Distorted Views Through the Glass Ceiling: The Construction of Women’s Understandings of Promotion and Senior Management Positions

Sonia Liff* and Kate Ward

The article explores the issue of whether women’s under-representation in senior management positions can be explained in part by the messages they are given about the promotion process and the requirements of senior jobs. Through interviews with over 50 male and female junior and senior managers in a UK high street bank, issues relating to the required personality and behaviour characteristics seen to be associated with success and with the long hours culture emerged as important. In many cases men and women identified the same issues but the significance of them for their own decision-making and the way others interpreted their behaviour varied — particularly in relation to the perceived incompatibility between active parenting and senior roles. The findings provide an account of the context in which women make career choices which highlights the limitations of analyses which see women’s absence as the result either of procedural discrimination or women’s primary orientation towards home and family. The findings also highlight the problems of treating commitments towards gender equality as an isolated issue and stress the importance of understanding responses to policies and ways of achieving change within the broader context of an analysis of the organization’s culture.

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Address for correspondence: * Sonia Liff, Warwick Business School, Warwick University, Coventry CV4 7AL.

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Introduction

Earliest organizational work on women’s exclusion from management was keen to move away from the psychological studies which suggested that women lacked the personality traits necessary for leadership positions. Instead it stressed the ways in which women were discriminated against by a range of organizational structures and processes. For many such accounts were overly deterministic, creating women as victims seen as unable to influence their own careers. Over the past few years the pendulum has swung in the other direction. American gurus suggest that any, sufficiently competent, woman can succeed providing she is determined, understands ‘the rules’, and follows them (Morrison 1992; White 1992). A rather more negative twist has been put on this scenario by Hakim who appears to argue that women who are committed to career success attain it. The reason that most do not is that ‘more than half of adult women accept the sexual division of labour and treat market work as an additional, secondary activity, to be fitted in with the demands of domestic life’ (1996, p. 119).

Anxious not to go back to a situation in which lack of success is seen as ‘women’s fault’, few feminist writers have been prepared to give any ground to these approaches. As a consequence there is a danger of missing two potentially interesting lines of investigation. The first is the possibility that women are rejecting not managerial work per se but rather the particular way in which it is currently organized. The second is that organizations do not exclude women only through promotion processes which discriminate against them. Organizations are also the site within which women come to understand the requirements of senior jobs and their own career options. Organizational cultures, structures and practices provide the context within which this occurs and can lead women to decide that such jobs, or the process they would have to go through to get them, are not for them. Clearly the two approaches are connected but give different emphases to structural and cultural features and to the role of the individual and organization.

Marshall (1995) has recently given some credibility to these approaches through her study of women managers who left senior jobs. The explanation that these women left because they were not competent to do the jobs they held is discounted by evidence that the majority had moved on to be successful in equally demanding jobs in different organizations. While ‘common-sense’ assumptions might lead one to think that it was conflicts between work and family that led women to leave such jobs, this was not a major issue for the women in Marshall’s study (a finding also evident in wider research by Brett and Stroh 1994). They did not lack drive and ambition, nor were they unprepared for the requirements of responsible and demanding jobs. Instead their attempts to work within and influence aspects of what they described as masculine work cultures featured strongly in their
accounts of why they found they were no longer willing or able to continue in a particular job. Gherardi (1996) discusses the ‘positioning’ of senior women within such male cultures in a way that highlights the role of the interaction between an individual woman and her work colleagues in the construction of her identity as a woman manager. These approaches also have resonance outside feminist literature in recent thinking on ways of understanding careers. Rather than seeing careers as individual ‘plans’ or as ‘paths’ which the organization manages for its members, Herriot argues that ‘an organizational career is the sequence of renegotiations of the psychological contract which the individual and the organization conduct during his or her period of employment’ (1992, p. 8).

This article reports research carried out in a UK high street bank. It aimed to explore whether there were issues relating to women’s interest in, and willingness to undertake, senior jobs which would form part of an explanation for women’s relative absence from such posts. The organization was formally committed to equal opportunities and professed concern about the continuing lack of women in senior positions. They were a founder member of Opportunity 2000 and have a target of 30% of women in management positions by the year 2000. They had the type of formal policies in place that one would expect of such an organization. However, there had not been the expected increases in women at senior levels. At the time of the research women represented approximately 2% of senior managers, 10% of middle and a third of junior managers. Questions were raised about whether there was a need to go beyond formal equality approaches after recruiting for a set of new, relatively senior, posts created through restructuring. Only 5% of applicants were women (and only 1% of appointees) and it was felt to be important to explore how senior jobs were viewed by women in junior management positions (for example, whether they were seen as desirable and attainable) to assess whether this might form part of the explanation of women’s under-representation.

Interviews were held in mid-1996 with 52 managers, comprising 38 junior and middle managers (14 with dependent children) and 14 senior managers (9 with dependent children). Thirty-six women were interviewed of whom 9 were at senior level (4 with children) and 27 at middle or junior management level (8 with children). Sixteen men were interviewed, of whom 5 were at senior level (all with dependent children) and 11 at middle or junior level (6 with children). The number of men interviewed obviously represents a much smaller sample of the relevant population than does the sample of women (particularly at senior level). The sample included staff from three regions and from Head Office and for the most part consisted of people who had been with the bank since they left full-time education. The age range was from 26 to 55. Efforts were made to include people in different marital and family circumstances but the sample was not a statistically representative one. Instead those facilitating the research within
the bank identified people whom they saw as good performers and likely to achieve further promotion and/or staff who were felt to be likely to have views on the topics under consideration and be likely to be prepared to express them openly. Clearly this sampling technique is not compatible with a detailed quantitative analysis of the numbers of employees facing particular types of barriers.¹ Instead it was intended to explore whether the way the promotion process was experienced by relatively successful employees could shed light on what had already been identified as problematic outcomes in terms of the gender balance of senior staff.

Senior managers were interviewed because it was felt important to assess what senior jobs involved from the perspective and experience of current holders. The policy implications would clearly be different depending on whether junior managers were being dissuaded from seeking promotion from well-founded or mistaken understandings. Junior and middle managers were asked in detail about their perceptions of senior jobs and the promotion process and were also asked open-ended questions about any barriers to promotion they had experienced. The latter allowed them to raise more conventional issues such as lack of support for applications or perceived biased assessment of potential which might have contributed to career expectations. Men were interviewed as well as women to provide a base line for judging which, if any, problems were specific to women. There was particular interest in assessing whether there were men (as well as the anticipated women) who had been discouraged from seeking promotion by the characteristics of senior jobs. (The manager responsible for equality initiatives felt that if it was shown that this was not simply a ‘women’s problem’, it would strengthen the case for making changes to management jobs and working practices.) More broadly, the interviews with men provided some insights into the organizational culture and the way women were viewed within it by their male peers and superiors.

This article reports the expectations held by those who had not yet reached senior levels about the demands and rewards that would come with promotion. Also discussed, and arguably as important for their career orientation, was their understanding of the promotion process itself (what characteristics/experiences were sought, how people were identified for promotion, etc.). While much of what was said by the interviewees in relation to these issues was common to men and women, its consequences for their own career orientation frequently differed. This was apparent particularly in two areas. First, the types of characteristics and behaviours which promotion seeking and achievement were seen to require. These were seen as much more problematic for women than for men. Second, the real or anticipated conflicts between senior management jobs and active parenting. Again, while both men and women saw this as an issue it was women, more than men, who felt that it was a factor which affected their career decisions. Theoretically the former relates in part to debates about whether the
characteristics required (or seen as required) of managers are more ‘male’ than ‘female’. The latter is a recurring theme in rationalist explanations of why women are absent from senior management (supported by findings that those women who do reach senior levels are far less likely to have children than their male peers, Coe 1992; Wajcman 1998), and in voluntarist explanations of why women choose not to pursue high level careers. It was also perceived as a likely problem by those within the organization supporting the research.

The two issues are connected. As in other financial institutions (e.g. see Lewis et al. 1996) a commitment to equal opportunities in this bank coexisted with a long hours culture. Formal start and finish times, and the common practice of taking work home notwithstanding, putting in long hours in the office was the norm. In such organizations this willingness to work long hours is frequently taken as a major indicator of ambition and commitment. It was anticipated that this presented a particular problem to those wishing to ‘balance’ home and work commitments. The expectation was that the research would identify the need to restructure the terms on which senior jobs were worked. That is, it would identify real barriers to combining senior management jobs with a life outside work and suggest the need for practical changes in, for example, provisions for flexible forms of working, if the organization was to make any real breakthrough in the representation of women at this level. In fact, the findings showed far more complex processes impeding the progress out of junior and middle management for women who were often still at the stage of making plans not only about their career ambitions but also about having children.

Perceptions and reality of senior jobs

Overall both men and women had limited knowledge of what senior jobs they might aspire to and only partial information about what such jobs might involve. There was a (well-founded) perception that recent restructuring had led to a decline in senior job opportunities. When men and women in junior management jobs were asked about their next likely career move they tended to mention one or other of only two jobs. This response seemed to reflect familiarity with those particular jobs rather than a clearly defined progression route and very few gave the impression of having planned beyond this. Some did hold strong views about the jobs it was necessary to have done during one’s career in order to progress to senior management roles. But their accounts of this more extended career route varied considerably, suggesting that they owe more to accumulated knowledge about a few people whose careers they had observed rather than to organizationally recognized paths. In any case routes which have been successful in the past may no longer be so, given the degree of change. In
some cases the jobs that were anticipated as necessary next steps did act as a barrier to ambition, for example, where they were seen as involving a move to a central London location. However, more common was a general uncertainty which was in itself undermining, particularly when combined with issues around promotion criteria and routes discussed below.

Nevertheless most junior managers saw a more senior role as desirable. They anticipated that senior jobs would be quantitatively, rather than qualitatively, different from their current roles. For example, they might involve responsibility for more staff rather than a requirement for completely different skills. As such, most were confident that they would be able to handle the technical or skill requirements of such jobs. There was more clarity about the expected downside of senior posts. Such jobs were seen as requiring a significantly greater level of commitment. More importantly they always conflated this required commitment with the need to work long hours and with work taking over one’s life. This was expressed in extreme terms with two men saying they would need to be single or divorced to contemplate it. (Halford et al.’s 1997 study concludes that career paths in banking are now strongly orientated towards single people.) Others said that cancelling holidays was the norm for senior staff. Some eight women, but no men, also commented on the vulnerability and isolation of senior jobs and alluded to bullying. In the light of this, one might wonder why most of them were ambitious for such jobs. Their lack of knowledge of the rewards associated with such posts suggests this was not a significant motivation to advance. It seemed more as though they knew that it was a job requirement that they had to appear ambitious — indeed, several said just this.

Senior managers themselves were generally very positive about their jobs. They experienced high levels of personal satisfaction from the work and from being successful. They also appreciated the salary and other benefits. They did seem to work somewhat longer hours than their junior colleagues. Data were not collected at the level of detail that would be required for full comparison but it is estimated that senior managers worked around an hour a day more than managers in more junior positions. On the other hand, seniority itself provided some opportunities to manage one’s time more effectively through, for example, being able to control the timings of meetings. As anticipated by those not yet at this level, senior managers did experience conflicts between work and their families, indeed, it was the downside of their status most commonly mentioned by both men and women. However, this was experienced differently by men and women. For men it was regret that they could not see more of their children. For women it was exhaustion from trying to maintain two roles. In part this was probably because women are more likely than men to be in dual career households, and thus not have extensive domestic back-up. Wider research on dual career households has also shown that even where services are
bought in, these tend to be managed by women (e.g. Gregson and Lowe 1994).

Views on the route to success

Among junior management, men and women shared a view of the workings of the promotion process as opaque and overly dependent on personal contacts and subjective decision-making. Formal systems of development and appraisal were seen as of little relevance to the career advancement process. There was even uncertainty about whether it was of benefit to be identified on a succession plan. Progression was seen to be much more in the hands of one’s line manager than to be determined by formal organizational systems. Training provision was generally positively regarded in terms of its current utility. However, a lack of certainty about what jobs were being aimed for, and what they involved, made it difficult for junior managers to assess the extent to which training was preparing them effectively for future roles.

When male and female junior managers were asked what characteristics were needed to succeed, they described various specific types of experience. They also stressed the need to be ambitious and keen and have the right people backing (or at least not blocking) you. They saw two different types of people as likely to fulfil these criteria. One type was a paragon with the necessary technical and interpersonal skills, capable of winning respect and influencing people. The other type was described as ‘not very nice’, self-confident to the point of aggression, politically adept, single-minded and selfish. When asked what they themselves would need to do to get promoted they stressed two factors. First, the need to increase their visibility, become better known and engage in more networking. The second was about making an impact in some way, for example, through exceptional performance or becoming involved in a significant project. When asked what they thought promotion actually depended on in practice, ability and performance seemed to slip even further down the list with most managers saying that it was about being in the right place at the right time and who you knew.

Senior managers initially gave much more weight to ability, stressing the need for analytical and flexible thinking, well-developed leadership and communication skills, among others. They also stressed the need for drive, determination and self-confidence — but did not describe these as ‘not very nice’! When asked to describe someone who would make it to the top there was more emphasis on personal characteristics. Such people it was said, particularly when referring to women, would need to be ‘tough’. Some male interviewees described those women who had made it to senior jobs as having ‘lost their femininity’ and some women reported being subject to
aggressive behaviour to ‘see whether they were up to the job’. Several senior interviewees highlighted adjectives such as cut-throat, thrusting and ruthless (presumably not thinking of themselves). They also recognized an element of luck but, perhaps not surprisingly since they themselves had made it, gave greater weight to ability and achievement than did the junior managers.

The mirror image of the view that ‘not very nice’ people succeed is of course that ‘nice’ people don’t. The strength of this view, and its particular significance for women, were illustrated when a number of female interviewees independently expressed surprise (and pleasure) that a particular woman had been promoted on the grounds that she was thought to be ‘too nice’ to succeed. These processes did not only affect women; men also believed they had to behave in ways with which they were not necessarily comfortable in order to progress, but the consequences for women were distinct. While the imagery has moved beyond simple exclusion of women, it is clear that the way an ideal manager is viewed remains saturated with characteristics traditionally seen as male.

Views on the consequences of children for careers

As has already been suggested, both men and women expressed concerns about whether it was possible to combine senior jobs with any real family life. Such views were widely held and, although not based on very specific knowledge of senior jobs, did seem at least superficially plausible on the basis of hours worked and work loads. This was an issue of particular concern for those women (at both levels of management) who currently had young children or were deciding whether to start a family in the near future. Their uncertainties about the possibility of combining a career and a family were reinforced by the very small number of visible senior women with children who could act as role models (or even as evidence that it was feasible). In this context it is perhaps not surprising that during the interviews women frequently expressed the concern that motherhood would spell the end of their career. It is important to recognize that this situation arose in the context of an organization with a strong equality profile and, in broad terms at least, a formal commitment to flexible patterns of working.

Women reported that information about the possibility of forms of flexible working such as job sharing, and how it could be arranged, was not readily available. There was a strong feeling that, formal commitments notwithstanding, the absence of information reflected the fact that the organization was not willing in practice to support, or adapt to, parents and were likely to interpret any interest in, say, reduced hours as a lack of commitment to a career. It was not that women reported experiencing
rejection when they requested such arrangements. On the contrary, few felt able to even broach the issue with their line manager because of a fear that even raising the possibility might, in itself, lead to them being excluded as serious candidates for promotion. The reasoning seemed to be that in a culture in which long hours are valued as a major indicator of commitment, knowledge that one had been asking about reduced hours of work would count more than an assessment of the quality of one’s work in determining one’s future. A vicious circle existed whereby women felt unable to explore with their managers their concerns about the balance between work and family in their current and possible future jobs. Yet without these discussions women lacked the information they needed in order to make rational plans about their future with the organization.

The methodology does not allow us to confirm these women’s perception that an interest in flexible working would have been interpreted so negatively against the alternative hypothesis that the bank was just poor at communicating the opportunities that were available. However, further evidence of the strength of women’s beliefs is provided by their actions in relation to leave associated with childbearing and care. Despite the fact that a third of the female interviewees had children, only one had taken a career break and only three had had a period of working part-time. While the majority had taken maternity leave, one woman reported having her second child during a period defined as ‘holiday’ rather than take maternity leave, while others reported taking less than the statutory minimum requirement. Most said they had returned to work as soon as they were able. There was also evidence of the extent to which promotion for women was widely seen as synonymous with childlessness in a range of anecdotal comments. Most strikingly one woman reported that her announcement of pregnancy was greeted, by both men and women, with the comment ‘but I thought you were a career woman’. The implication was clear — you cannot be both.

Further evidence came from the way in which those who did challenge the long hours culture were described by interviewees. The majority of junior male managers interviewed expressed negative views about women in management. One of their criticisms was that they were said to score ‘own goals’ by leaving work at 5.00. The language used here is interesting. They are not being criticized for doing less work or doing it less well. The implication seems to be that women are themselves responsible for their failure by drawing attention to their difference. Women also commented disparagingly about women who in some way drew attention to their difference from the managerial norm. Such women were described by women and men as being ‘their own worst enemy’. The message again is that unless women are prepared to mirror male behaviour, then they have only themselves to blame for their exclusion. Such messages to ‘fit in’ and not draw attention to oneself impose a double bind on women in a culture which also demands that you must get noticed in order to get on.
Implications for men and women of the promotion process

The problems experienced by women managers in the bank were exacerbated by a number of factors. First, the extent of recent restructuring meant that there was a higher level of uncertainty about what jobs there would be to aspire to, and what they might involve, than might have been the case in a more stable organization. Second, the perception of a promotion process based more on knowing, and impressing, the right people and being part of the right networks than on formal systems of assessment of one’s ability meant that individuals were particularly sensitive about the impressions they created. Men and women expressed similar uncertainties about future opportunities and about the workings of the promotion process. Such concerns were expressed in broad terms — and were thus not simply an issue only for those who experienced or anticipated work–family conflicts. But because many of the women expected to, or wanted to, play a more significant role in their children’s upbringing than did most men, and because there were widely held stereotypes about women ‘leaving to have babies’, it was clear that these processes had a different impact on men and women. It was also apparent that women felt less comfortable with the informal networks on which promotion depended and with their ability to influence them.

Furthermore, women reported the feeling that negative interpretations about their future commitment to work were based on assumptions about women in general rather than on an assessment of them as individuals. Thus some women felt that their behaviour at work showed that they were ambitious and committed to a career with the bank. They had either decided not to have children or were prepared to, and felt able to, work in the way the organization required even when they had children yet this was disregarded. For example, one woman reported being rejected for promotion to a job she had already covered ably, shortly after her return from maternity leave. She felt her application was a signal that she still wanted a career. The feedback was that they were not sure she had the ambition and commitment now she had a child.

The strength of the stereotypes were such that the messages women were seeking to give about their career commitment rarely seemed to get across to their superiors unless made in a very forcible way. Nearly half the women in junior and middle management jobs identified specific obstacles to their progress at some point in their careers and others were unable to explain a lack of progress at some points. It was striking that several women reported a hiatus in their career which had only been broken when they had decided to act in an uncharacteristically assertive way. More than one reported that she had already decided to resign before venting her anger by telling a senior manager how she felt about the way she had been treated. While loudly asserting that they were prepared to
accept male working norms did work for some women, it is important to remember that complaining about being faced with such a choice or claiming that it was possible to work differently was rejected as a viable strategy by both men and women.

So it would appear that one consequence of these widespread assumptions may be that women have to adopt a more extreme version of the ‘not very nice’ behaviours of self-promotion. Given widely held views that women were unlikely to succeed, and that women with children did not really want to, the normal signals of ambition may be insufficient. The only thing which seemed to disrupt these assumptions about a woman’s likely life course was her age, with one woman commenting that she had the impression that once you get to 35 then people thought ‘she’s probably not going to have a family now; we can perhaps invest a bit’. Even this is far from unproblematic given the widespread belief that, particularly since restructuring, age is itself a barrier to promotion.

The emphasis on informal networks and ‘making an impression’ as significant aspects within the promotion process also contributed to making a career with the bank a gendered activity. The complex mix of fitting in and being distinctive was experienced very differently by men and women. What they were expected to fit in with was a male social and work culture, how they were expected to be distinctive was in masculine ways from a male norm. As importantly informal networks operate both as support channels and as sources of information. Women (at both levels) but no men referred to the ‘loneliness’ of management jobs. Both men and women expressed concerns about the difficulty of gaining information about the types and nature of jobs available and of the way the promotion process worked. Fitting more easily within the organizational culture, and thus having better access to mentors and support networks, men were in a much better position to cope with, and address this uncertainty. It is also significant that because men had different expectations from women about their involvement with any children they might have, their uncertainty about their future direction was at a lower level than most women’s. They seemed clear that they had the choice to combine children with a career. For most this would mean a limited involvement with their family (which for them felt feasible and acceptable). However, it was interesting that those who did want to give more weight to their family also felt that it would be possible for them to find a rewarding job that would allow this.

In contrast, the women were uncertain about, and did not feel the same extent of control over, their choices. They felt the decision to have children, or not, would be likely to have enormous consequences for their work prospects. They received a range of messages to the effect that if they choose children, their careers would be damaged and were faced with a situation where it was very difficult for them to establish whether this was a ‘real’ constraint. It is important to be clear that these women were already coping
successfully with demanding management jobs (although many felt their current situation was less than ideal).

To summarize, management in general, and senior management in particular, was a predominantly male preserve in this organization. Formal equality statements expressed concern about this situation but there were far more powerful informal practices which reinforced it. The image of a senior manager, or someone who was likely to make it to this level, was in part super-human workaholic, willing and able to accommodate enormous work loads and prepared to devote themselves entirely to the bank, and part skilled operator able to impress the right people and be in the right place at the right time. It might be thought unsurprising that many women felt uncomfortable with at least some of this picture. But what is perhaps more significant is that women were repeatedly confronted with messages to the effect that whether they were comfortable with it or not, their colleagues and bosses did not see senior management as an appropriate aspiration for them. These messages were conveyed in part by negative comments about those women who had been promoted, by a stress on the incompatibility of family and work commitments and via assumptions that every (normal) woman would want to have children and give them priority over work.

Again, despite formal support for employees’ family commitments, there was a range of significant informal practices operating in a different direction. Women believed that to show an interest in, say, flexible working was to risk becoming labelled by their superiors as not a career person. This led them to feel inhibited about even asking what was available and how they could take it up. Their colleagues also made it clear that to attempt to adapt their working hours to fulfil family responsibilities was to disqualify oneself as serious about a career. In these, and other, ways senior managers and peers used informal practices to constrain the use women could make of provisions which, in the light of the organization’s commitment to equal opportunities, should have been both available and widely used. While holding down a high level job and having young children is always likely to be demanding, it is important to recognize that the situation was being made much worse for women than it needed to be. Male interviewees at times expressed the view that women were now being favoured by the bank. However, their practices, intentionally or not, served to perpetuate male interests. If women decide that combining a family and a career is not possible in this organization then, even if some decide to forego the family, this will inevitably reduce the competition men face in the promotion race.

Discussion

The notion that an organizational career, as traditionally understood by researchers, is itself gendered is relatively well established (Gutek and
Larwood 1987). The argument is that an uninterrupted path up an organization based on single-minded commitment is essentially a model based on (some) men’s experience. Where this was seen as the dominant model, then women who attempted a career were either seen as aberrant women (in the sense that they put work before a family) or as having ‘second-class’ careers which advanced more slowly or disjointedly than men’s. The dominant notion of a career has not only been disrupted by feminist research but also by changes in organizations themselves, for example, by moves towards flatter structures which offer less straightforward opportunities for career ‘advancement’. Careers are now more commonly understood, in the literature, as a sequence of jobs within and between organizations rather than as a steady climb up one organizational ladder.

This may be seen as a favourable development for women since it would suggest that women are more within the mainstream of promotion cultures than previously. As this case makes clear, many gendered aspects of career ‘negotiation’ remain. Successful negotiation involves bluff and counter-bluff and may crucially depend on control over, or access to, information. A consideration of the re-negotiation of the psychological contract thus needs to explore the strengths and resources of the various partners as well as their needs and desires. Most people, both men and women, are likely to feel at a disadvantage when attempting to redraw the terms on which they interact with their employers. Nor is it straightforward for employers to change the terms of the psychological contract because employees’ understandings of their intentions are drawn from a range of sources including past experiences. However, this case has highlighted the specific issues women managers face in such an organization. They have problems presenting themselves as plausible candidates for promotion since the dominant organization model of those that will succeed is strongly sex-typed male. Women are also differentially excluded from those networks through which they can make themselves known and learn about the promotion process. Again one might have expected recent interest in female management skills and their relevance to modern organizations (Rosener 1990) to have enhanced the extent to which women are seen as ‘management material’ and reduced the power of Schein’s (1973) well-known analysis ‘think manager, think male’. This was based on studies that showed that people’s beliefs about the characteristics held by a manager were very similar to their conception of men and had little in common with the characteristics they believed to be held by women. These findings are thought to have implications both for those selecting managers, who are likely to see men as more plausible candidates for such jobs, and for women themselves who may experience ‘role conflict’ in thinking of themselves as managers or in trying to act out that role. But instead of the formal commitment to increasing numbers of women managers narrowing the gap between images
of women and images of managers, a new image of a female manager seemed to have been created in this case. To paraphrase Schein, the situation could be described as ‘think female manager, think childless superwoman’. The message that women were left with was that those without a single-minded commitment to the organization did not belong at senior levels. While at times the media has given a positive spin to being a superwoman, it seemed clear in this context it meant at best a woman who was not normal — and more frequently one who was ‘not nice’ or even ‘unnatural’!

The significance of child-related responsibilities for women’s work opportunities is again well recognized. While the provision of policies to support employees’ need to balance work and home commitments is not part of the UK’s legal framework, such policies are prevalent in all models of equal opportunities. This is particularly the case in pro-active models of equality policies such as that promoted by Opportunity 2000 to which this organization belonged. One might therefore again have expected to see some lessening of the problems women managers experienced from this source. However, annual reports from Opportunity 2000 have noted that formal provisions such as career breaks may not be taken up if women feel that it will be construed as evidence that they are not able to compete on the same terms as men. Evidence that women do expect such an interpretation has also been demonstrated in other research. Rubin (1997) reports women censoring themselves from asking about childcare provisions or talking about family plans during interviews because they assumed this would be interpreted negatively by those making selection decisions. In doing so they denied themselves information which might well have been relevant to their decision about whether they wanted the job. But importantly subsequent discussions with selectors confirmed that the women were pursuing a sound strategy if they were to have any hope of being offered the job. A survey of ethical policy and practice by the Industrial Society shows the wider ambivalence many organizations have towards their employees’ family commitments. This reported that 55% of managers said that enabling employees to balance home and work life was essential to ethical management. However, only 30% said that it was true in their organization giving a ‘hypocrisy gap’ beaten only by the rhetoric and reality relating to ‘communicating with employees openly, honestly and frequently’ (IRS 1996).

Holt and Thaulow (1996) develop a more complex account of forms of work family support that may be offered to employees and how those employees extend or contract its scope in practice. They start by defining parental needs which are said to include three elements: economic support or the need for an income on which the family can exist; practical care or the need to provide everyday tasks such as ensuring children get to and from school or carers and to the doctor if sick; and emotional care or the need to provide attention and stimulation for the child. Such needs have
traditionally been split in nuclear families according to a gendered domestic division of labour with men providing the primary economic support and women the practical and emotional care. While trade unions used to campaign for a family wage in male workplaces, what is currently referred to as family friendly policy concentrates exclusively on the practical care aspect.

On the basis of a series of Danish case studies Holt and Thaulow point out that not only do employer-initiated formal policies exist to support parents’ practical care needs but employees themselves operate a series of informal practices which may broaden or constrain the provisions available to an individual. The sum of these formal and informal provisions they term the *latitude for adjustment* between work and family life. They find that the conditions which facilitate high levels of latitude for adjustment, such as holding a key or senior position and doing work which is primarily task-rather than time-driven, are features more common in male rather than female occupations. When, in contrast, they look at how such potential is actually used, they find that women use informal co-operation to significantly expand their leeway for practical care whereas men actually constrain take up of those provisions formally available to them. Interestingly, the only circumstances in which men did use informal practices to extend each other’s flexibility at work was in relation to economic needs, for example, to accommodate a second job. Given that management within the bank we studied remained, in cultural terms at least, a male occupation, then this may provide a framework for understanding why the flexibility that should have been there was constrained in practice.

Policy-oriented analyses can also be enlightening about the way in which family-friendly policies and those who attempted to use their provisions were viewed in this organization. Employer policies to address practical care needs are part of a ‘women’s problems’ approach to equality (Liff and Cameron 1997). Such approaches are based on initiatives which are thought to help women to compete. The danger is that they make women look inadequate (unable to compete without ‘help’) and recipients of special treatment (and hence possibly being given an unfair advantage). This is likely to create resentment among men and a belief that those women who do succeed have not done so on merit. What such equality approaches fail to do is to expose the current organization of the workplace as built around, and hence favouring, male needs and ways of working. An analogy from the disability discrimination literature (e.g. Oliver 1990) is instructive. This contrasts a medical model of disability, where a disabled individual is seen as having a problem and needing help to ‘fit in’, with a social model, whereby an individual has an impairment (in relation to others) but is disabled by a society organized in ways that take no account of varying physical capabilities and hence excludes her/him from many activities.
From this perspective a similar impairment, say, deafness, can lead to a very different level of disability depending on the way schools, workplaces and society more generally are organized. To suggest, as this analogy appears to, that it would be a positive development for an employee’s children to be considered an impairment rather than a disability in career terms might be thought extreme. The point being made is rather that the degree to which having children is an impediment to one’s career is strongly related to whether systems of job and work design pay any attention to the fact that employees may have responsibilities and commitments other than to their organizations. If they do not, it should be seen as a limitation of the organization not the employee (although in practice it may well be more damaging to the individual).

Overall this case study suggests that the ways in which women and men seek to combine work and family responsibilities (or not) within their pursuit of a career in management should not be seen as an isolated issue. For their significance to be fully understood these issues need to be embedded within an analysis of the broader organizational culture and, in particular, in relation to the way careers are negotiated between the individual and the organization. Attention needs to be paid to the range of what Acker (1990) characterizes as the gendered processes which make up organizations. She provides a framework for analysing the organizational culture aspects of this arguing that organizations construct ‘symbols and images that explain, express, reinforce, or sometimes oppose’ gendered divisions of labour (ibid, p. 146). In addition there are processes such as interactions between organizational members, the creation of gendered individual identity, and the gendered conceptualizations of elements of organizational structure and activities. Such an analysis is not only relevant to understanding men’s and women’s attitudes and behaviour but is also significant for organizations wishing to make progress on equality agendas. Unless organizations seriously address informal practices and the messages they give, then their formal policy initiatives are in danger of being seen as insincere. The psychological contract cannot be redefined unilaterally by management. Nor can it be assumed that the beliefs about organizational intentions on which it is partly based will simply fall into line with new corporate pronouncements.

These research findings suggest that the informal relations between managers (at all levels) and the organizational culture of which they are part are at least as important as formal policies and procedures in determining women’s success in promotion. Women’s expressed ambivalence or uncertainty about career advancement may tell us as much about what the organization, their peers and superiors have led them to believe about senior jobs, and the processes they need to go through to get them, as it does about women’s relative commitment to home and work.
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Note

1. Detailed reporting of the numbers of interviewees holding different views might encourage readers to think that we were making claims about the proportion of managers in the organization with such views. In line with the methodological issues discussed we feel that such claims cannot be justified because of the way the sample was selected (non-random, small numbers of men). However, in reporting results we have adopted the following conventions. If a view/experience was reported by only one person we say so explicitly. The use of words such as ‘most’ or ‘majority’ in reference to reported views have their normal meaning. Otherwise a reported view refers to a situation where at least five people in the relevant group said more or less the same thing and others hinted at it. Where gender is not specified, then both men and women contributed to the view. Where it is not specified otherwise, there was no significant gender difference in opinion.

References