval of a characteristically gendered status quo.

The “gendered construct” remains an influential driver for the development of policies within an organisation, ranging from working hours to career paths designed within the framework of the male profile (Allen, Langowitz & Minniti, 2008; Alvesson & Billing, 2009). Furthermore, historically gender as construct is embedded in male dominated organisations (Alimo-Metcalfe, 2013; Korabik & Roya, 1989; Korabik, 1990; Williams et al., 2012) and consequently, bias is seen as legitimate (Acker, 1990; Acker, 2012; Blair-Loy, 1999; Burke & Mikkelsen, 2005; Edeltraud, 2012; Uhlir, 1989). The normative dimensions continue to strengthen and fine-tune the existing framework as gendered structures, shaped by history, continue to follow a fraternity pattern (Acker, 1990; Acker, 2012; Blair-Loy, 1999; Burke & Mikkelsen, 2005; Edeltraud, 2012; Uhlir, 1989). Lonsway et al. (2003a) claim that males and females staffing imbalances evidence gender bias in the workplace, reflecting embedded gender inequities, which incrementally become the norm. According to Davey (2008), women in male dominated work environments did not report explicit discrimination and emphasised the importance of avoiding special treatment but acknowledge that agency includes both aspects of free will and submitting to the regulatory order.

Although the logic organisational lens appears neutral and genderless, key attributes of legitimised gendered organisation remain. Brumley (2014), studying 55 professionals found that work policy is predicated on masculine norms and Williams et al, (2012) found similar

perspectives of a gendered organisational lens amongst female geoscientists in the oil and gas industry.

Law enforcement is a classic example of policies and practices being legitimised and institutionalised as historically these operate within a framework developed and implemented by the organisation. Thus, reinforcing gender inequality and perpetuating a culture in which men lead the organisation (Alimo-Metcalfe & Alban-Metcalfe 2003; Heilman et al., 2004; Henderson, 1992; Ianni & Ianni, 1983; Kruger, 2006; Lonsway, 2002; Lonsway, Welch & Fitzgerald, 2001; Natarajan, 2009; Palermo, 2004; Paoline, Meyers & Worden, 2000; Rigg & Sparrow, 1994; Sayse, 2012). In this way, processes that support men are legitimised and the status quo is maintained, as is the notion that men are the only gender capable of leading (Acker, 2012; Alvesson & Billing, 2009; Billing, 2011; Olsson and Walker, 2003; Schulz, 2003).

Wilson and Heinonen (2012) further reiterate that workforce structure is important as it largely influences career progression. Building on this, Cook and Glass (2014) tested three institutional-level theories that shape women's access to senior positions. First, women are likely to be promoted to top positions in firms that were struggling, albeit, with little evidence that women replaced men. Juxtaposed to this were diversity driven firms (see Stainback et al., 2016) playing a role in women's ability to overcome glass barriers (Cook and Glass, 2014).

Despite all the challenges facing women in an organisation, the seminal works of Ryan and Deci (2017) on self-determination espouse that it is a combination between competence, autonomy and relatedness determining the inherent paradigm for motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Of particular interest in this exercise are strategies that are employed in the face of challenges. Ryan and Deci (2000) argue that the experience of competence and relatedness through a sense of belonging, understanding and acceptance of the environment and roles fosters engagement evidenced in active participation, willingness and drive. This, in turn results

in persistence and creativity, arguably reflected in the pursuit of promotion through a range of strategic approaches and strategies.

The threads of self-determination, institutionalisation and legitimacy theories morph into another dimension, namely self-legitimacy. In the context of this paper, this is defined as the police officers' sense of confidence in their authority, leading to self-reflection of the individual's decision to be malleable in their careers. Research (Tankebe, 2010; Bradford & Quinton, 2014) posits that individuals who view their leadership as legitimate have a tendency to promote the organisation at large. This leaves the individual to question their leader identity and ascertain if they are satisfied at being a leader at that particular stage of their careers. Such a study would prove useful in terms of theory and organisational practice.

LEADING AND MANAGING

Women contextually confuse the two important perspectives of management versus leadership at the middle level. Kotter (1990) juxtaposes senior leadership and top management by explaining that although equally important; the difference lies in the former being processes necessary to run an organisation. Management processes include planning, budgeting, human resources and key performance indicators, while leadership focuses on vision that assists the organisation to reach higher levels. As such, the leadership role reflects the highest tier in the hierarchical pyramid embodied as a small group of staff that influences the organisation (England, 2010).

Many terms continue to articulate leadership and despite considerable research during the 70s and 80s, a universally accepted term is yet to be agreed (Yukl, Gordon & Taba, 2002). Alvesson, and Billing (2009), more recently Carli, and Eagly (2011), concur that there is no real psychological difference between men and women's aspirations to climb the corporate ladder. Some researchers postulate that there are no gender differences in styles of

management, both in earlier studies (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Eagly, Karau & Makhijani, 1995; Maupin, 1993) as well as contemporary organisational research (Day, Harrison & Halpin, 2009). Yet, gender stereotyping has seriously influenced women's advancement (Koenig, Eagly & Mitchell, 2011).

The concept of leadership can be described as a process by which a person influences others to accomplish an objective and directs the organisation in a way that makes it more cohesive and coherent (Brown & Gioia, 2002; Cox, Pearce and Sims, 2003; Day, Gronn & Salas, 2004; Day & Harrison, 2007; Hernandez et al., 2011; Lipman-Blumen, 2000; Sloan, 1996). Leader identity refers to various attributes one attaches to oneself, notionally reflecting perceptions by others (Gergen, 1971). Although concepts such as power, authority, personal traits and management have complicated the definition of leadership over time (Bass & Avolio, 1990; Lipman-Blumen, 2000; Schafer, 2010; Yukl et al., 2002). Intrinsically, the sense of leader identity is a relatively deeper mental state of the individual's self-perception.

While these authors rationalise that the misconception stems from a mix and match of social roles, a meta-analysis of gender roles largely drawn from the works of Eagly and Johnson (1990) proves otherwise. Schein's seminal works (1973) concept of 'think manager, think male' are the alignment of male leadership, suggests that correlations between male and female leaders reflect biased perceptions. Extant research resonates the same theme as the social identity theory lens (Hogg, 2001) sees effective leadership as part of a group of individuals with common goals. It begs the question if this theory is inclusive of the other gender in a gendered organisation. Furthermore, categorising leadership can lead to bias toward a certain group, more often in a gendered organisation in favour of the male leadership traits (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Contextually in policing, it is suggested that male officers are as 'natural' leaders, whilst women as leaders are somewhat 'unnatural' (Bailey et al., 2008; Gold, 2009; Marques, 2010).

The description of female leadership as being collaborative, collegial and empowering is juxtaposed to a male leadership style of command, control and being able to assert power. On the surface, within a para-military context the male leadership style is more attractive for males rather than females. However, Paustian-Underdahl, Walker and Woehr (2014), dispute this as being an overly simplistic perspective. Irrespective though, it raises the question as to whether women can achieve leadership positions within such an environment and fuels the ongoing debate for a dramatic reconfiguration of organisational cultures to enabling a more widened access to leadership positions (Alvesson & Billing, 2009; Still, 1999). According to Berdicchia and Masino (2018), hierarchical authority of supervisors not only legitimises power but also triggers behavioural changes, such as accepting the gendered dynamics of an organisation for example, through pressure to conform and coercion.

A POLICING PERSPECTIVE

The National Centre for Women and Policing periodically reports that women across all ranks made up only 13% of the total North American police force (Lonsway et al., 2001; Lonsway et al., 2003a). Lonsway et al. (2001) lamented that a continuing poor recruitment would make it impossible for women to match men in promotion for several decades. Few women have been narrowly promoted to senior positions, whilst many are promoted into supervisory and management jobs, raising the critical question why there is a stagnation at mid-level.

Derks et al. (2011) surveyed 63 Dutch senior policewomen confirming both the queen bee phenomenon and gender bias. Incidentally, the results also showed that women do not serve as role models to other female colleagues. Rindfleish (2000) however notes that, whilst the majority of women in senior roles do not hold queen bee attributes, most would not actively support other women in the workplace either. In essence, whilst not actively undermining

opportunities of female colleagues, women senior managers may be completely disengaged from their female colleagues. This, in turn, legitimises the status quo; potentially triggering defensive mechanism for police women to accept the gendered organisation, warts and all, or to create their own career progression (Ellemers, Speers & Doosje, 1997).

SELF EFFICACY AND OTHERS

Zeldin and Pajares, (2000) propose that individual personality, alongside other barriers, is a powerful potential barrier for career progression as self-efficacy is derived from the individual's self-confidence and motivation. Hence self-efficacy acts as a strong motivator, classified through alpha and beta personality behaviour by the individual. Women in science and technology areas in higher education institutions for example need strong qualifications and self-efficacy to be successful in their career progression (Zeldin & Pajares, 2000).

Originally, mentoring programs were introduced as a two-way learning process for mentors and mentees. In gendered organisations, it is vital that mentoring programs are encouraged, as it opens the professional door for women in the organisation and gives male mentors an insight into the ways that women operate (Cox, 1993; Hansman & Garafolo, 1995; Hite, 1998). Researchers (Maxwell and Ogden, 2006; Holmes, 2005) consider that effective mentoring programs may enhance the career prospects of mentees, as it leads to increased confidence through the ability for individuals to initiate strategic conversations with higher ranked staff, thus developing skills and an enabling process. It is therefore critical that women have mentors to support them, as without this support, women risk to be narrowly stereotyped (von Hippel and Tyre, 1995). According to Weseler and Niessen (2016) relationships at work, arguably including mentoring and networks, influence both the employees perspective on and performance in their role. Workers noting support from colleagues and supervisors reported an

increased ability to control their work characterised by increased work satisfaction and commitment (Berdicchia & Massino, 2018).

Given that, few organisations have audited their mentoring programs to verify its effectiveness (Wanberg, Welsh & Hezlett, 2003); questions about the effectiveness of men and women mentors remain unanswered. Nevertheless, mentoring can be fulfilling and provide potential for growth and development (Ragins & Krams, 2007). Higgins and Kram (2001) contend that in gendered organisations, mentoring sessions are more readily available to men than for women. Consequently, the onus is on mentees to seek the most appropriate mentor and for women particularly, this is often where barriers emerge such as mentoring sessions held outside working hours and poorly developed support networks to help find the most appropriate mentor (Dreher & Ash 1990; Higgins and Kram 2001). Brunetto et al. (2017) postulates that in policing, whilst mentoring leads to informal learning and incidental learning from colleagues is important for both skill and knowledge development, self-directed learning is more important to achieve promotion – effectively supporting the requirement of job crafting as part of career progress.

Bartol and Zhang (cited in Pearce, 2007) assert that networking is important for leadership development as it provides shared work knowledge amongst peers, as it is critical to achieving professional success (Holmes, 2005). Through networking, both men and women use platforms that are important for their trajectory into senior roles (Lockett & Jack, 2013). Brumley's (2014) compounds that women were aware that opportunities were contingent on networking and emphasized strategic manoeuvring to be visible at work while men emphasized patience and resilience.

Notionally, being a female within a gendered organisation is already a key barrier for the individual's career progression (Billing, 2011; Fischer, 2007). Within a gendered

organisation, males support and encourage each other into senior level promotions as opposed to females who do not (van den Brink & Benschop, 2012). Subsequently this becomes a barrier for the women as they lack the accessibility to exclusive networks, creating a limitation on social capacity building (Ibarra, Kilduff & Tsai, 2005).

The ‘competence, autonomy, relatedness’ aspects of the self-determination theory in the context of female police officers considers the factors that inherently motivate the crucial decision to progress to a senior position or remain at middle-management level. In the case considered here, competence refers to and is reflected in the considerable experience that the subjects have built to be at the mid-management level. Autonomy is represented by female police officers considering their desire for career progression in a holistic context and considered approach, rather than pursuing promotion at all costs as their male counterparts tend to do. Lastly, relatedness, or connection, reflects to both belonging and identity, partly evidenced in the uniformed profession and partly in the networking and mentoring activities, however limited or artificial.

The proposition of this study is to explore and understand why there is a continued paucity of women into senior positions. By applying various hybrid theories, the women develop their own sets of strategies as tools to drive their career trajectory into senior positions. Similarly the decision not to seek upward mobility remains within the confines of individual decisions.

Figure 1 shows the environment within which the ‘self’ is positioned in a gendered organisation, where the constructs are institutionalised and legitimised, and where self-determination informs and influences decision-making. The outcome is a choice to either apply strategies for career progression or remain stagnated at mid-management within the organisation.

Insert Figure 1 approximately here

Methods

This paper adopts a qualitative research paradigm underpinned by a subjective ontology and an explanatory epistemology. It also deemed important to acknowledge and consider the personal experiences of the study participants. Skate (1995) suggests that all these factors contribute to the richness of the study. With the prerequisite for research participation being that, respondents needed to be in the middle-level ranks in policing, respondents are at a stage where aspirations and barriers to top-level positions are important and understood. 40 mid-level policewomen voluntarily participated in this study with interviews conducted in a natural setting. The respondents were selected for their contextual insights into the lived experience of pursuing and being awarded promotion. Selection of respondents started from convenience sampling followed by snowballing sampling until data saturation was achieved. **The objective is to reach saturation of response ideas from a small number of respondents rather than collecting a large number of responses used for generalising findings (Anthony, 2016). Applying this method provided both depth and detail (Jupp, 2006). Furthermore, sampling size is determined by the research methodology and a small sample size was sufficient to determine an in-depth analysis. Using purposive sampling triggered the advantage to the researcher, namely enabling the identification of suitable respondents who are able to contribute to the study (Jupp, 2006).**

Although the cohort have been promoted to mid – level ranks there appeared to be a stagnation in upward mobility. To investigate this query, three propositions were investigated, predominantly by asking three broad question, namely:

- Policing as a gendered organisation inherently represents a clearly identifiable set of challenges for progression to senior level appointments, by asking ‘What are the key barriers that the women consider limiting their progression from mid-level into senior positions?’
- Promotion to senior roles in policing requires female applicants to leverage specific strategies, tactics and instruments, such as mentoring and networking, by asking ‘What strategies did the women use for seeking leadership roles?’
- Self-determination attitudes and perceptions influence career and promotion choices, by asking ‘Why are women currently not applying for senior positions?’

Qualitative interviews were the primary source of data collection in this study, analysed thematically through the NVIVO software. Shuy (2003) deem this as the most effective form of data collection as it is able to generate empirical data by a process of social constructivism. Hence, personal, conversation-style interviews were administered after initial introductions and clarifications of the study and its purpose. Interviews capturing the lived experiences of participants along a semi-structured format and took about an hour, the respondents were asked to share views on issues around women in mid and senior leadership, career advancement and aspirations. The interviews were audio taped to ensure the respondents’ articulation is captured, and to allow the researcher to check and re-check the transcriptions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Kahn & Cannel, 1957; Shuy, 2003; Silverman, 2003; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). To ensure rigour in research validity the women were encouraged to review their interviews and make edits (Legard, Keegan & Ward, 2003; Patton, 2002) post interview.

Although every story was unique, common themes running through the women’s experiences were collated, and analysed. Interviews were transcribed and converted into NVIVO. To prepare the data for coding, and eventual analysis, several coding stages were applied, namely the initial coding allows for broadening the theoretical framework (Charmaz,

2006). The initial coding broke down the data into small bits that were grouped together, and checked for similarities and contrasts (Saldana, 2009). For example, when the respondent stated,

A lot of the activities during business hours but a number of opportunities out of hours which is a challenge in itself and an important part in our promotions... a woman in law enforcement and been there a long time would understand what you are going through and guide. Above me people...we still have people who think women who get together they talk and it is chatting and it is nonsense,

this was initially coded as follows:

Mentoring is important for career progression and with an analogy highlighting the importance of extended support needed for career progression and the perception that mentoring is a social interaction.

Following this, the second stage refined the data into themes. Subsequently, a thematic synthesis approach was used to summarize the findings with key recurring themes elucidated from the interview response using phenomenological analysis methods. Furthermore, a demographic profile survey and secondary data collection was supplemented for analysis to support the primary data collection. Such data are economical and used to suit the organisation; generally, they should be used as supporting information (Platt, 1999).

Results and discussion

VIEWS ON MENTORING AND NETWORKING

This study highlights women using a range of strategies to promote their strengths with the assistance of another individual. The respondents labelled mentoring to be relatively outdated for them. The women personally perceived that after being a mentee for a period, they required a tactical approach, inherently a sponsor to take them to the next level of mentoring.

The majority of respondents felt that their agency did not see mentoring as a priority for staff development. While those respondents who had a negative view of mentoring arguably lack human and social capacity. Notwithstanding mentoring, being a key criteria to leader development. Evidently, there appears to be a gap in the way the policewomen perceive support or the absence of, in their career development. Those women who did seek mentoring also understood that networking mirrored mentoring. The cohorts tended to look at the options available to them as either a barrier or an opportunity that they could overcome through empowering themselves through mentoring and networking.

Within policing, there are no statistics to gauge whether mentoring has increased women's success in gaining promotion. Unlike men who use a descriptive approach, women are inclined to structure their mentoring sessions and follow a prescriptive approach (Maxwell 2009). The respondents strongly advocated mentoring as being important for the lower level positions rather than for the more senior positions. In gendered organisations mentoring can be challenging as it risks being confused with coaching, or can be negatively viewed as being part of a small social network comprising of women in a male-dominated organisation. A respondent stated,

...There is a written sub culture

Another echoed her mentoring experience,

...he taught me to keep my emotions in perspective...his focus was to enhance women in policing in managerial and leadership roles.

The respondents interchanged the term 'sponsor' and 'mentor' within a policing context. When prompted clarified that the term 'mentor' was more relevant with low to middle level management rather than the term 'sponsor'. One rationale for this interchangeability is that the term is contextually new and covert.

On the importance of having a sponsor and the perception in senior ranks associated with having a female Chief Officer as a sponsor, one respondent stated:

In 2013, she is the first female Chief, there was not one before so if we are thinking... than 2013 is a milestone...She was mentored by the former Chief who is a male ...it is important to have both a male and female mentor.

On the accessibility to female mentors, a respondent stated,

I did have access to all other women in the agency that I considered to be very successful.

Networking was a very powerful tool for women in senior leadership roles as networking becomes politicized and raises their profiles, catapulting them into leadership roles. While male police officers are reported to bond during social gatherings such as fishing or golf trips, mostly inaccessible to women, the policewomen are developing and using alternative social groupings. The findings echo Williams et al. (2012) and Kwong, Jones-Evans and Thompson (2012) who state that women are limited in their networking opportunities and subsequently adversely influences careers. In this respect, one respondent stated,

... in this tough field especially for females and if you want to succeed you need to network broadly and your mentors to be focused.

As a respondent summed up on networking which is an investment to capacity building,

I do that, as that is what I have to do but as you go up the chain of course, a lot of it is networking and building external partnerships

However, some women found the barriers as opportunities with one respondent stating,

I am very grateful to my mentors and supervisors who supported me in doing that...

While another cohort stated,

I aligned with people where I wanted to go

With another respondent admitting the value of networking,

...don't think I got to Senior Sargent by myself.

TACTICS AND STRATEGY

Respondents perceived leader identity from a strategic viewpoint of leading the agency characterised by little team based decision making processes. As one respondent explained her role in the agency,

At my rank, it is very political ... but that does not deter me to take on leadership role...and to go for the Chief's job...

While another commented on utilising strategies for career progression,

the focus of our strategic plan - from day one we set boundaries, goalposts and put in timeframes and things we want to achieve

With another respondent summing,

I think that early in my career, I think one of the best strategies is to be ready for any opportunity that is given to you,

The cohort acknowledge that at entering the executive levels they believed to be in a better position to make changes in the organisation compared to remaining at the operational level.

As one respondent summed up:

It's a new way of doing business when being at senior level...a personal decision and a certain level of ego as well.

On the prospects of being a leader a respondent stated,

I think when we can put strong women into command positions

Juxtaposed to this view was another respondent whose views were,

*I would not want to have the top job...not saying that I could not do it
...I have other aspirations*

The respondents believed that it is equally difficult for women to build strong networks with female senior staff, firstly because there are few women in senior positions. Secondly because their male counterparts are more inclined to self-promote and create additional networks to support themselves in the organisation. One respondent stated:

It is easier for the guys...golfing, fishing and the next thing you know they have met new people who will push them.

Another respondent shared similar views,

...it is still a very close network, the promotion system is not based on qualifications.

The majority of the respondents perceived that to be successful in networking they needed to be part of the group, as one respondent stated:

The male network is very strong there is a non-written sub-culture.

In view of these perceptions, most respondents were resigned to the situation that if they did not network strongly they needed to strategize differently, as one said,

...but you know they passed the test, they networked and met the right people and there they are.

SELF DETERMINATION

The big shift in opinion amongst respondents was that it was their individual decision to move upward in their career. Since the cultural and social context in which both women and

men live does not necessarily segregate men and women, women feel relatively comfortable in networking or seeking a mentor within a gendered organisation. Ninety percent of the respondents were mentored at an earlier stage of their career, proving invaluable to them. Per se, mentoring in a police force can serve as a vital tool to the female officers. Not just in seeking promotion but also as an instrument to understand dynamics and decision-making processes in a gendered organisation. A respondent articulated the notion of personal choice,

There is usually plenty of opportunities should you wish to go for it, does not mean that I would get it though.

While another respondent stated,

...you know what; there is not in my mind a glass ceiling I could not break

One respondent echoed a self-determination perspective.

*...so I was brought back and supported by the hierarchy to come back to metro...
I have made it known of what my aspirations are as far as my position down here...
It goes back to the question about whether not what a person's aspirations are...*

The sense of managing one's career is clear when one responded,

...at that point in time it was the goal I wanted to achieve and where I wanted to stay.

However, the women had to manage their identity from professional to leader identity. When they saw themselves as a leader at mid-level, there was little motivation for them to seek top-level leadership positions. Speculating that they were satisfied with their role.

On leadership at mid-level, a respondent stated,

Actually, you can be in a leadership role at any rank.

There existed a perception that there were better promotional opportunities in developing a protean career once they left law enforcement. A respondent viewed,

I guess it is what people are like, perhaps another career it would be different but I think it is difficult in police sometimes

While another stated,

...that is our window of opportunity to find a new career

With another respondent stating,

...at the end of this three years, and if there is promotional opportunities I would stay, but if there was no promotional opportunities for me or the ability to grow I would leave

One respondent completed her postgraduate studies to prepare for a protean career stated,

With my background in law enforcement and a MBA I would have no problem getting a top position outside. This Agency does not care what happens to all that brain drain...they are too conservative.

At mid-level, while in charge of and managing a team, the individuals believe that it is their leadership style and associated perceptions that concretize into their leader identity. This creates a sense of complacency and a lack of interest to seek career progression. With one respondent stating,

I have been doing this since 1995 and because of that you are naturally looked on as a leader

On their perception of leadership a respondent echoes,

I am able to exert a greater degree of leadership influence and in performing the role of co-ordinator which is very much is a managerial based position and

focus

With another respondent stating,

I am a leader in my own right

With a respondent reflecting on leadership,

I feel in some ways we got away from being true leaders,

With another reflection from a respondent,

I think the Director in the last couple of years is realising there should be leadership development

The respondents on the subject of senior women were comfortable and confident that women could lead a police jurisdiction effectively. Researchers (Acker 1990; Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban_Metcalfe 2003; Williams et al 2012; Connell 1987; West and Zimmerman 1983; Ridgeway and Berger, 1986) propose that gendered organisations have conditioned the agency to be male centric leading to a pattern of vertical segregation where women are overlooked during the promotion process. A degree of male centrism appears to be prevalent in accepting the social context when one respondent stated,

...when we grow up young boys went out shooting with their dads and girls stayed at home cooking cupcakes with their mothers, so by large boys would have been exposed to this nature than women.

Respondents, although not particularly referring to the queen bee syndrome, did however echo how they perceived other women. Female officers found discouraging other women as a different form of bias from men. Conversely, they noted that men and women instigated bias as well. One respondent stated,

Women are the barriers; women would undercut other women. Men do not seem to do that, there is competition among men but not at the level, women do, to cut others.

While another respondent echoed the lack of support for women in career progression,

I do not think that she increased the number of women than the previous Chief of Police.

Another respondent stated,

The women are afraid that if they share information with you or help you they are going to lose out.

A respondent spoke about her perspective on women issues,

I am at that point, where I do not know if I would be comfortable in doing women focused things.

Respondents did not identify any particular barrier that was purposely designed to deter them from gaining promotion. Furthermore, the policewomen viewed barriers as being applicable to both men and women. Admittedly in different perspectives, and reported that over time, the organisations has improved its organisational behavior. The organisations were actively seeking to promote suitable officers, regardless of gender, into senior positions. One respondent stated,

I have been getting calls from Chief of Police from all different towns and cities wanting to know how we recruit, retain and promote more women

While another reflected,

I think there are things in place not specifically for women I think it is for everyone

Considering barriers and aspirations, it is ascertained that leader identity amongst female police officers is developed at the middle level. Where a wide range of challenges throughout their career path decisions challenges the women. Conversely, now women strategize their aspirations and most often include the endorsement of a sponsor to support them into the realms of senior leadership. A respondent stated,

... in this tough field especially for females and if you want to succeed you need to network broadly and your mentors to be focussed

While another admitted,

I pushed myself into places where I did community meetings

Conclusion

Data suggest that the women clearly understood the expectations, definition and management of their own career progression and leadership skills. They also understood that it was through a number of strategies, reiterating networking and mentoring as a top priority. The women agreed that during the last two decades they experienced prominent barriers and saw an incremental shift in the paradigm of gender bias. The dichotomy of barriers or challenges to career progression centres on the individual, as it is applicable to both genders. Hence, the barriers become self-imposed. While other individuals perceive barriers as opportunities, the respondents in this study have the ability to manage their careers particularly when they possess managerial and leadership development skills.

The women also understood that they had two separate identities; one as a woman in a very male dominated organisation, and themselves as a policewoman. This dichotomy is noted as being a real or perceived struggle for them individually and presents as a challenge as leader identity amongst female middle managers pivots around their team-based units, especially when they had male officers reporting to them. This confirms a well-established position that

leader identity is a perception held by the individual (Brown and Gioia 2002; Cox et al 2003; Day and et al 2004; Gecas 1982; Gergen 1971; Hernandez et al 2011 and Lipman-Blumen 2000).

What remains unique about this study is that it looks at mid-level women in policing. Conclusively, the decision to pursue career progression and associated development of leader identity thwarts at that level. Hence, drive and motivation for career progression is in itself a barrier as the cohorts self-determine their career management. In addition, strategically selecting the most efficient support, including a mentor or active networking, remains a challenge.

Although the findings resonate with other research on paucity of women in senior positions, this paper points at various contextual factors that contribute to mid-level women's career decision. Deciding to either remain at mid-level rather than aggressively seeking career progression. In the first instance, female police officers are enveloped in an organisation that is highly legitimized and institutional, arguably deemed by society as genderless. The next aspect is developing an identity within the gendered organisation, to some a barrier and others an opportunity. Accordingly, there would appear to be a value for the women to strategise their career progression or decide to remain at that mid-level.

Police as an organisation is unique in that leader identity is present at several ranks. The identity of 'self' as professional is fluid and yet stagnant as the individual's perception of identity as a police officer is challenged when rejecting career progression. Barriers and opportunities become interchangeable for the women, fulfilling the leadership aspirations of some even when that results in limiting women to seek senior executive roles.

Because of the scarcity of women in senior positions, aspects of the queen bee syndrome are prevalent, creating another set of disadvantages for women. Strategically, some

policewomen prefer to manage their career by considering a protean career. While the policewomen start their preparation at middle level, for some their focus is to remain there and not to progress within policing. Their intention is to invest in positioning towards a new career preparation outside policing.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings suggest that job crafting type activities influence the decision of female police officers to pursue a career beyond middle management, although without necessarily being prominent or articulated as such. This sits however alongside the organisational citizenship behaviour in that towards the senior roles the job-crafting reduces somewhat and is replaced with an increased support and acceptance of organisational realities. The findings also confirm that the theory of self-determination as articulated by Deci and Ryan (2000) is an underpinning component in career progression in gendered organisations.

In a practical environment, this paper suggests that female police officers with a career driven perspective are quite independent and clear about the pursuit of promotion and the actual costs associated with this. Whilst overall the realities of the policing environment, including its gendered nature and the subsequent bias, are manageable, organizations could pursue the benefits of diversity through a larger female senior management cohort by facilitating more indirect learning through cross-gender mentoring or building social capital through networking.

Limitations and future research

Limitations of this study include the narrow sample size in that it only draws upon law enforcement in North America and Australia. As a result, the generalisation of findings may not be applicable to other gendered organisations. However, it still draws on bureaucracy and how it is anticipated in the wider community. While the 40 respondents were selected through

a snow balling method, a method often used in a difficult environment, they arguably do not represent a sufficiently wide population.

It is worth noting that while there remains a paucity of women in top senior leadership positions, this paper notes the need for a paradigm shift. Hence creating new opportunities for mid-level and senior-level women officers in gendered organisations. Contextually for future studies, it is important to examine the status quo of para-military organisations with rigid structures. Consequently being able to shift its policies and processes enabling policewomen to converge. Admittedly, there can be a sense of threat to the hierarchy but to meet the needs of the current job market, it is essential that organisations function organically. Furthermore, convergence would assist and support the female members to help meet the challenges and opportunities within the gendered organisation.

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Figure 1: Theoretical framework

