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on Human Resource Development Research and Practice across Europe
Theme "HRD: Reflecting upon the past, Shaping the Future"

Become your own 'Project': Learning from Women Elite Leaders' Reflections to Shape Women's Future Careers

S. Mavin[1], J. Williams, P. Bryans and N. Patterson

Winner of the Alan Moon Prize for Best Paper at Conference

Abstract

With the aim of reflecting on the past to shape women's future careers, we explore women elite leaders' reflective learning on their career experiences. The research focuses on the UK context where those who hold leader positions at the pinnacle of organizational hierarchies remain largely men. Through a thematic analysis based on data from 81 qualitative semi-structured interviews, we offer 6 emergent themes to encapsulate women elite leaders' key issues for women who want to progress in their careers: 1) To be or not to be a woman… 2) Family matters 3) Becoming more authentic and building self-efficacy 4) Investing in your development 5) Outstanding credibility but not the solid lieutenant and 6) Bravery counts. We explore thematic resonance by interpreting accounts from a further 16 women elites from the BBC Radio 4 Woman's Hour 'Power List' 2013. We view leader careers as gendered and draw upon doing gender well and differently against sex-category (Mavin and Grandy, 2012; 2013) to conceptualize 'woman as a project' as our contribution. 'Woman as a project' provides an architecture for instrumental personal organizing of holistic [personal and career] lives and incorporates two significant features: conscious awareness of doing gender well and differently against sex-category, including gender aware positioning of self as a 'woman leader' or a 'leader', and instrumental personal organizing. Through these features the project architecture integrates as interlocking processes, the key issues that women elite leaders identified for women motivated to progress in their careers as leaders.

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Become your own ‘Project’:
Learning from Women Elite Leaders’ Reflections to Shape Women’s Future Careers

Introduction

With the aim of reflecting on the past to shape women’s future careers, this paper explores women elite leaders’ reflections on their career experiences to offer themes of learning and a conceptualization of ‘woman as her own project.’ The research problem lies in the current UK context where those who hold leader positions at the pinnacle of organizational hierarchies remain largely men (Sealy and Vinnicombe, 2013; Davies, 2011). Against a background where “male-defined constructions of work and career success continue to dominate organizational research and practice” (O’Neill et al., 2008:727), we present analysis of women leaders’ reflections on key career issues for women. We draw from a wider qualitative study of 81 women elites who hold UK FTSE 100/250 Executive/Non-Executive Director and/or influential leader positions and accounts from 16 women from the BBC Radio 4 Woman’s Hour Women’s Power List 2013, to explore our research question: what are the key issues women need to be aware of as they progress into senior positions? We use the term ‘elite leaders’ to include those women who hold significant positions of power and influence at the top of organisations (e.g. CEO, COO, CFO, MD, Head of HR, Director/Non-Executive Director, Chair/Vice Chair, Company Secretary, Head/Teacher of School, General Manager). Women elites have achieved a traditionally “masculine strategic situation” (Tyler, 2005: 569) in navigating the gendered labyrinth (Eagly and Carli, 2007) and in doing so may be viewed as no longer “the organizational second sex” or “Others of management” (Tyler, 2005: 572). This study, following Ellemers et al. (2012) and Chesterman et al. (2005), explores reflections from women who have achieved elite leader positions, and advances Terjesen et al.’s (2009: 332) call for “truly innovative research into the female directors’ experiences” currently lacking in the literature.

Our assumptions are that “women’s careers are complex and multi-dimensional, yet work practices appear to exist in a single dimension – the male defined organizational dimension” (O’Neill et al, 2008: 735) and that after decades of women working, the predominant attitude remains ‘think manager, think male’ (Schein, 2007), think leader, think man. Therefore gender remains core to constructions of manager and leader. We recognize gender as a social construction, a socially produced binary division and distinctions between women and men, and masculinities and femininities (Acker, 1992) and draw upon doing gender well and differently against sex-category (Mavin and Grandy, 2012, 2013) to support our contributions.

We begin with our understandings of gender and a context for women elite leaders before outlining our research approach. We then focus upon analysis of data which emerged in response to the interview question ‘what are the key issues women need to be aware of as they progress into senior positions?’ discussed by all women participants. We offer six emergent themes which encapsulate women elite leaders’ key issues for women who want to progress in their careers: 1) To be or not to be a woman… 2) Family matters 3) Becoming more authentic and building self-efficacy 4) Investing in your development 5) Outstanding credibility but not the solid lieutenant and 6) Bravery counts. We then explore thematic resonance by interpreting accounts from a further 16 women from the Women’s Power List (2013). We draw upon doing gender well and differently against sex-category (Mavin and Grandy, 2012, 2013) to conceptualize ‘woman as a project’; an architecture for instrumental personal organizing of holistic [personal and career] lives.

Understandings of gender

For us, gender is a social construction, a socially produced binary division and distinctions between women and men, and masculinities and femininities (Acker, 1992). This position reflects recent developments in gender studies which have moved the debate from essentialized concepts which biologically determine masculine behaviours or traits with men and feminine behaviours or traits with women. Gender can now be understood as an achievement; we do gender through ongoing negotiations of how gender is 'done' against social expectations (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Constructing this argument, West and Zimmerman (1987) distinguish between sex, sex categorization and gender a feminist tactic of separating physiological differences [sex] and social behaviours [gender] to unpack gender and open it up scrutiny and disruption. However, there remains debate over the connections between sex and gender, as it is suggested that when doing gender, people are already categorized by sex, as the body cannot be said to be neutral (Kelan, 2010). The potential to destabilize the binary is important given it has implications for the behaviours and meanings available to and acceptable for, both women and men (Mavin and Grandy, 2012, 2013). Rather than undoing gender (Butler, 2004), it is suggested that gender undergoes processes of being re-done or done differently (Mavin and Grandy, 2013) as women move into spaces and ways of organizing previously associated with men and the performance of masculinities.

The research is based upon this position; that gender can be done well and differently against sex-category through simultaneous, multiple enactments of femininity and masculinity (Mavin and Grandy, 2012, 2013). Women can do gender well if they do so in congruence with the female sex category whilst simultaneously doing gender differently by engaging in behaviours associated with masculinity (Mavin and Grandy, 2012). We incorporate sex category into doing gender, as we recognize that gender is done from a body which is not neutral, but already positioned via sex category (Kelan, 2010). This recognizes that the gender binary, femininities and masculinities and management can begin to become decoupled (Billing, 2011) as women manoeuvre between the behaviours expected of women and those expected of men in becoming leaders (O'Neill and O'Reilly, 2010). Mavin and Grandy (2013:234/235) explain doing gender well and differently as "for a woman to do gender well or appropriately, as evaluated against and accountable to her sex category, she performs expected feminine behaviour through a body that is socially perceived to be female" with comparable expectations for men. Congruence with sex category is achieved and so "while a woman may do gender well, she may also enact multiplicity, including doing gender differently, against perceived sex category and expected gender behavior" (Mavin and Grandy, 2013:234/235). This process is dynamic, however we recognize that through ongoing gender stereotyping women and men continue to evaluate themselves and are evaluated by others against the femininity-masculinity binary divide (Mavin and Grandy, 2012, 2013). This approach to doing of gender well and differently is taken into our analysis of women elite leaders' experiences.

The context for UK women elite leaders

The position of women elite leaders in UK business and society is one of marginality reflecting an established view of organizational contexts and structures as gendered in ways which detrimentally shape women's experiences (Connell, 1987). Understanding the perpetuation of gendered organizing contexts requires an appreciation of the role of patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity. Patriarchy as socio-structural practices (Walby, 1989) provides the backcloth to gendered relations as it operates at macro [societal], meso [organizational] and micro [everyday interactions] levels (Billing, 2011), expressed through hegemonic masculinity which maintains assumptions of masculine superiority (Knights and Kerfoot, 2004) and perpetuates the association of men/masculinities with management and leadership (Gherardi, 1994). Women who want to progress their careers experience a double bind whereby they are expected to perform femininities associated with being a 'woman' whilst also demonstrating behaviours expected of manager/leaders [associated with masculinity] (Gherardi, 1994). In order to manoeuvre between these expectations and the gendered contexts they construct, women leaders may opt to perform femininities and masculinities simultaneously and so do gender well and differently (Mavin and Grandy, 2012, 2013). Yet, women may also ventriloquize patriarchal attitudes (Brown, 1998). Engaging with patriarchy has consequences for the behaviours and relationships women can develop and sustain, and limits the femininities deemed to be appropriate for women to gendered stereotypes (e.g. caring, empathic, compliant), which Connell (1987) suggests can be called emphasized femininities. Women may challenge hegemonic masculinities construction of 'accepted' femininities by doing gender well [e.g. engaging in such stereotypical femininities] and simultaneously doing gender differently [e.g. by engaging in competition and ambition] (Mavin and Grandy, 2012, 2013).

An embedded resistor to women's doing of gender well and differently is the masculinity associated with elite positions, argued to be "imbued with conceptions of rationality and instrumental control, taken for granted and which render gender largely unproblematic" (Ross-Smith and Kornberger, 2004:296). Such masculine rationality is centred on control; "an extreme version of competitive masculinity" (Ross-Smith and Chesterman, 2009:6) where elite leader positions are understood as a "masculine strategic situation" (Tyler, 2005:569) which shapes senior positions through embedded patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity reproducing masculine discourses and practices (Ross-Smith and Chesterman, 2009). Such contexts offer interesting and potentially informing sites through which women's experiences can be explored. Further, while women are now associating themselves with management and leadership (Billing, 2011), women may still need to manage negative responses if they jolt other organizational members' gendered expectations (Mavin, 2009). These debates ground our research question: what are the key issues women need to be aware of as they progress into senior positions?

Research approach

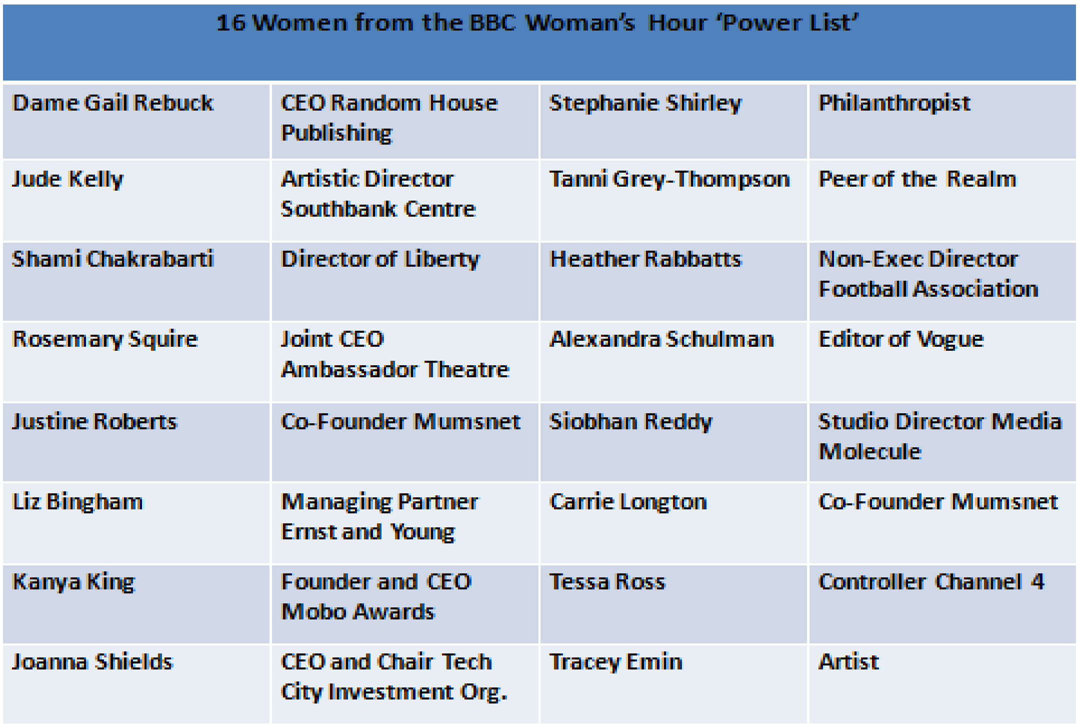
This research is a part of a larger project exploring women elite leaders' relations with other women at work. We draw upon the traditions of qualitative research and adopt a social constructionist approach where we see participants' stories as co-constructed, retrospective, partial accounts where as researchers we play a role in this construction. Following Stead and Elliot (2012), our perspective supports relational and socially situated understandings in that it encourages views of women's experiences as dynamic participation in social practices within particular historical and social contexts, such as organizational gendered contexts.

Data was collected by three of the authors. A semi-structured interview guide was used to facilitate exploration into a similar range of topics across participants who were asked about experiences of social relations with other women, life/career history and experiences of becoming a woman moving into elite positions including friendship, competition, cooperation and ambition. Interviews with 81 women working in UK based organizations were conducted: 36 Executive Directors/Non-Executive Directors in FTSE 100/250 companies and 45 elite leaders identified as 'influential' in an annual regional newspaper supplement about the 'top 250/500 influential leaders'. Participants held formal positions with significant institutional and hierarchical power within a private or public organization and were thus considered elite leaders. The participants were aged between 33-67 years; 73 self declared as white British/Irish/Other white backgrounds, two black/mixed backgrounds, with six non-declared; 62 women worked full time; 14 part time with five non-declared. Interviews lasted on average 90 minutes. These were recorded, transcribed, anonymized, coded and returned to participants for approval and further reflective thought. We have not identified individual women participants.

One author led on initial interpretations of the women leaders' responses to the question, *'what are the key issues women need to be aware of as they progress into senior* positions?,' discussed by all 81 participants. Analysis of women's responses and cross-transcript analysis was highly iterative, moving between "phases of coding, literature review, and conceptualization of the data" (Ladge et al., 2012: 1456) resulting in six emergent themes. A different author then engaged in a process of thematic resonance by interpreting the emergent themes in light of reflective accounts in videos of 16 women from the BBC Radio 4 Woman's Hour 100 women's 'Power List' (2013) based 'women who are the movers and shakers who shape the way we live today?' A panel of six chaired by Eve Pollard debated the listeners' nominations, decided the relative influence and reduced the nominations to form the top 100. The list is presented as a snapshot of powerful women at that time. Extracts of the panel's discussions are available alongside the interviews with Powerlisters at http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p011fp9k?page=4. Our focus is on 'How *to be a Powerful Woman'*, a selection of video clips in which 16 of the Powerlisters 'share their experiences, advice and philosophy for a successful working life' (http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01chzq9) (see Table 1 for the Powerlister women participants). The BBC present the clips in 6 themes but without explanation. Not all 16 women contribute to each theme but 8-12 voices are heard in each clip. Our interpretations were conducted in 3 ways: i) one author listened to the clips to gain initial impressions of key content; ii) then listened to the clips to identify resonance with the themes identified by the 81 women in the original research project; iii) the clips were listened to a final time to identify any major differences to the themes from the original 81 interviews and any additions to that analysis. As the videos are publicly available, the women are named where exerts from their accounts are presented. See Table 2 for our themes from the 81 women elite leaders and the BBC's themes from the Power List.

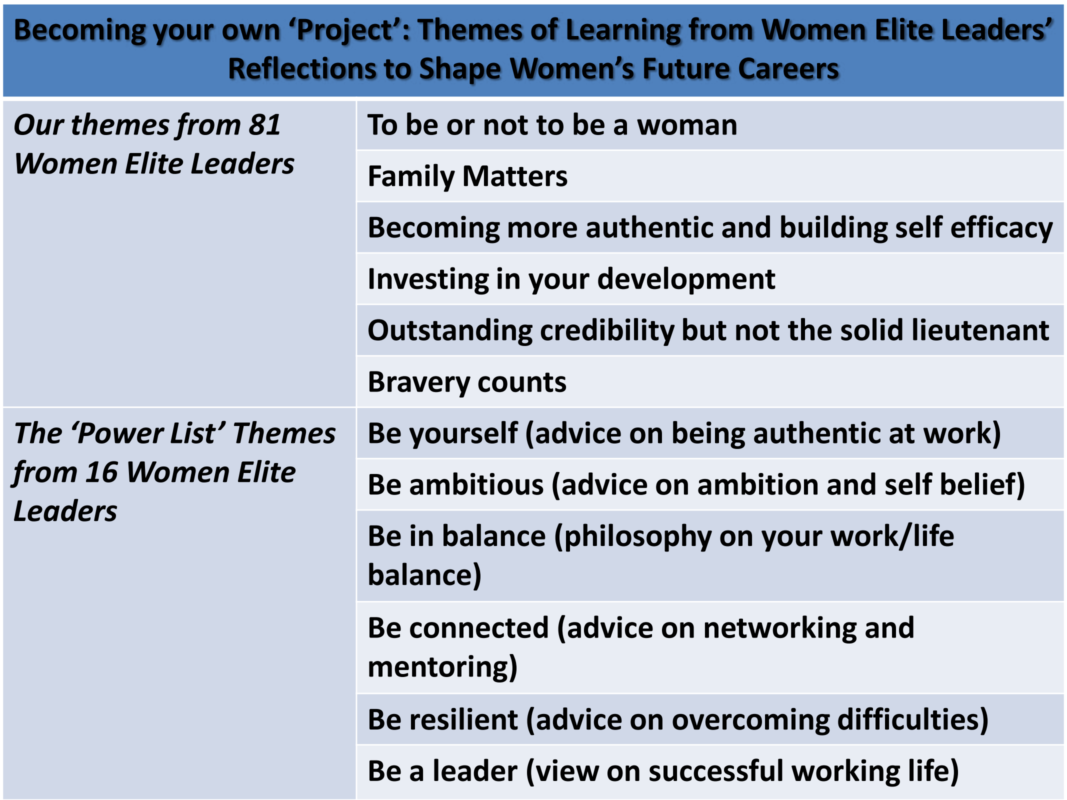
We are conscious reflexively that the women participants are not a homogeneous group and while they share experiences as women elite leaders and at the same time we recognize women as oppressed and marginalized as leaders in patriarchal organizations, they do not share the same experiences (Bryans and Mavin, 2003; Griffin, 1995). We are also aware that our analysis is influenced by our own and the participant's biographies, career histories, bio-data, life stages and their societal and organisational contexts. We were explicit about the gender aspects of the empirical research when contacting participants and in the interviews questions. Therefore interviews provided a unique site to explore the key issues for women who want to progress their careers. Further we recognize that the women elites and researchers were co-constructing learning from the participant's career journeys and experiences to date during the interview as a site for reflective learning.

Table 1. 16 Women from the BBC Woman's Hour 'Power List' 2013.



16 Women from the BBC Woman's Hour 'Power List'			
Dame Gail Rebuck	CEO Random House Publishing	Stephanie Shirley	Philanthropist
Jude Kelly	Artistic Director Southbank Centre	Tanni Grey-Thompson	Peer of the Realm
Shami Chakrabarti	Director of Liberty	Heather Rabbatts	Non-Exec Director Football Association
Rosemary Squire	Joint CEO Ambassador Theatre	Alexandra Schulman	Editor of Vogue
Justine Roberts	Co-Founder Mumsnet	Siobhan Reddy	Studio Director Media Molecule
Liz Bingham	Managing Partner Ernst and Young	Carrie Longton	Co-Founder Mumsnet
Kanya King	Founder and CEO Mobo Awards	Tessa Ross	Controller Channel 4
Joanna Shields	CEO and Chair Tech City Investment Org.	Tracey Emin	Artist

Table 2. Becoming your own 'Project:' Themes of Learning from Women Elite Leaders' Reflections to Shape Women's Future Careers.



Becoming your own 'Project': Themes of Learning from Women Elite Leaders' Reflections to Shape Women's Future Careers	
Our themes from 81 Women Elite Leaders	To be or not to be a woman
	Family Matters
	Becoming more authentic and building self efficacy
	Investing in your development
	Outstanding credibility but not the solid lieutenant
	Bravery counts
The 'Power List' Themes from 16 Women Elite Leaders	Be yourself (advice on being authentic at work)
	Be ambitious (advice on ambition and self belief)
	Be in balance (philosophy on your work/life balance)
	Be connected (advice on networking and mentoring)
	Be resilient (advice on overcoming difficulties)
	Be a leader (view on successful working life)

Women elite leaders' key issues for women who want to progress careers

The themes presented were agreed by all authors. Our interpretations of the women BBC Powerlisters are integrated into the empirical themes to illustrate resonance and differences. The themes are relational, socially constructed and reflect how women do gender well and differently, simultaneously against the gender binary.

To be or not to be a woman ...

This theme reflects the women leaders' positioning of themselves as 'women leaders' or as 'leaders' and therefore gender neutral against the gender binary. Those who positioned themselves as leaders-gender neutral did not want being a woman to be relevant to their positions and were clear that it was business that counted. There was almost nothing that was a problem unique to women and if individuals wanted to achieve, they could do so regardless of gender. This gender neutral positioning was reflected in comments that women should not ask for, nor expect, special treatment or to be treated any differently to men. The women elite leaders recommend that women do not use their femininity, their appearance or being a woman as an excuse; thus eliminating gender and constraining women's opportunities to do gender well. However a key contradiction is that these women highlight a need to have a significant awareness and understanding of gender - in order for gender not be an issue.

Those women who positioned themselves as women leaders felt that women should stop worrying about being women, value themselves as women and stop apologising for being a woman. They did not want women to become one of the boys, by adopting male traits. There was an overall awareness from the participants of the gendered nature of organization and of the discrimination women still face and advice was for women to be realistic about the possibility of being the only woman in the room as they rise hierarchically; by doing your homework, picking the right company [women-readiness] and being aware of having to confront masculine heroic leader expectations. Their advice was to be aware of assuming and deploying authority while at the same time, not to be too aggressive and testosterone driven and "scare the horses" which could limit the appointment of other women. Thus women are able to do gender differently but not too differently against the binary that they render themselves and other women vulnerable.

Women elite leaders make comparisons to men in identifying their key issues for women who want to progress as leaders. They recommend that women reflect on the way men go for the "quick wins" [influencing key people] when they get promotion and have already got a plan for "everybody to say how brilliant they are", whereas women get "too stuck into the job" rather than the relationships around them. Women elites repeatedly point out that women must work harder than men, be on top of their game and not make mistakes, which are less tolerated than when men make them. Again the women recommend women lose or tone down their femininity by focusing on their competence [masculinity] and not on their clothes and children [femininity] because this is the case for men.

The BBC Power List did not explicitly a priori raise the issue of 'to be or not to be a woman...' However those women Powerlisters analysed often reflected themselves as 'women leaders' or as 'leaders' (gender neutral). For example, "being a senior woman you are under a microscope much fiercer and closer on you than for most men. The language about women is more derogatory" (Jude Kelly).

Family matters

Further contradictions surface in the theme of 'family matters' where dependent upon the women's positioning of themselves against the gender binary, family matters should not be a barrier to women who want a leader career, or family matters should not be an issue for an organization i.e. women should not expect special treatment, even though in general they recognized that the weight of family responsibilities falls to women. This was also influenced by the women's age and life-stage in that younger women elites were more adamant that the organization had a responsibility to support women in successfully managing family matters and an elite career. However women at later life-stages did recommend that women should not be afraid of having a family, a personal life and a career and to remember "you cannot go home and cuddle a career." Regardless, women elites agree that women should plan and organize their family matters in ways which work with their overall life and career ambitions, including choosing the right partner carefully. Numerous women participants who had children told us of how their partners work at home; work part time or have retired to take the lead in family responsibilities, so that personal relationships were grounded in equality. This type of life planning requires early self-awareness and decision making for women and an integration of personal life choices and career. The 'whole life' view of career also emerged from interpretations of the 16 women Powerlisters, illustrated by Heather Rabbatts who, when discussing work/life balance and children, comments,

> "It's ridiculous that we somehow think that we should be excluding women because during certain years, and it is only certain years, and increasingly we're all working till we're 90 because we don't have pensions, that there might be this challenge … we should have the full panoply available to companies to enable them to support women in their workforce while they have young children."

Again women elites compared themselves to men in terms of family matters where it was perceived that men in organizations did not understand the impact of maternity and returning to work for women leaders. The women participants recommend that women talk more and act positively about these issues as a means of 'normalizing' women's experiences. An example of this is a woman elite leader discussing that she did not accept any resignations from women on maternity leave or upon return "until the hormones had reduced." There was resonance with the women Powerlisters in terms of normalizing women's experiences. For example Tessa Ross talks of being in a film edit with a baby on her lap [doing gender well and differently simultaneously] and comments

> "It's terrible that we should have to questions these things at all. The world can't adjust its expectations to allow us to do that? Of course it should. I don't see any reason why it shouldn't be possible to expect people to have the breadth of life … to be mothers, to be parents, to go back to work, to choose to take time off, to do things part time for a while …these are things that matter."

Becoming more authentic and building self-efficacy

Being 'true' to yourself, being yourself, being genuine, becoming authentic, knowing oneself, what you stand for, knowing your values and having a moral compass were highlighted as incredibly important enablers of success. This 'becoming more authentic' was discussed in terms of how women should: work hard on knowing who they really are; reflect on management and leadership styles and on the way they develop relationships. These interpretations did resonate with the women Powerlisters who then focussed more on personal values in the BBC's themes of 'Be Yourself' and 'Be a Leader.' For example, Stephanie Shirley who talks about male military based theories of leadership not being right for her and how through discussion she grows the team rather than being "boss lady." Further Joanne Shields comments "you lose your integrity and you lose everything" and Heather Rabbatts says "being authentic is absolutely core. Understanding your own values and bringing them to the workplace is the most important lesson I would convey to anyone else."

Integrated with becoming more authentic is advice for women to develop and demonstrate self-efficacy (believing in one's capabilities to organize and take action to succeed (Bandura, 1977)), self-belief and to value their abilities as a leader. This leadership self-efficacy is not grounded in a general concept of confidence or competence (Vinnicombe, 2013). These women are highly competent and knowledgeable. Rather, this self efficacy reflects women committing effort to achieving their own specific outcomes, attributing failure to things within their control and recovering quickly from set-backs (Bandura, 1977). This includes imagining / visualizing yourself in a position to reduce insecurity and build self-efficacy; ignoring any "little voices" of self-criticism or self-doubt; developing leader self-efficacy through organizing all aspects of life to enable women to perform to the best of their abilities; developing self-belief, resilience, confidence in own abilities and valuing themselves in ways which reduce insecurity. Women are recommended to work at reducing personal over-sensitivity and investing in development techniques to manage over-worrying and anxiety, seen as debilitating, energy-sapping and a barrier to women's self-efficacy in elite roles.

Investing in your development

The theme of 'investing in your development' has a functional 'do this and that' feel but at its core the process of women committing to personal learning and development was a key issue which provides the scaffolding for women 'becoming more authentic and developing self-efficacy'. Women elite leaders recommended that women who want a leader career are prepared to learn, change, adapt and be flexible; are prepared to rehearse and practice 'being' a leader; are prepared to commit to coaching for job interviews; to engage in networking, join professional organisations and get onto organizational talent programmes. Spending time observing leaders, in terms of what to do and not to do, learning to operate in contingent ways and identifying strong role models were also key issues, as well as developing relationships with other external women elites to discuss challenges. Women elite leaders emphasise women not being afraid to commit to coaching and mentoring early in their careers to support personal development and to develop emotional intelligence and self-awareness, critical to becoming more authentic and supporting the achievement of other key issues. For the women Powerlisters this theme held resonance, reflected in the BBC theme of 'Be Connected' and in the women's views around seeking feedback and learning to cope with criticism – "it doesn't mean more than praise" but Jude Kelly thinks women are prone to think so. There was no doubt that long term career planning, being overt about which role is next for you; swapping careers, sectors, moving sideways; planning and making career moves along the lines of a game of chess, was a key issue for women who want to progress careers; utilizing agency in manoeuvring towards their life goals. Investing in their own development for the future to support career planning and thus making themselves the project, was reiterated as critical.

Outstanding credibility but not the solid Lieutenant

In demonstrating competence as a key issue for women who want to achieve leader careers, women leaders advised women to be on top of their game, the expert, with internal [self-belief and self-efficacy] and external [enacted/reputational] credibility, demonstrated through competence and delivery and high professional standards. Women who want to progress careers should be trusted as an expert advisor; be loyal; be seen to take responsibility; know everything there is to know about an organization's purpose whilst developing their own personal brand. The women had no doubt that women have to work harder than men to get on and have to make sacrifices but their counter-advice was for women to balance this exceptional credibility without working too hard, to prevent exhaustion. Women should not take on too much and underperform. Women must be able to have a vision of the wider world and with their own brand, make an impact on the organization. However again this is a balancing act for women and should be enacted without getting stuck in middle management positions or becoming too much of a specialist, in that if women focus on the specifics of the job, they risk being overlooked in terms of leader potential. Therefore women should learn to balance their exceptional credibility without being “the solid lieutenant”, developing their potential; moving from “doer to thinker creator.” This theme resonates with the BBC Power List theme of ‘Be a Leader’ e.g. Joanna Shields talks about leaving things better than you found them and win-win approaches and Tessa Ross says that building something that matters makes the fight possible.

Functionally the elite women leaders identified profit and loss and line management experience as critical issues for women who want to progress in their careers. Women should take a strategic role in developing excellent relationships with stakeholders and shareholders and demonstrate understanding of the bottom line; to get the profit and loss responsibility and move sideways to access it like a game of chess, [doing gender differently and seizing the masculine strategic prerogative], as well as simultaneously demonstrating how they can nurture and act corporately within the organization and have line management experience [doing gender well by meeting more feminine stereotypes]. The notion of women organizing themselves is reflected again in this theme. The women participants used a metaphor of juggling balls to reflect what was necessary in women’s home and professional life. This is a common theme in women in management research, the juggling of multiple roles and family concerns, evidencing the proposal that women’s career choices are about more than just paid work (O’Neill et al., 2008). Therefore women need to be good organizers, multi-taskers, good delegators and be able to “steal with pride” rather than re-invent the wheel to demonstrate exceptional credibility. The critical message is that women are advised to organize their work and personal lives to provide an architecture which enables their progression.

Bravery counts

‘Bravery counts’ reflects women elite leaders’ recognition of how risky the performance of masculinities is for individual women, the need to find a balance between behaviours needed to challenge the stereotypes and organisational politics. Women are often reluctant to engage in and often disassociate themselves from organizational politics as distasteful, viewed as a boy’s game related to the masculine strategic objective (Tyler, 2005). However in a similar way to becoming more authentic, women leaders advise women to invest in fully understanding the organisational context, relationships and organizational politics; to know their audiences and be instrumental in how they communicate and perform when engaging with them. Women elites advise women to do gender differently in that political behaviour is normally the domain of men so that may also be perceived as recommending women to conform to masculine norms.

In understanding how the social organization works, women are recommended to act as the de facto leader before formal appointment. In their career planning women should work out who is influential and/or what organizations will be critical to progress, thus emphasising the instrumentality of career planning. Women are recommended to politically align themselves to a good sponsor, influence people and develop appropriate allies and to recognize the need for, and develop their own, “political and organisational savvy” if they want to develop their elite careers, so that they learn the invisible rules of the game or “combat” and understand “sub-agendas” and “political currents that run beneath” the organization. Understanding organizational politics and social relations enables women to fully engage, influence and also identify and manage their allies and enemies.

Women also recommend that women who want to progress as leaders are brave, take risks and are prepared to “seize the moment” in their behaviours and actions. Women should go for “quick wins” influencing significant others, move out of their comfort zone to gain experience and be prepared to stand alone when necessary. In practice this means speaking out, asking the “pertinent questions”, asking “one good question in every meeting”, therefore being assertive, confident, having an opinion and pushing yourself forward and doing gender differently. The theme resonates with the women Powerlisters e.g. Alexandra Schulman talks about taking a leap in the dark and not knowing if you’re able to do it but you have to go for it and Heather Rabbatts comments that you only learn when you are at risk. Kanya King comments “I realised if I wanted to make a difference I had to take risks and sometimes it would work and sometimes it wouldn’t.”

Women leaders advise that women should not be afraid to challenge [and do gender differently] but they need to be prepared “for the fact that people will not like it”, as masculine behaviour from women jolts gender stereotypes (Mavin, 2009), provoking back-lash responses. Women participants recommend that knowing and understanding your audiences helps mediate this backlash. In terms of challenging gendered stereotypes, the women advise that women are prepared to “sing their own praises”, “cultivate the art of gentle boasting”; be able to express ambition and competition confidently, be “very overt about the next job they want” and continually reviewing aspirations so that they can articulate these when appropriate. ‘Bravery counts’ reflects the risks of performing masculinity for women elite leaders.

Woman as a project

The themes discussed are interlinked, complex, fluid, simultaneous, at times contradictory and take place within gendered contexts against masculine norms. The themes are relational, socially constructed and reflect how women do gender well and differently, simultaneously against the gender binary (Mavin and Grandy, 2012; 2013). A further level of cross-theme interpretation led us to conceptualize how women may wish to view themselves as their ‘own project’ grounded within gendered contexts and supported by two integrating features: a conscious awareness of doing gender well and differently simultaneously and women’s instrumental personal organizing (see Figure 1).

Here ‘project’ is understood as a conceptual, processual plan for women’s awareness, outlook, preparation and decision making, which enables women to engage in contingency planning in their life course and to prepare for actions and alternative actions. ‘Woman as a project’ is supported by an architecture for design, structure and behaviour in navigating women’s whole life course, enabling consciousness to the gendered contexts and possibilities for women’s decision making and agency within their personal and work lives. ‘Woman as a project’ requires a commitment to self-awareness, understanding oneself, one’s values, ambitions and aspirations, across and at key points, in their lives. In approaching their lives as a project, women commit time, effort and planning, over time and space, in processes of holistic, instrumental, personal ‘organizing’ which requires commitment to the significant organizing of women’s lives, aspirations, ambitions across their life and not just work context. In this way we respond differently to the call by Jackson and Hirsh (1991) that careers should be accommodated around the reality of women's lives, allowing them to make a meaningful investment in both occupational and family roles; proposing a holistic integration to enable women’s instrumentality and agency.

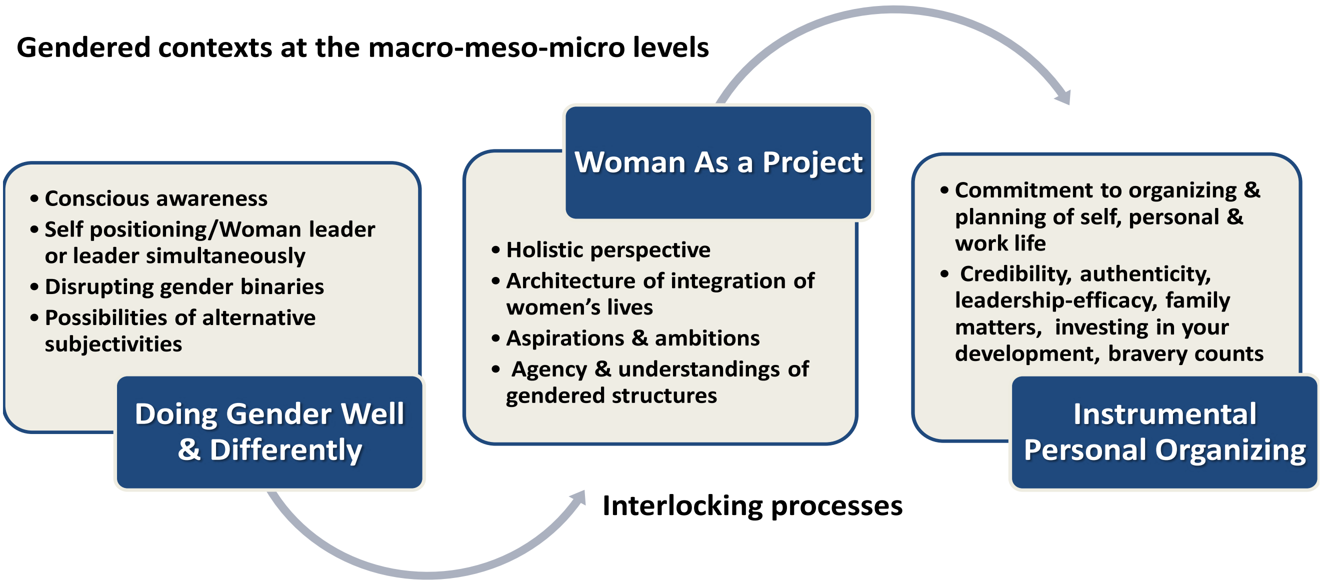

Gendered contexts at the macro-meso-micro levels
• Conscious awareness
• Self positioning/Woman leader or leader simultaneously
• Disrupting gender binaries
• Possibilities of alternative subjectivities
Doing Gender Well & Differently
Woman As a Project
• Holistic perspective
• Architecture of integration of women's lives
• Aspirations & ambitions
• Agency & understandings of gendered structures
• Commitment to organizing & planning of self, personal & work life
• Credibility, authenticity, leadership-efficacy, family matters, investing in your development, bravery counts
Instrumental Personal Organizing
Interlocking processes

Figure 1. Woman as a Project: Key Issues for Women Who Want to Get On

'Woman as a project' provides an architecture to integrate women's lives which incorporates two significant features: conscious awareness of doing gender well and differently against sex-category, including gender aware positioning of self as a 'woman leader' or as a 'leader', and instrumental personal organizing. Through these features the project architecture integrates as interlocking processes, the key issues that women elite leaders identified for women who want to progress as leaders. 'Woman as a project' enables women to view their life course from a holistic perspective rather than one which is compartmentalized and in this way takes account of the complex and interwoven choices and constraints in women's career and life development (Powell and Mainiero, 1992) as well as acknowledging how women's career and life responsibilities ebb and flow against life stages (O'Neill and Bilimoria, 2005). This commitment to 'woman as a project' is grounded, not in developing women against a deficit model of male norm at the macro-meso-micro levels but as a guiding architecture for how a woman might approach and/or construct themselves in organizing their life's ambitions and aspirations.

A feature of the concept is a micro-level individual consciousness of doing gender well and differently against sex-category which opens up possibilities of disrupting male norm assumptions and gendered expectations. Raising awareness amongst women of their performances of doing gender well and differently simultaneously may enable alternative subjectivities to be further embedded and accepted in society and organization so that women and men are more able to demonstrate a range of subjectivities. We contend that what is unique about this study is the women elite leaders' awareness of the continuing gender binary for managers and leaders and their advice for other women to be conscious of positioning themselves as 'women leaders' or as 'leaders-gender neutral'. These choices are not either/or, they can be contingent and can operate simultaneously as women 'do' manager and leader roles. Contradictions surfaced from women who position as gender neutral leaders but who expect society and organizations to be changing to adapt to women's family and caring responsibilities. We contend that it is the conscious awareness of these contradictions which empowers women's agency and that the 'woman as a project' architecture has the potential to enable this awareness.

Becoming more authentic with self-efficacy is a theme within the project architecture. In advancing Mainiero and Sullivan's (2005) claims that authenticity and being true to oneself will be prevalent late-career, as the theme held resonance across over half the women involved in the research and was evident across the women who share similar hierarchical positions [the top of their organization] but different career stages [i.e. they are mid-through to-late career] and who also spanned the age range of the research population, becoming more authentic has risen in priority and is no longer apparent just at late-career. This also resonated in the analysis of the 16 women Powerlisters.

Through the themes of 'family matters,' 'outstanding credibility but not solid lieutenant' and 'investing in development,' women leaders emphasize that women who want to progress their careers should instrumentally organize and plan their lives. This is not a new finding in the field of women's careers, where women are often thwarted by gendered society and organizational structures and expectations, sometimes resulting in women developing alternative career patterns against a hierarchical male norm career. However, this current research offers a 'holistic' way of viewing life course beyond career planning. Women elite leaders tell us that rather than focussing solely on the job they are doing, women could make themselves the 'organizing project' in terms of their 'whole' life rather than just 'work'. In not being the 'solid lieutenant' or 'stuck in middle management', the concept of "woman as a project" highlights how women could 'stop doing the doing' and stop overly focussing on their current role, to step back and focus upon themselves as their life time project. Women who want to achieve in their career are encouraged to see themselves as something to be more instrumentally organized, planned, evaluated and implemented successfully. We contend that the "woman as a project" concept takes place within multiple gendered relationships and contexts, where becoming consciously gender aware of doing gender well and differently and instrumental personal organizing are key enablers and where an architecture integrates through instrumental organizing, chess-like career planning, development of key competences, personal and family matters, strategic life planning and engaging in learning and development.

Conclusion

Women's experiences take place within gendered contexts and structures at the macro-meso-micro level which constrain and enable women's agency. We recognize that research into women at the individual micro level faces the danger of falling into the 'blame the woman' trap, so that women are treated as deficit against male norms with suggested strategies at risk of being perceived as 'fixing the women' (Mavin, 2008). Reflexively we recognize that the BBC Power List themes are instrumental, focussed on the micro and women's agency and do not consider the impact of structural constraints which produce gendered contexts. This is illustrated by Cheryl Sandberg's (2013) argument that women can have it all but they sub-consciously sabotage their own careers through fear, guilt and willingness to conform to stereotypes, versus the debates which highlight that change is required at the macro level, in society and at the meso level, in organizations to change masculine cultures and adapt to the needs of women in the workplace (e.g., Bryans and Mavin, 2003). We recognize the need for change at each level, along with a commitment to gender politics for women managers and leaders, where women are more aware of, and better prepared to learn, 'the rules of the game' at each levels to be able to challenge, disrupt and orchestrate change through various strategies appropriate.

We are also aware that this research may be limited by the nature of the participants; women elites in the UK and that this could open up criticism from those who argue limiting studies of women's careers in management to samples of elite women represents only a small proportion of the population, so that generalizations may not be relevant for the majority of women (O' Neill et al., 2008). However, our assumption is that the learning offered is for those women motivated to progress. We contend that as the 'woman as project' concept integrates women's personal and career lives, it has transferability to women at all levels and life stages in management and leadership.

We have outlined the emergent themes resulting from our analysis of women elites' reflective learning and explored resonance via women Powerlisters. Drawing upon doing gender well and differently simultaneously against sex-category we offer a concept of 'women as a project' and its associated architecture as an enabler to supporting women who want to progress careers. We also offer reflective learning for those responsible for HRD and talent management in organizations to enable revision of current gendered/gender neutral approaches to career development/planning and to integrate gender aware initiatives in practice.

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