

Cranfield University

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A qualitative examination of the importance of female role  
models in investment banks

School of Management

PhD



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# ABSTRACT

A number of practitioner surveys across a range of industries have cited the lack of senior female role models as a barrier to career progression. There is very little academic literature to explain this at a senior organizational level. An initial review of the extant role model literature led to the inclusion of two further related areas – organizational demographics, as a contextual factor affecting the availability of role models, and work identity development as a link between the lack of senior female role models and the lack of career progression.

In seeking to answer the question of *why* and then *how* female role models are important for senior women, this study fills an identified gap in the comprehension of the concept of role models and their importance in the workplace. It addresses a need to understand both the key elements of the concept and the mechanism by which they come into play.

The research uses qualitative methods, specifically in-depth semi-structured interviews. These were conducted with a senior group of 33 female directors from six global investment banks, in order to elicit their experiences of role models in demographically imbalanced work contexts.

Analysis of interview data considered all three areas of role models, demographic context and work identity development. As the women forged their identities in the male-dominated context of global investment banks, what became clear was that who they are and have become was informed by the critical relationships they have had. Whilst clearly some of the women had found male role models with whom to develop these critical relationships, there were some identity issues, particular salient to women, which could not be addressed by men. Thus the findings demonstrated the utility of female role models.

This thesis has a number of contributions to make on varying levels:

On a conceptual level, this study adds to our understanding of the value of role models, particularly detailing the affective or symbolic value. It has added to the conceptualization of role models, detailing *what* were the core attributes of

individuals chosen to be role models, *who* they were in relation to the women, *how* the women used them and *why* they were important.

It has combined the three literature areas of role models, organizational demographics and work identity development in a way not previously done, and has shown empirically that they are related and explain each other. Organizational demographics affect the availability of role models. And it is suggested that the relatively new theory of relational identification is the mechanism that explicates how the presence of positive female role models is a key influence on women's work identity development.

It has clarified the value of role models in extreme gender demographic contexts, and *how* and *why* they are important to senior women's professional development, thereby adding to the theory of role modelling.

Practically, the study explains why women in surveys may have been citing the lack of female role models as such a prominent issue, and suggests what some of the issues are that organizations should pay heed to in trying to address this.

Keywords:

Women directors; work identity; demographic context, career development, critical relationships

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And to my “boss” Professor Susan Vinnicombe, my inspirational role model.

# DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the incredible women who very generously shared a part of their life story with me. They have already achieved so much. Many of them have since moved on, whether by choice or circumstance. I wish them good luck and fortitude with whatever path of possibility they chose for their future.



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# **Chapter 1 - Introduction**





## **Chapter 1 - Introduction**

This chapter introduces this thesis to the reader and outlines the research topic of the importance role models for senior women. Section 1.1 explains briefly how I became involved with the topic, and section 1.2 clarifies why it is important to research this issue. In section 1.3 I describe an initial study conducted as a precursor to the PhD research, and section 1.4 states the intention to extend the pilot study research and outlines the proposed research questions. Section 1.5 summarises the subsequent chapters of the thesis.

### **1.1 The journey begins**

My personal journey of the PhD began in the practitioner world, rather than the academic one. In the first years of this decade, much was being made in the business press of the proportionately large numbers of senior women leaving corporate life just as they appeared to be reaching the upper echelons of the corporate hierarchy. Assumptions were being thrown around about women not being ambitious. Not being able to make sense of this, I came to talk to Professor Susan Vinnicombe, whom I had recently met when she was speaking at a women's conference in the City of London. She brought to my attention a number of often covert processes and practices that can undermine women's careers, and mentioned some surveys which had cited the lack of senior female role models as a barrier to career progression, even at the most senior levels. Again, this did not make sense to me: Why would intelligent, well-qualified, mature women with already successful careers need a role model, at a later stage in life?

Initial investigation showed that, academically, there was little and incomplete explanation for this need at senior levels. It also brought to my attention just how small the proportion of women was at the top of our largest corporations. Today the figure for the proportion of female held Executive positions on the top 100 companies in the Financial Times Stock Exchange (FTSE) is just 4.8% (Sealy, Vinnicombe and Singh, 2008a). There are very few women at the top to act as examples that women can get to the top. Time, it is often argued, will provide the answer. But a full 30 years after equality legislation, reviews of the literature on women on corporate boards

reveal a continued lack of understanding about why women are not progressing (Terjesen, Sealy, and Singh, forthcoming) and a glacially slow progress in these figures (Sealy, Vinnicombe and Singh, 2008b).

On the other hand, the career success of a select few women was frequently highlighted in the business press in such a manner that one would be forgiven for assuming that the ‘glass ceiling’ had clearly been shattered. The problem here is that this often leads to individual women questioning why they may be struggling in their personal careers and therefore assuming the problem lies within themselves. However, Jones (2008), with his tongue firmly in his cheek, wrote in a recent Financial Times article that a “structural survey of the glass ceiling” looking at the demographics of women at the top of the FTSE organizations showed that “it was still in good condition in spite of recent worries about localised cracking”.

## **1.2 The importance of researching role models**

Why might it be important for organizations to know more about this role model issue? From a practitioner standpoint, it was something that was already assumed to be an issue, after a number of industry surveys had highlighted it as such. If organizations are going to attempt to address this ‘issue’, then they need to understand what it is that needs to be addressed, in order that they might provide the correct ‘solutions’. But what very quickly became clear was that there is a dearth of understanding as to even what a role model is or should be, let alone how or why it should be important at work.

Initial conversations with friends, at mid-career level, working in the City of London, mostly in financial institutions drew curious reactions. The presumption of this handicap of a lack of senior female role models, was denied by most female friends – no they did not have any role models, but why should that be a problem, it had not been thus far? The term ‘role model’ itself appeared to be problematic – a nebulous concept that everyone assumed they understood, but could not define. In comparison, the term ‘mentor’ was clearly understood as someone who, at work, on a formal or informal basis, the individual would have occasional meetings with in order to discuss work progress and career progression. ‘Role model’ seemed to mean something different, but was not clearly explained. As mentioned, initial conversations were with

friends, male and female, who worked in the City of London. The female friends had pointed out that there were relatively few women in the most senior ranks, and had mentioned that they were definitely not role models, with comments about those women being “too male” or “too aggressive”. There were comments made about women at the top and some high-publicity sex-discrimination claims. The women also said they did not aspire to be in the roles those women had. The City financial institutions are well-known for having aggressive macho cultures, and here were suggestions that there was both a lack of senior women and a lack of role models.

Therefore, I felt that empirical research into what senior women believe is positive and useful in those men and women above them may offer both the women and the organizations a better understanding of what it is that they feel is lacking, why that may be important, and what could be done to improve the situation.

### **1.3 The pilot study**

An initial pilot study was therefore conceived. I contacted the Heads of Diversity (HoDs) of a number of financial organizations, asking for their participation in a study addressing the importance of senior female role models for women. Due to the number of high-publicity, high-pay-out sex-discrimination cases, most financial institutions have a Head of Diversity role, whose remit would usually include responsibility for ensuring equality of career opportunity for women and other ‘minority’ groups. I chose to speak initially with the HoDs, firstly as I thought I might be able to get some sense of an organizational perspective, as individuals charged with dealing with the issue, and secondly because if I was to take the research further, then the HoDs would be a good point of access to senior women.

The pilot study consisted of semi-structured interviews with Heads of Diversity (HoDs) from 11 banks – two retail banks, two fund management firms, and seven investment banks - to ascertain some of their opinions regarding the importance of role models in their organizational context and the career progression of their senior women. In establishing the HoDs’ views on why senior female role models are important, questions asked included:

- What is the HoDs' perception of the senior women in their organization?

- In what way, if at all, does their organization promote particular women as role models?
- In what ways would women's experience at work change if there were more senior women in this organization?
- Do the HoDs think that women in their organization believe they can be promoted to the top level of their organization?

I found that most of the HoDs were aware of the lack of role models being cited as a major problem, and some had had this confirmed in surveys they had conducted within their organizations. Most of the HoDs were able to give an explanation for why they felt it was important, talking about the well-documented behavioural value of role-modelling, in terms of learning how to behave in certain professional situations. Most of them also talked about other benefits, more intangible, using terms such as *proof of possibility*, and *importance of similarity*. I refer to these as symbolic values. The HoDs did mention some organizational benefits, for example, an intrinsic value for the organization of being able to present senior female role models to the external world - a variety of stakeholders, such as clients, shareholders and potential employees were mentioned. The way that one of the banks spoke about the value of role models was very much as being part of the marketing machine, both internally and externally.

Many of the HoDs also recognized the value of senior female role models in both making change and signaling (to both men and women in the organization) that changes are being made. The HoDs also talked about who the organization sponsored as role models, as this was often part of their job. The sort of women put forward as role models was dependent to some extent on the attitudes and beliefs of the HoD, with varying opinions about the importance of the women's degree of "femininity" and whether they were "charismatic enough". The variation in responses made it clear that there would be a benefit to finding out from the women themselves what they thought of the exemplars of career success that the organization was portraying. For more detail on the pilot study, see Appendix 1, a conference paper.

## 1.4 Extending the research

The pilot study raised a number of issues. Firstly, the construct of role models has been defined by Gibson (2003; 2004), but with a limited scope. Secondly, among the interviewees there appeared to be no clear conceptual definition of role model, although there were a few common attributes mentioned. For example, all the interviewees were clear about the behavioural value of having role models and most mentioned other, less tangible, more emotive symbolic benefits. There were differences of opinion as to what a “success model” (Ibarra, 2007) should look like, and what made an exemplar “useful” to the individuals. Clearly there are different perceptions of what a successful career should/does look like in an organization (Sturges, 1999) and if these differences between the individual and the organization’s perspectives are not resolved, then “progress and development may be impeded, and the contribution they make to the organization reduced” (Sturges, p.6). The ability to manage a career effectively will be greatly diminished if the subjective side of career success is ignored (Sturges, 1999; Gattiker and Larwood, 1986).

Therefore, there is a need for research into role models which attempts to clarify and conceptualize the meaning of role models for senior women and for their organizations, making a contribution to theory by demonstrating the different elements of the term. The aim therefore is two-fold – to gain a better understanding of the meaning of the concept and also to explore the mechanism through which it is having an impact - in other words, why and how is it important? This could be done by aggregating data from individuals, which would reflect different subjective meanings.

From the literature, a link between role models and identity was suggested, and a gap in the comprehension of the concept of role models and their importance in the workplace was identified. There is a need to understand both the elements and the mechanism(s) by which they come into play. Therefore, questions regarding the conceptualization of role models should be asked:

- What are the attributes of role models?
- Who are they in relation to the observer?

- What are they used for?

The answers to these questions should feed into the main research question of

- *How do role models influence the formation of senior women's work identity in male-dominated firms?*

## **1.5 A summary of the thesis chapters**

The remaining chapters of this thesis can be summarised as follows:

In chapter 2 the extant literature on role models is reviewed. The initial review of that small body of role model literature led to the inclusion of two related areas – work identity formation as a key explanatory factor behind the link between the lack of senior female role models and the lack of career progression, and organizational demographics as the contextual factor affecting the availability of role models. Organizational demography research has highlighted that women struggle to find suitable role models in organizations where the demographic profile is not sex-balanced, and this situation gets worse as women reach senior levels.

Chapter 3 considers various philosophical approaches to academic research, and outlines that which is chosen for this research. The research design and processes of data collection and analysis are described, and some possible limitations discussed.

Chapter 4 is the first of four chapters describing the findings from the research. This chapter presents demographic information gleaned from the women in the sample, such as age, tenure and family information. It includes descriptive statistics to aid a greater contextual understanding of who the sample women are, and the lenses through which they view their careers. It considers the proportions of women dealing with some of the major issues discussed in the subsequent findings chapters, concerning role models and identity issues. In addition, in order to give the reader a better sense of who these women are, four short case studies of the female interviewees are presented.

In order to answer the main research issue of why role models are important for senior women, a greater understanding of how the senior women in this study understood the

concept of role models was required. In chapter 5, findings regarding further questions of the conceptualization of role models are reported. The chapter addresses four questions: *What are role models?* looking at the characteristics of those whom the interviewed women described as role models; *Who are the role models?* in relation to the interviewed women; *How are role models used?*; and *Why are role models important?*

The findings in Chapter 6 consider in what ways the process of work identity formation is influenced by the presence or absence of role models. As Gibson (2003) suggests, we look for different things from role models at different ages and stages of our careers, analysis of the interviews reveals, unsurprisingly, a major temporal element to the way in which the individuals talked about who they are and were at work. Therefore, the chapter is divided into sections of Past Me, Current Me and Future Me, the issues they face at each stage and the impact of not/having role models had.

Chapter 7's presents findings that consider organizational demographics as the contextual factor affecting the availability of role models. Both the requirement for and the impact of the lack of attractive role models is entirely contextual. Therefore this, the last of the findings chapters, considers how the women perceived the demographic context in which they worked and how cognizant of its impact they were. It describes just how imbalanced the women perceived their environment to be and some of the effects of the demography that surrounds them. A sub-section considers the perspectives of some of the older women, who started working more than 20 years ago, and the chapter finishes with a description of the women's hypotheses of what their working world would be like with more women above and around them.

Chapter 8 begins with a summary of all the research findings, and then goes on to relate them to the theoretical starting point of the literature outlined in Chapter 2. The chapter considers what supports, extends or contradicts previous findings and what new issues this study has raised. The contributions this research has made to the field of role models is outlined, in particular, identifying further dimensions of the concept of role models. The importance of the impact of 'local demographics' on group dynamics and perceived career prospects is discussed, and at an organizational level,

how meanings and cultures are interpreted and assimilated. From the findings on work identity development a proposal is made that relational identification may be the link between the role models and work identity. The paradox of the very senior women interviewed is addressed, in terms of their identity development and the lack of female role models, and the contribution to identity work of this study is suggested. The discussion clarifies the value of role models in an extreme gender demographic context, and how and why they are important to senior women's professional identity development, thereby adding to the theory of role modelling.

Chapter 9 concludes the thesis, looking at the aims of the research – what was conducted and why. The main findings are again summarised, and an outline is given of how I believe the project has contributed the theory. Some limitations and practical applications of the study are suggested along with some possible future research ideas. The chapter ends with a brief personal postscript on the conclusion of the PhD journey.



## **Chapter 2 - The Importance of Role Models for Senior Women: A Literature Review**



## **Chapter 2 - The Importance of Role Models for Senior Women: A Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

Women at the top of today's largest companies are not yet much in evidence. After 30 years of equality legislation, only 4.8 per cent of executive directors in the UK's top 100 companies were women in 2008 (Sealy, Vinnicombe and Singh, 2008). The organizational reality in many countries is that women still struggle with rigid and male-dominated hierarchies, promotion based on uninterrupted linear career paths with little flexibility, lack of credibility in a masculine culture, isolation from other women and transactional rather than transformational management styles (Rosener, 1990). There are very few women at the top to act as examples, or role models, of how these challenges can be overcome. Whilst it can be argued that time will eventually provide more female role models for senior women as increasing numbers of women achieve top positions, the fact that there were only 17 female executive directors on Financial Times Stock Exchange (FTSE) 100 corporate boards, in 2008 - up from 11 in 2000 (Sealy, Vinnicombe and Singh, 2008b) - indicates that it will take many years before there is a substantial pool of available female role models at board director level.

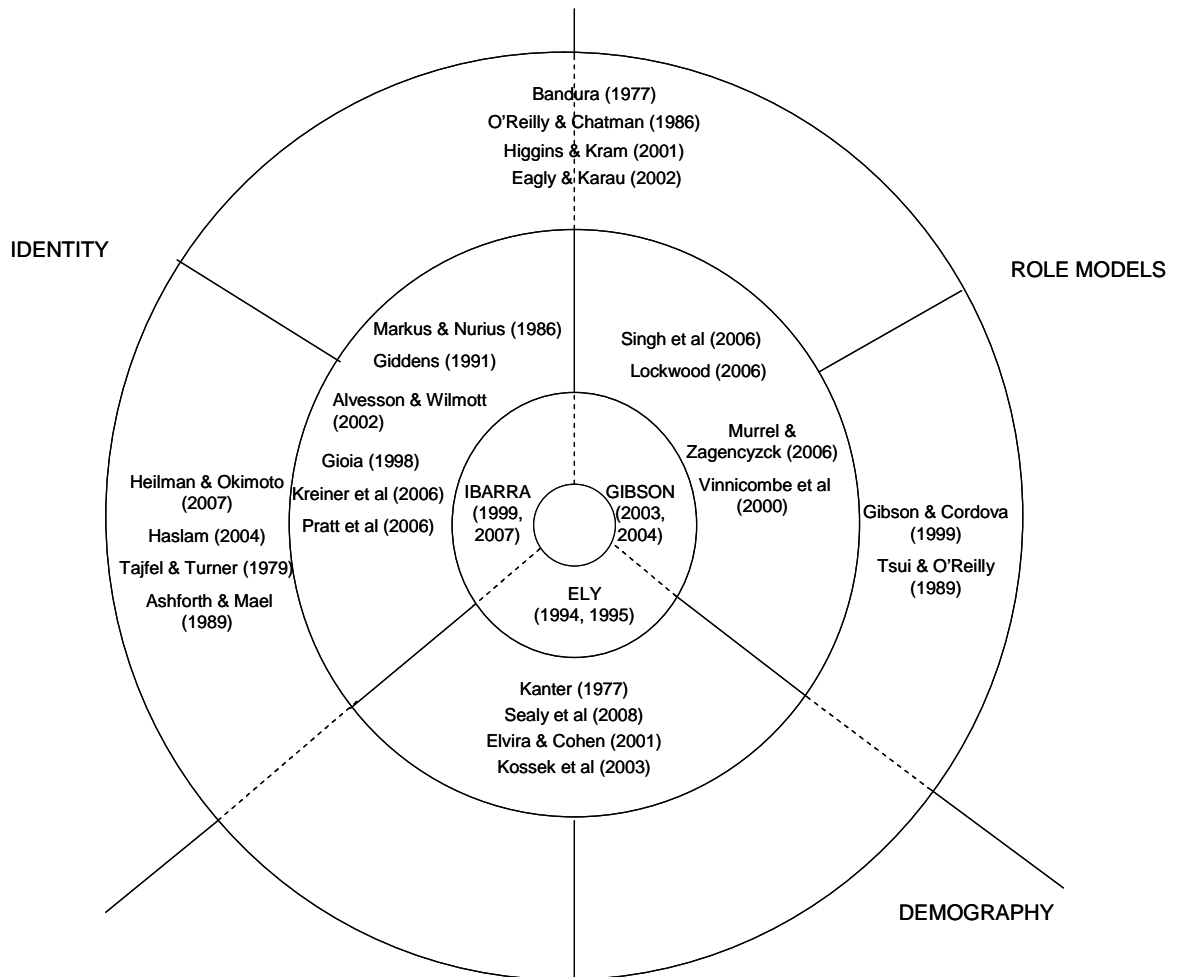
This issue is important for several reasons. The lack of female role models is cited by academics as contributing to women's propensity to resign (Rosin and Korabik, 1995). Women often leave to join other, more synergistic organizations, where they feel their leadership qualities will be recognised, or set up their own businesses (White, 1992). The issue has been highlighted in a study by Catalyst and Conference Board (2003) of a large number of European managers who cite the lack of female role models as the second biggest barrier (after sex-role stereotyping of leadership) to women's career success. Other recent surveys also highlight the lack of appropriate role models as an important barrier for women to achieve senior positions (Catalyst and Opportunity Now, 2000; Eve-lution, 2005; DDI/CIPD Leadership Forecast Survey, 2005). From psychology, we would expect role models to be part of identity development processes in early career (Gibson, 2003). But these European

practitioner surveys do not explain why women approaching senior levels consistently report that they lack and need senior female role models.

However, despite this high profile and topical issue, initial examination of the literature on role models revealed few recent academic studies apart from those of Gibson (2003; 2004) who called for re-examination of this construct outside the mentoring field, and Ibarra (1999) who identified role models as vital for the successful development of young professionals. Very few studies appear to have addressed the gendered aspects of this phenomenon in business settings, and prior to Gibson's work, the importance of role models for people at senior levels seems to have raised little interest. The only study in the UK appears to be that of Singh, Vinnicombe and James (2006) who considered the phenomenon from the perspective of younger female managers.

Therefore a comprehensive literature review was conducted, to establish what is known and what more needs to be understood about role models for women as they establish their senior organizational roles. The review findings are described in the rest of this chapter. I begin with definitions of role models and the role modelling process, drawing on Gibson (2003, 2004). Section 2.2 looks at the concept of role models as we currently understand it, including the dimensions we have, and Gibson's initial ideas about role models and career stages. As Ibarra identified possible gender differences in the use of role models in professional identity formation, the literature review was extended to include women's work identity development, described in section 2.3. The demographic context affects not only the availability of role models but also how those individuals are perceived, so in section 2.4 I examine the context of organizational demography as it relates to role models. In section 2.5, I then draw on social theories of identity to illuminate the process of role modelling as it impacts identity work in its organizational demographic context. Earlier research on role modelling has examined these processes in isolation from the male dominated context that most senior women find themselves in, whilst organizational demographers mention the important phenomenon of the lack of female role models only at the surface level. I finish the chapter with a discussion of where the literature on role models stood at the start of this PhD process, in relation to the paradox of the present cohort of well educated professional and successful senior female managers and their

expressed needs for female role models. The review acknowledges some important gaps in knowledge about the importance of role models. These are identified and discussed briefly in terms of this research project. Figure 2-1 shows how the literatures to be discussed sit together, including some of the key authors.



**Figure 2-1 Map of the extant literature**

## 2.2 The Concept of Role Models

I begin by examining how the term ‘role model’ has been defined. Shapiro, Haseltine and Rowe (1978) defined role models as “*individuals whose behaviours, personal styles and specific attributes are emulated by others*” (p.52) and showed that modelling contributes to identity construction. A role model can be an inspirational and/or motivational individual, someone from whom one can learn and model desired behaviours (Lockwood and Kinda, 1997). Similarly Gibson (2004) defines a role model as “*a cognitive construction based on the attributes of people in social roles an*

*individual perceives to be similar to himself or herself to some extent and desires to increase perceived similarity by emulating those attributes.* (p. 137). Such definitions exclude learning how not to do things, the negative role model. However Gibson (2004) moves the definition forward to include this aspect in his definition of role modelling as “*a cognitive process in which individuals actively observe, adapt and reject attributes of multiple role models*” (p. 136).

Gibson distinguishes the use of role models from mentors, which has more recently dominated the literature. Mentors provide advice and support through an interactive relationship, and behavioural role modelling is one of the functions of mentoring (Ragins and Cotton, 1999). Formal mentors are assigned to an individual by the organization, often without any consideration for what the individual actually thinks about the mentor. Other distinctions are those of *permission* and *involvement* – individuals can choose role models without involvement or permission from the model, whereas mentors have to agree to participate. There are a large number of studies looking at the individual-level factors that account for the cultivation of the mentor relationship (including Scandura & Ragins, 1993; Ragins & Cotton, 1993; Thomas, 1990) and also organizational level factors of what helps to cultivate such relationships (including Ragins & Cotton, 1991; Ragins, 1997). In all these studies conceptualization of mentoring has been traditional, with focus on a primary single dyadic mentoring relationship, and usually taken from the perspective of the protégé. There is also an underlying assumption that the effectiveness of the relationship lies in the amount of mentoring assistance. The arrangement can be formal or sometimes informal, but usually with someone considerably more senior and almost never one’s boss. Regular meetings are arranged to provide high amounts of career and psychosocial assistance (Thomas & Kram, 1988). There are some instances of peer to peer mentoring (Kram & Isabella, 1985; Kram & Hall, 1996). Some also suggest the mentor should be outside of one’s own organization (Chao, Walz & Gardner, 1992) and a few do not (Higgins & Thomas, 2001). In an earlier study regarding factors that facilitate success, Vinnicombe, Singh and Sturges (2000) found women directors had used role models to define both positive and negative behaviours. Some female directors talked about informal “*silent mentors*”, whom the individual would observe to develop her management style, understand organisational politics and enhance her career as to what was and was not effective– in other words, role models.

## **2.2.1 The Dimensions of role models**

### **2.2.1.1 Cognitive dimensions of role models**

The focus of the Gibson papers (2003, 2004) is on the *cognitive construal* of role models. Gibson (2003) identified two cognitive dimensions: positive/negative role model constructions and global/specific constructions. Positive constructions refer to aspects which the individual would want to emulate. Negative constructions refer to observation of a role model in behaviours that are examples of how not to behave in a particular situation. Global constructions relate to a variety of attributes in a role model to be emulated, whilst specific constructions refer to a single attribute that can be drawn on in a particular context. Role models are seen as cognitive constructions based on attributes of people in specific social roles. The individual perceives the role model to be similar to themselves to some extent and desires to increase perceived similarity by emulating those attributes, resulting in a behavioural change.

Gibson (2003) found that a basis of construing positive role model attributes was perceived availability, defined as “*the degree to which the individuals think they are sufficiently similar in their environment*” (p. 599). We should understand here that *similarity* could be actual or perceived or desired similarity, and could cover a number of attributes – e.g. similar background, style or demographics. Gibson does not distinguish between these. This is consistent with theories that link positive affect to similarity – e.g. social comparison theory (Collins, 1996). Individuals seek out others with some similarities as they are informative for making accurate self-assessments and can be inspirational for self-improvement (Lockwood and Kunda, 1997). This is an essential part of the identification process. In other words, if it is not possible to find someone sufficiently similar to emulate, then the individual loses out on potential benefits. Hence, in an organizational context, if women do not see similar women above them, they may perceive that there is no-one to emulate. Thus the recent surveys in Europe (Catalyst and Opportunity Now, 2000; Catalyst and Conference Board, 2003; Eve-lution, 2005; DDI/CIPD, 2005) citing a lack of available female role models may not just be referring to the low numbers of actual women, but suggests an even lower number of women *perceived* to be similar to those seeking role models, or a lack of female role models to whom they would *desire* to be similar.

Gibson's interest is in the *cognitive construal* of role models, with the emphasis on the individual's cognitive processes, rather than the behavioural outcomes, but already he has introduced the issue that this construal cannot be independent from the social context in which individuals find themselves. The organizations in which individuals work are social contexts, with varying organizational demography and cultures. This overlap of theoretical areas (individual and societal, cognition and behaviour) indicates part of the challenge of studying this topic. They all need to be considered carefully when looking at how and why individuals construe role models as they do.

### **2.2.1.2 Structural dimensions of role models**

Gibson (2003) also identified two structural dimensions of role models: close/distant and up/across or down. The close dimension refers to someone well known to the individual, whilst the distant is a role model outside the everyday interactions. Up refers to a role model in a higher position, across is a peer, and down is a subordinate, and across or down might also relate to others with undefined status. The gender demographic context is important in terms of availability of senior role models, as men will have many more possible 'up' candidates to select from in male dominated hierarchies. However the disadvantage for senior women of fewer available role models may be present at similar and lower levels too. Women at senior levels in male dominated organizations are likely to have far fewer female peers than men, and may find female subordinates to have only limited possibilities as role models, due to their different hierarchical status and experience.

Individuals differed in the degree to which they observed role models who were further up the hierarchy. Variations tended to relate to whether the individuals were promotion-focused or whether they had reached a level where upward advancement was unlikely – in which case they looked at peers or below for new ways to excel in their current position. This is congruent with the regulatory focus literature (Lockwood, Jordan and Kunda, 2002). This states that an individual's regulatory concerns – whether they are motivated by a desire to succeed or a fear of failure – will determine the effectiveness of various types of role models. Promotion-focused individuals, preferring a strategy of pursuing desirable outcomes, are most inspired by positive role models, who highlight strategies for achieving success. Prevention-focused individuals, choosing a strategy of avoiding undesirable outcomes, are most



motivated by negative role models, who highlight strategies for avoiding failure. Gibson suggests that role models represent a selection process of people in the organisation, combined with an active cognitive interpretation of the role model attributes (Bandura, 1977a). This focuses on *how* individuals create role models from the people they observe, rather than on the actions of the role models themselves.

### **2.2.2 Role models and career stages**

I found only one research study (Gibson, 2003) that investigated role modelling at different career stages. Important to the present study are the mid and late career stages in which senior women are situated. Gibson examined career stage differences in the dimensions of role model formation. Traditional career theories (Erikson, 1950, Super, 1957) suggest that as individuals get older, confidence in self-concept is increased and hence the requirement for role models diminishes. However, Gibson's findings suggest that the tendency to observe role models does not diminish with age, but rather the individual changes the emphasis placed on various dimensions.

In Early-career, which Gibson called the *acquiring* stage, individuals work on a viable self-concept – emulating others, using positive, close role models and a range of attributes in the construction of the professional identity. In Mid-career (the *refining* stage), individuals seek to refine the self-concept as confidence begins to grow, selecting specific and generally still positive attributes from role models. The individuals in Gibson's study also emphasized the importance of having role models for task transitions but perceived that few were available. Mid-career was often a state of ambiguity and uncertainty, where individuals felt they lacked guidance, particularly through visible role models, of what the next career step should look like. These findings echo those of Ibarra (1999; 2000), and were confirmed by the “Endurance” career phase proposed by O’Neil and Bilimoria (2005). Respondents in mid-career in Gibson's study also felt that, as time passed, career choices became limited with further restricted availability of relevant role models. Role models were now different people for different things, as the individual created composite models. In addition, the respondents' ability to pick out useful attributes increased, giving them a better sense of their own self and style. In Late-career (the *affirming* stage) individuals sought to enhance and affirm the self-concept, learning specific skills tied to specific goals. They often construed not just positive but also negative role models to help

affirm their own sense of uniqueness. The tendency of those in middle and late career stages was to integrate specific attributes of role models into composites that approximated a global role model. Creating a global composite is consistent with social learning theory, modelling being a cognitive process in which the person creates an image of how a behavioural model does a particular task and then generalises that to different situations (Bandura, 1977b).

Gibson and Barron (2003) found that older employees in a large US engineering organization who perceived they had multiple organizational role models available and identified with them showed increased organizational commitment and job/career satisfaction. These late career stage employees created composite role models, based on their own cognitions rather than the actions of the role model. If losing valued female employees is an issue for organizations, particularly at senior level, then the Gibson and Barron study is significant in showing that availability of role models increases commitment and job/career satisfaction. The important factor is that the employees believed the role models had *similar values and goals to themselves*. Thus the recent European surveys may suggest a lack of role models (female or male) perceived to have similar or desirable values or goals to the women completing the questionnaires.

The implications of Gibson's empirical studies, with the first steps to developing a career-stage framework of role models, are valuable for organizations. In mid-career, individuals felt they lacked role models. Whilst organizations may feel that individuals should find their own feet, they risk losing or misdirecting experienced talent by not addressing this developmental need. This may be congruent with the perceived exiting of women at mid-stage career currently occurring (Hewlett and Luce, 2005). Gibson's study suggests that organizations should recognise the growth needs of mid-stage individuals, by emphasising exposure to exemplary peers and superiors. In this era of more rapid organizational and career changes, individuals need to establish their own 'network' or constellation of developmental relationships, varying in strength and variety (Higgins and Kram, 2001). Gibson believes role models are an important part of this relationship portfolio.

Whilst Gibson's research is undoubtedly important in terms of raising the profile of research into role models, there are some limitations of his studies and questions left

unanswered. Firstly he does admit that in searching for patterns of difference across the stages, there was a risk of assuming more homogeneity within the stages than was actually the case. This is particularly an issue in the mid-stage, where his sample has ten out of fifteen workers who have not yet been promoted to partner level and only five who have made this important transition. I would suggest that these two groups may have very different expectations and attitudes regarding their current career success or lack thereof.

In addition, in his empirical paper (2003), the boundaries between role models, mentors and behavioural models become blurred as Gibson talks about close role models and watching response and feedback. Moreover, whilst he defines role models as cognitive construals, he does not overtly take into account the symbolic or inspirational effect or emotive value that role models have. Finally, this study of career stages is undertaken in two professional services firms, a sector that is particularly competitive, hence the need for more research is indicated into role modelling and career stages in other environments. In this section I have looked at the concept of role models and how it has previously been defined and construed. In the next section I look at what we know about how role models are used.

## **2.3 Role Models and Identity Construction**

### ***2.3.1 Developing “Provisional Selves” through role models***

To gain a better understanding of the importance of role models, we need to examine the utility of role modelling in the development of work identity. Work identity has been defined as an enduring set of attributes, beliefs, values, motives and experiences by which people define themselves in a given work role (Schein, 1978). However, as Gibson has shown above, work identity is not a fixed concept, but changes with work role changes. Career transitions are an opportunity for renegotiating one's work identity through the mechanism of 'possible selves', defined as who one might become, would like to become, or fears becoming (Markus and Nurius, 1987). Ibarra has conducted research into professionals in investment banking and consulting firms making transitions from junior to middle, and middle to senior management positions (1999; 2000) and from senior management to leadership roles (2003; 2007). In her Adaptation Process, she revealed that successful transitions required three basic tasks:

- observing role models to identify potential identities;
- experimenting with ‘provisional selves’; and
- evaluating experiments against internal standards and external feedback.

In the Ibarra (1999) paper, over 90% of participants described how role models displayed the role identity they were attempting to assume. By observing successful role models, the subjects built a store of tacit knowledge, attitudes, and impression management routines. They created the idea of a ‘possible self’ – the role identity they wanted to assume. They also learned about acceptable variation in how to enact the role by comparing different role models. They then experimented with these ideas, using a process of observe, practice/test and evaluate against internal standards and external feedback. Participants also matched role models based on their attractiveness – i.e. to what extent did they admire or share the traits underlying the role model’s behaviour. As with Gibson’s studies, Ibarra found that participants used role models to define negative behaviours or characteristics, i.e. the role model represented a feared possible self, a negative role model. This suggests a value of more senior role models even if they are not attractive. Studies that highlight the role of affect between the individual and potential role model or socializing agent are not new (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Yost, Strube & Bailey, 1992; Kram, 1988), but as Ibarra states “benefits of modelling styles and behaviours that do not feel very self-congruent have not received much empirical attention” (1999, p. 785).

The process of acquiring behavioural skills, such as a work style, is different from learning knowledge in that the learning must be refined through personal experimentation, not just vicariously through observation (Bandura, 1977b). In Ibarra’s study, the most prevalent form of experimentation was imitation. This was either done on a wholesale or partial basis (mimicking global or individual traits). Selective imitation, a “mosaic of different people” was a more sophisticated form of mimicry, combining facets from multiple role models to craft a more self-tailored persona. Those using this tactic suffered less concern regarding authenticity – i.e. the degree of congruence between what one feels and what one communicates in public. In contrast, participants who used true-to-self strategies (e.g staying with their present style, focusing on their present strengths and searching for a very closely matched

single role model) in making the transition made several references to caution, modesty, being acutely aware of their own limitations, avoiding exaggerated displays of confidence, and being more concerned with client credibility in the long term rather than creating a good first impression, focusing on substance over form. However, as they clung to their old identities, they struggled to transfer some of the new styles and skills required, experiencing longer-term dissonance between their current and ideal selves. Their actions also limited the growth of their behavioural repertoires, providing a restricted store of material from which to select and grow. Ibarra's study did not set out to give a gendered perspective, so it is not until the discussion part of the paper, that she makes it clear that the true-to-self subgroup who used this limiting tactic was almost entirely women. She does not, however, attempt to explain why this might be. How much of this is related to individual and how much to situational factors? There was a scarcity of senior females and Ibarra found that this did constrain the attractive identity matches for women, making it harder for them to learn.

Identification with role models infuses behaviours with meaning and purpose, providing more motivation to change. By identifying with role models, people move from compliance to assimilating role requirements (O'Reilly and Chatman, 1986). As participants evaluated their 'provisional selves', they became aware of the need to find more appealing, feasible role models and so extended their role model set. Ibarra's study highlights the value of role models, increasing repertoire variety and therefore the likelihood of successful adaptation.

Ibarra proposes a model whereby an Adaptation Process she described mediates between situational and individual influences on one hand and the identity construction processes on the other. If successful identity construction is essential to career success, then the availability and successful use of role models become key antecedents to this. Her findings on the women's experiences of career transition show consistency with well-established findings on minorities and majorities in organizations (Kanter, 1977). Women were more likely to experience difficulty finding suitable role model matches, to use true-to-self strategies, and to perpetuate provisional selves that they described as inadequate. Combining Ibarra's findings with those on organizational demography (see section 2.5 below) furthers our

understanding of the processes affecting women's career transitions and the importance of role models.

In a later unpublished analysis of the same data set, Ibarra (2007) focused on the different responses to identity threat that men and women used to construct 'provisional selves'. This time she was clear from the outset about differences between men and women. Men's identity work used role modelling (imitation strategies) and the women's used personal crafting (true-to-self) strategies. They were both clear about their concerns to convey an appropriate image to clients. However, what was apparently striking was that men's and women's strategies separate clearly to fit the 'acquisitive' and 'protective' styles, described by Arkin (1981). Whereas a protective style seeks to avoid disapproval, an acquisitive style seeks to impress and solicits approval by behaviours that will elicit deference, with active aggressive attempts to signal credibility. Protective behaviours include 'laying low', reluctance to interact, modesty, a propensity for neutral qualified expressions of judgement, in order to avoid making a negative first impression on a client. As Ibarra says "*The ability to win client confidence facilitates career advancement, while the use of protective self-presentation confirms gender stereotypes that may lead to career stagnation.*" (2007, p.16)

The problem is that the model for success within professional services or investment banking organizations, with high client contact, is one that coupled acquisitive with role modelling strategies, both of which worked well for the men, and involved possible selves towards which they could strive. However, for the women, this model represents an 'Impossible Self', which could not be attained. The demographics prevented the role modelling and the identity threat caused them to take a protective stance.

Many of the issues concerning women in the workplace today are around the lack of a sense of authentic identity. As mentioned above, Ibarra shows that in transition women are more likely to use a less sophisticated true-to-self mimicry, which due to a lack of attractive female role models invariably adds to problems of inauthenticity. Pratt, Rockmann and Kaufmann (2006) conducted a six-year qualitative study of medical residents in the US to examine processes of identity construction triggered by work-identity integrity threat: a mismatch between what they did and who they were –

the importance of the relationship between 'doing' and 'being' among professionals, and the impact of the organization context. Like Ibarra, they found that role models were critical to learning. However, unlike Ibarra they did not find that the junior doctors tried on 'possible selves' based on multiple role models. Rather they found that "*role model choice was based more on a justification or validation of an existing or emerging identity*" (p.255). But that presupposes a role model that can be aligned with the individual's authentic 'true self' identity. As Kahn (1990) noted, work becomes meaningful when one's 'preferred self' can be expressed through one's work and one's membership in an organization. Pratt et al (2006) argue that "*achieving alignment between identity and work is a fundamental motivator in identity construction*" (p.255). This is a complicated and challenging task for women aspiring to leadership in unbalanced demographic contexts, as will be discussed further below.

### **2.3.2 Developing managerial identities through role models**

In a qualitative study of young women managers, Singh, Vinnicombe and James (2006) found that they tended to use a selection of role models from a variety of domains, many from outside the workplace, to help them build appropriate identities. This is encouraging after Ibarra's study which suggested women tended to search for a single global role model rather than plural, and is in line with Gibson's findings. However, they did not create a composite global role model but rather drew on inspiration from any relevant role model for a particular task or situation. The role model sets crossed the business world, family and popular celebrities. Although 60% of the role models were from the business world, very few top businesswomen were mentioned and women reported very few acceptable role models available within their own work environment. Often those women at the top who did not have families were rejected as role models. They were seen to have sacrificed too much of their social and emotional capital in their quest to succeed in the masculine workplace, echoing Liff and Ward (2001) – see below. Higgins & Kram (2001) identified a matrix of four different developmental networks of types of mentors. Singh et al (2006) drew on their approach and found the set of role models reported could be seen as a network providing both active and near as well as distant and passive career guidance, and for which different types of psychological learning processes may be

engaged. This suggests that having role models of each type may be beneficial to women wanting to progress.

As in Ibarra's study, when asked what they learnt from their role models, the women talked about personal characteristics and style. Various 'masculine' style traits emerged, such as control and determination. However, for others what was important was seeing their role models utilise their 'feminine' traits in their work-style, as they wished to emulate these in their own working lives. This is encouraging, as from Liff & Ward's study, below, it would seem that despite the links made between feminine traits and successful transformational leadership styles (Rosener, 1990; Eagly, 2007) women in the UK workplace, still seem to feel that feminine traits are at best not valued, and at worst, damaging to their careers. The Singh et al study showed that role models were used to develop 'ideal selves' for their future career. But such role models were rarely available. This study is useful in confirming that role models are an important influence in work identity development.

Sheppard (1989) highlights problems for organizations without senior female role models. Additional time and effort is spent by female managers ascertaining how they should behave and present themselves at work. Women end up taking on an inauthentic work identity, like 'wearing a mask'. Men may sexualise and objectify women as a method of control, and women find themselves between a rock and a hard place of being either the unprofessional objectified sex object or the 'not very nice', too masculine woman (Liff and Ward, 2001). Women without female role models tend to desexualise themselves as a coping strategy. Leadership and management styles are self-perpetuating in their masculinity, as the femininity is not valued by either men or women (Schein, Mueller, Lituchy, and Lui, 1996) particularly at director level (Cames, Vinnicombe and Singh, 2001). Collinson (2003) mentions how men also work to construct, negotiate and achieve their masculine identity. The challenges of identity formation at work are not exclusive to women, but men do it in an environment that is predominantly masculine and therefore not so alien. Wahl (1998) comments that men get confirmation of themselves and their identity as leaders through a shared maleness, whereas, unless there are sufficient female leaders, women have no such resource.



## **2.4 Social Theories of Identity – Theoretical Background**

From the literature, I have thus far shown that role models are used for professional and managerial identity development, and suggested how the limited availability of female role models may create a less favourable context within which women managers develop their work identities in male-dominated organizations. The issue of context will be further explored below (section 2.5).

A common feature of the few articles written over the past ten years or so on role models and identity formation has been the tendency to cite the paucity of contemporary identity literature that integrates various levels of the self. During this study I explore whether various social theories of identity can shed light upon the process of role modelling within identity development to explain why role models are so important for senior women. In 2007, in a theoretical article by Sluss and Ashforth, the nascent concepts of relational identity and relational identification are used to show how workers may define themselves and construct identity through work relationships. This theoretical article builds on models such as social role theory and social identity theory, which I will outline below, by focusing on the interpersonal level, in an attempt to integrate the personal and collective/social levels of identity. However, it should be noted that due to the recency of the concept of relational identification, this theory did not inform the research question, the design or data collection of this study. It was, however, important in the interpretation of the findings, as will be seen in later chapters, and shows promise in answering the research question.

Socialisation is a negotiated adaptation through which people aim to improve the fit between themselves and their work environment, by refining their emerging ideas of who they want to be in that role (Bandura, 1977a). Identity refers to the meanings or self-conceptions that are attached to an individual either by him/herself or others. These meanings are usually based on social roles (social identities) as well as idiosyncratic character traits or personal identities (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Identities have been regarded as socially constructed (Haslam, 2004) and negotiated as people convey images of themselves about how they would like to be regarded by others. Work identity has been defined as an enduring set of attributes, beliefs, values,

motives and experiences by which people define themselves in a given work role (Schein, 1978).

Ibarra's work concludes that having a clear and consistent professional identity is fundamental to career success, although it could be argued that whilst helpful, many other factors come into the equation. Nonetheless, many of the issues concerning women today, causing some of them to leave corporate life, are around the lack of a sense of authentic identity, a lack of clarity around *who am I?* (Hewlett, 2007). Inside and outside the work environment, identity development is not just an individualistic concept but a socially constructed one (Ibarra, 1999).

### **2.4.1 Social Identity Theory**

Organizations are social environments and how people familiarise and define themselves within and in relation to these social structures will help explain how they will think, feel and behave at work. Social identity theory, developed in the 1970s by Tajfel (1972) and Turner (1975), concerns intergroup relations. Its fundamental psychological tenet is that "*where people make social comparisons between groups, they seek positive distinctness for their in-groups compared to out-groups in order to achieve a positive social identity*" (Haslam, 2004, p. xix).

Whereas personal identity refers to self-knowledge about one's own attributes, social identity is the knowledge of the sense of who one is, defined in terms of *we* rather than *I*, as part of a social group or clustering. Social identity theory shows how social and psychological factors combine to determine the courses of action that individuals take in order to achieve a positive social identity. The social factors are the reality that individuals confront, including the *structural* aspects, e.g. organisational demographics and other people – the social process of identity stemming from others' reactions to the individual. The psychological factors look at how individuals interpret this world, referring to their internal *cognitive* processes. If an individual feels they are in a lower group, their response to this negative assessment and emotion is to endeavour to dissociate and assimilate culturally and psychologically into a higher-status group.

There is some evidence, however, contrary to this, that individuals may internalise both the psychological and behavioural attributions of their in-group as well as the

wider social evaluation of selves as inferior and less-deserving (Tajfel, 1982; Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Ely, 1995). An explanation for this is that people have a general cognitive preference to have their expectations about reality supported, as opposed to experiencing cognitive dissonance. So if they accept the negatives about their own group, for example, if women expect men to hold higher positions, some will prefer to engage in low level tasks and behaviours corresponding to low performance and low status. This is in line with expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964) which states that an individual will act in a certain way based on the need to have their expectations met. This would clearly affect women's aspirations and beliefs in terms of their career potential. Psychologically and behaviourally, they will emulate characteristics associated with women as a group, and not with men.

What remains unclear, however, is why, with a shared understanding of status relations, some individuals will take this route and others will challenge the status quo – the individual idiosyncrasies that make each individual's interpretation different. Key to this is the individual's belief structures, in particular with regard to social mobility. Tajfel and Turner (1979) proposed strategies that individuals use for self-enhancement. Social/individual mobility beliefs state that anyone can rise to the top. Social change beliefs state that the only prospect for improving oneself lies in action as a group member. Social change beliefs are likely to be dominant when an individual believes themselves to be "*locked into their group membership*" (Haslam, 2004, p. 25) and feel they must act either to improve or defend their group's status.

Individual mobility is most likely to happen when a group has relatively low status but boundaries are seen to be permeable. The individual can disassociate themselves from other in-group members and work to improve their personal outcomes (rather than work collectively to improve the outcomes for the group). For example, with clear status differences highlighted by a predominance of men in positions of power, in attempting to join her higher-status counterparts, a woman may provide more favourable attributions to the out-group. There is plenty of evidence in scholarly work (Kanter, 1977; Mavin, 2006; Simpson, 1997) and popular literature of women "acting like men" as it allows women to feel favourable about themselves, despite the unfavourable evaluation they may give their sex in-group. Women in male-dominated firms will often evaluate other women less favourably in relation to the organization's

requirements for success than their counterparts in more sex-integrated firms (Ely, 1995). Some women have found that the glass ceiling can be broken by acting as an individual, defecting to become ‘one of the boys’, rather than trying to improve status and treatment of women in general.

From a social identity theory perspective, this strategy can work well for individuals when the high status group believes their status to be secure (e.g. male executive team). They will often then show magnanimity, and cherry pick individuals in a covert, benign form of discrimination, whilst behind the scenes ensuring the continued repression of the low status group. Anecdotal evidence would suggest that this may frequently be occurring in corporations in the UK and US. The magnanimous gate-keepers appease any guilt they have by allowing only a few individuals to succeed. However, because of the token status (Kanter, 1977), these individual women are not role models for those below them, in terms of changing the situation or organisational culture. Indeed, they show how to be successful by ‘playing the game’, when in reality, it may be they who are being played.

However, Ibarra (2007) found no evidence of social change strategies, consistent with Tajfel’s (1981) idea about boundary permeability affecting the strategy used by low-status groups. Alternatively, Tajfel proposed “social creativity” where those in low status groups (women) reinterpret their characteristics – e.g. female traits – as positive but distinctive from the high status group (men). In the previous study with Heads of Diversity (Sealy, 2008), one interviewee gave an example of a very senior woman who put heavily scented lilies on her desk everyday. The interviewee had interpreted this as an intentional statement of femininity, as in Giddens’ (1991) Identity Enactment Theory, which describes the behavioural repetition of something that makes a statement about ones identity. The interviewee talked about the act in admiration, almost as if it were an act of bravado, rather than just the woman being herself. Another explanation of this possible trumpeting of the feminine statement is Tajfel’s social identity strategy of “social creativity”. Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) found evidence of this in their paper on “dirty work”, where people found a way of maintaining favourable self-evaluations, whilst doing unattractive work. In line with social identity theory, by positioning the comparison of women to men in such a way that exploits the positive distinctiveness of their gender, women manage the threat to

their identity. One could argue that this is a function of the demographics in that if the demographics were more equal, then women's identity would not be threatened and therefore they would not have to emphasise the positive distinctiveness of their gender, as demonstrated by Ely's (1994, 1995) papers (see below, section 2.5).

### **2.4.2 Identity Management**

One of the challenges with trying to understand identity formation for senior women in terms of collective theories, such as social identity theory, is that these women are often so isolated that they do not have a collective of which to feel a member – they are visibly very different from their male colleagues and very removed from other female colleagues. In such circumstances it is argued that individuals need to actively engage in identity management, in order to deal with 'identity dissonance' (Gioia, 1998). Identity management is not always just an individual process. As Alvesson and Wilmott (2002) argue, today's organizations attempt to exert power and discipline over individuals by shaping their identities and relationships through 'identity regulation'. The role of the organization in the construction of identities through role models would seem to be another important area for in-depth research.

Kreiner, Hollensbe and Sheep (2006b) use qualitative studies to look at how individuals in a very demanding occupation (Episcopal priests) actively negotiate the social and individual construction of their identities. They discuss the processes used to achieve an optimal balance between over-identification and individuation or under-identification, by differentiating or integrating individual and social identities. This interesting paper creates a conceptual model using Lewin's Field Theory to describe the processes of identity construction. In essence the paper explicates what the authors see as the various forces that interact to create a "field" or context in which individuals and groups operate. By identifying these forces, Lewin believed we could understand why individuals behave and react as they do (Papenek, 1973). This may be a useful model in which to consider the behavioural and other values of role models: the forces that help us better understand why individuals behave/react as they do and what the implications of strengthening or weakening these forces would be in terms of changed behaviour.

### **2.4.3 Social and Gender Role Theory**

Another socially-based identity theory that is relevant here looks at sex-role expectations. According to social role theory of sex and gender differences (Eagly, 1987), women are expected to behave in a manner consistent with societal gender roles. There are general beliefs held that men have a higher level of *agentic* attributes, whereas women have a higher level of *communal* attributes, although whether men and women *have* higher levels of these attributes or simply *utilize* them more often, is another question. Therefore, because leadership is still construed in masculine agentic terms, this presents a substantial barrier to women. Women are experiencing the double bind of incongruity between their gender role and leadership stereotypes. Eagly and Karau's (2002) theoretical paper on gender roles supported the notion that attitudes are less positive towards female than male leaders and potential leaders. This is derived from the injunctive aspect of the female role model of how women should be. It is the less favourable evaluation of behaviour that fulfils perceptions of the leader role (which violates the female gender role), when this is enacted by a woman as opposed to a man. The consequences of this are less favourable attitudes to female than male leaders; greater difficulty for women to attain leadership roles; and greater difficulty for women to be recognised as effective in these roles.

Another effect of the imposition of gender roles on behaviour is on self-regulatory processes. As Ely (1994; 1995) showed, women's social identities in their workplaces reflect the current gender stereotypes, particularly in organizations with low representation of women in senior positions. Women may behave gender stereotypically because of having internalised aspects of gender roles, especially if situational cues make these aspects particularly appropriate. Self-regulatory processes can induce gender roles, and may actually cause the women to become less attracted to top management positions (van Vianen and Fischer, 2002). Many women struggle with the issue of balancing the feminine/masculine styles – they need to be sufficiently businesslike and professional to be considered a credible manager and sufficiently feminine to not challenge prevailing assumptions about gender. They compromise their career progression because they appear less confident or powerful, and do not ascend to executive leadership because they are perceived to lack sufficiently agentic behaviours. This is likely to be the result of stereotyping and

prejudice. As Eagly and Karau (2002) state, none of this can change without a wider variety of role models.

Supporting Eagly and Karau's work, Heilman and Okimoto (2007) replicate previous work showing that when performance levels are ambiguous, women are perceived to be less competent than men in male gender-typed work, thus leading to discriminatory practices. And, even when performance is unambiguous, women are then disliked and seen as undesirable bosses. Women who are successful in male domains violate gender stereotypes, and their perceived lack of feminine attributes causes negative reactions. However, if there is clear evidence of the woman's communal traits, which need not be displayed, but can be inferred by roles such as motherhood, these negative reactions can be abated. Their study shows that it is possible for successful women to be seen as both agentic and communal, previously considered mutually exclusive, and that it is "*the women's perceived violation of feminine 'shoulds', not their taking on of masculine 'should not's' that underlies and fuels the penalties these women incur for their success*" (p.91). There is substantial literature suggesting that women perceived as communal are also presumed incompetent at supposedly male tasks, yet this study shows the double-edge sword, that women in the workplace have felt for years that without showing those feminine qualities, they are disliked by their colleagues (male and female). Perhaps the call for senior female role models reflects women's search for exemplars of how to demonstrate both the agentic and communal traits successfully. The current demographic context in many organizations means exemplars are few and far between.

Interestingly, Wells (1973) proposed a related double-bind for men. The paper is 30 years old, but anecdotal evidence suggests that in very aggressive, 'masculine' environments, the issues have not dissipated. Expression of emotion was considered a sign of weakness and inappropriate within a business context. This is not to say that men do not *have* emotions, but just that they are repressed. So the double-bind for men is that if they accept women (who behave like women) as managers, then they have to accept that it is acceptable for a manager to express the emotions he has repressed himself. To be aggressive and competitive is to play the stereotypic male. The male role requires that a woman be taken care of, protected, not fought, and not considered an equal. This poses another double-bind for men. If he plays the

(prescribed) male role, he cannot relate to women on an equal (male) basis; if he behaves as his own person relating to women as an equal, then he risks being seen as less of a man and a less deserving manager.

#### **2.4.4 Relational identity theory**

As mentioned, many articles on identity formation recently have cited the paucity of contemporary literature in its ability to integrate the levels and dynamics of identity. However, during the past two years some publications have emerged, progressing the understanding of the process of developing work identity through work relationships. Building on social identity theory and social role theory, Sluss and Ashforth's (2007) theoretical article uses the concepts of relational identity and identification to explain how workers may define themselves and construct identity through work relationships. They attempt to integrate the personal and collective/social levels of identity by focusing on the interpersonal level. They propose that interpersonal relationships are simultaneously informed and influenced by both person-based and role-based identities, giving a more holistic understanding of a worker's experience. However, they do not suggest any gender differences, or any differences between same-sex and different-sex work relationships. Role-based identity is the goals, values, beliefs and behaviours typically associated with that role (Ashforth, 2001), regardless of who is enacting the role. The person-based identity is the traits that define *how* that individual is enacting that role (e.g. with consideration, fairness, honesty). The relational identity is the interaction of both person-based and role-based identities of two people within a relationship, and therefore draws on the interpersonal level. This could bring more depth to the concept of role model as studied in this research, in order to consider on what level the relationship is working. As previously mentioned by both Bandura (1977a) and O'Reilly and Chatman (1986), individuals may choose to adapt to their environment by refining ideas about *who* they want to be *in that role*, and if they can identify with *who* is enacting a specific role, they can move from compliance to assimilation of the role requirements. This would help an individual to make the successful transition to a new role.

Sluss and Ashforth's paper theorises about *relational identity* and *relational identification*. The former looks at what is the nature of one's role relationship, e.g. manager-subordinate. It is the web of relational identities, roles and role incumbents,



which form the social system of the organization. *Relational identification* is the extent to which one defines oneself in terms of that relationship, i.e. how much does one internalize that identity as a partial definition of oneself? This is clearly relevant to how an individual perceives and uses role models.

#### **2.4.5 The Utility of Relationships at Work**

Gersick, Bartunek and Dutton (2000) conducted an interesting study into the importance of relationships in professional life, within academia, comparing men and women. There were some unsurprising findings: for example, that men and women live in different relational environments in academia; also, that workplace relationships provide two types of support – instrumental career assistance and emotional support. “Our relationships with individuals and groups constitute the environment in which we live our professional lives” (2000, p.1026), and others have recognised the important influence relationships can have on who we are and how we behave at work (Brickson, 2000; Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Katz & Kahn, 1978). Primarily, relationships are very important at work because they serve task-related needs, especially in today’s flatter organizational structures. Traditionally, relationships at work have been investigated through social exchange, which tends to view them as transactional, calculative and instrumental (Gersick et al, 2000). However, in reality, individuals hope that their relationships will also satisfy their sense of belonging, need for meaning and relational identity.

A later study looking at relational strength and turnover was that by Mossholder, Settoon and Henagan (2005). Generally, research into turnover looks at predominantly individual characteristics, such as job satisfaction and attitudes, etc. By taking a relational perspective, Mossholder et al showed how with more identification with those around the individual, the effect of ‘organizational shocks’ is ‘dampened’. The study, however, was not really looking at the quality of the relationships, but more the embeddedness of the individual in terms of network centrality. Uhl-Bien, Graen and Scandura (2000), however, showed that high quality relationships also gave organizations competitive advantage, in terms of low turnover. Along with Mossholder et al, they contend that relationships matter and their development positively influences organizational outcomes.

Gersick et al (2000) noted differences between men and women's network ties (Ibarra, 1997) and that men were less likely to have women in their relational worlds. However, for both sexes, more importance was given to mutual bonds of collegueship than pure instrumentality, and negative relational experiences had powerful effects. Perhaps unsurprisingly, "the relational worlds described by women included significantly less career help and significantly more harm than the relational worlds of men." (p.1038). What was different was the way the sexes reportedly talked about their careers. The men, as insiders, described it as a "game", according to the women, with many references to "playing" and "winning". They reportedly spoke strategically of managing their reputations. However, the women, with very few of their kind at the upper echelons of their institutions, as outsiders, struggled to prove their fitness to "join the game" and so saw the working environment as a constant "test of skill" to see if they were good enough to join. Theirs was not, therefore, a strategic or reputational approach. As Gersick et al said: "Women's stories portray struggles with exclusion from the club", and they did not get as much career help as did the men. Gersick et al discussed how approaching a career as a constant test would cause considerably more stress and anxiety than believing it to be a game. In calling for further research they suggested investigation into the "constellations of relationships that actually impinge on them [categories of disadvantaged people] and the system dynamics that keep these constellations in place". Research on work identity dynamics is still in its infancy, and there is a need to integrate the levels of self (Prentice, 2001). Relationships send "powerful messages about who we are and how we are valued". (Gersick et al, 2000, p. 1026). One's values and philosophy are created and nurtured by one's experiences with one's reference groups and social identity groups to which one belongs or aspires to belong (Boyatzis and Murphy, 2000). But, the extent to which one's own qualities are "perceived to be positively valued will affect one's values and be interpreted by one's operating philosophy" (Boyatzis & Akrivou, p. 16). So if, without identification through relationships, the individual feels that their values or approaches are not appreciated, they may either alter them to be more in line with those around, or leave to go someplace else where the individual believes they will be valued.

#### **2.4.6 Impact of attachment**

In studying the formation of work identity, more can be learned about relationships and attachment from the personal psychology literature. In a comprehensive paper, Chen, Boucher and Tapias (2006) considered the impact of significant others on the self. They were not talking about work environments specifically, but much of what they say is pertinent in describing how relational conceptions of oneself are important in understanding behaviour. Describing how other people have an on-going influence on who we are, Markus and Cross (1990) suggest this happens “both early in life, as the individual constructs a core sense of self, and throughout life, as the actual, anticipated, or remembered evaluations and concerns of significant others are continually organized into the working self-concept” (p.602). Adult attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) assumes that relationships with caring, responsible and consistent significant others foster the formation of secure working models: of the self as competent and worthy; and of others as caring and available. It also assumes the opposites are true. This was really referring to very close relationships in one’s personal lives, but later adult attachment work has suggested the theory works with a broader range of significant others (Pierce & Lydon, 2001). Ogilvie and Ashmore (1991) also suggest that “we not only internalize and mentally represent our selves and others, we also form images of what we are like and how we feel when we are with specific other people in our lives” (p. 286), recognising the external impact of those we might have relationships with. And following this, Chen et al (2006, p.166) propose that “Relational selves serve orienting and meaning functions by informing the individual of his/her place in the social world and imparting meaning to this place”. From the interaction of the dyadic relationship, the individual works out their worth and their value, as well as how they are perceived by the other.

#### **2.4.7 Explanations from Identity Theories**

In this section I have examined several identity theories for further insight into why role models may be important in identity construction. Social identity theory explains how individuals seek out role models by comparison that leads to a desire to join the higher status group by emulating its group characteristics. This explains how and why many highly successful women are seen to use masculine-typed behaviours. Social and gender role theory explains that such violation of traditional feminine roles leads

to censure from both men and women, and often rejection of the masculine-style women as role models. From social identity theory, the focus of the collective is on the individual as an interchangeable prototype of that social category, e.g. manager. It involves a depersonalised sense of self. In contrast, relational identity theory highlights the interpersonal elements, as the individual seeks to emulate the higher status individual rather than the typical group characteristics. Relational identification involves being attracted to the qualities of the individual, and interpersonal attraction may be an important element in choosing role models. Relational identity and identification have only recently been applied to the concept of work identity, but on initial inspection appear to be very promising in their relevance to the use of and perhaps the construction of role models. The demographic context affects the availability of senior female role models. In the next section I examine the significance of the demographic context for a deeper insight into the influence gender imbalance has on role modelling.

## **2.5 The Significance of Context: Organizational Demography**

The demographic gender balance at senior levels of organizations affects not only the physical availability of women as senior role models, but also, as the studies below will show, how women are perceived as possible role models, and the differences of these perceptions between men and women.

### **2.5.1 *Tokens and minority groups***

Research on organizational demography and power addresses the context of the working environment that influences the availability of role models, and the processes of gender identity formation. In her ground-breaking work, Kanter (1977) observed the asymmetric power within an organization, part of a culture where the majority dominated and marginalised the minority, and where structures emerged to preserve this situation. The concepts of 'homophily' and 'tokenism' were based on the premise that people prefer to work with similar others. Kanter showed that women became 'tokens' when in a numerical minority of less than 15%. Through processes including assimilation, polarisation and exaggeration, stereotypes were used to heighten boundaries, and women became both highly visible and isolated. In Kanter's view,

only when the proportion of women passes the 15% threshold to become a ‘minority’, rather than a ‘token’, could they begin to overcome these pressures.

In a longitudinal empirical study, Kossek, Markel and McHugh (2003) followed the effects of an HR strategy moving an organisation’s demography towards one of greater diversity over an eight-year period. However, when such a diversity objective commences, pragmatically changes are incremental. “*Weak demographic shifts create weak fault lines*” (pp.334) and do little to change or unite social construction. As the minority group grew, they became more of a competitor for scarce resources, and the majority group, consistent with social identity theory, began to discriminate. This led to more strain on intergroup relations, reduced social interaction, and reduced consensus. The study emphasised the importance of tipping points at the work group level. It is frequently assumed that by hiring more minorities and women, the power balance will improve, but identity groups need to be equal in their access to power resources (Kanter, 1983) for an improvement of attitudes (Kossek et al, 2003). This suggests organizations may need demographic earthquakes to take them to the tipping point of 35% (Kanter, 1977) to prevent the perpetuation of stereotypical negative dynamics.

### **2.5.2 Impacts of unbalanced sex composition**

In her 1994 seminal work, Ely looked at the impact of women’s proportional representation at the top of organizations and what effect it had on the relationships among other women in that firm. She found that in firms with few senior women, women were “*less likely to experience gender as a positive basis for identification with women, less likely to perceive senior women as role models with legitimate authority, more likely to perceive competition in relationships with women peers, and less likely to find support in these relationships*” (p. 203). She also found that in firms with more balanced gender representation at the top, the opposite was true on all accounts.

The presence of executive women signals the level, as well as likelihood, of possible promotion to other women. Women in executive positions may also be able to influence the organizational policies and culture and make it more attractive for women to stay with the organization. Elvira and Cohen (2001) proposed that

organizational sex composition at senior levels explains turnover differences for men and women in a female-dominated organization. They found that the proportion of executive women above them directly affected the turnover of women, who were more likely to leave if they were in the lower ranks, but not if they were in middle and top positions. Elvira and Cohen speculate that lower rank women may perceive such a distance between themselves and the executive women that this limits their view of possibilities for change. In contrast, higher-level women are more similar and closer to the executive women who have the power and resources to affect their working conditions, and hence were less likely to leave the organization as the proportion of women above them increased. This work preceded that of Gibson identifying close versus distant as structural dimensions of role models. Some practical implications are clear from these findings. Increasing the number of women in senior positions may help organisations both reduce turnover and draw on talent within women that is broader than either the traditional masculine or feminine role brings on its own.

Ely's work goes beyond that of Kanter (1977), as the latter suggested that balanced representation at peer level would reduce sex-role stereotyping and promote a greater sense of belonging for women. But Ely says that this is not the case unless there are women in positions of authority in that organization, as "*sex may persist as a salient category with negative consequences for women lower down in the organization*" (1995, p. 590). Gender cannot be treated as an objective property, synonymous with biological sex, or universal across organizational settings. Gender is an ongoing social construction. Both Ely's 1994 and 1995 papers show how women's presence in positions of power positively affects how gender is defined and the processes that create gender identity at work.

In her 1999 paper, Ibarra found that the organization's demographic context resulted in a paucity of role models for the women professionals. She recounts how many interviewees reported the available role models' styles were either not feasible for them or incongruent with their self-concepts, and as a result few women used the imitation strategies favoured by their male colleagues (see section 2.3.1 above).

More recently, in an unpublished paper, Ibarra's (2007) central argument is that demographic conditions moderate the identity construction processes that legitimize certain success models whilst discrediting others. She discusses how when making

certain organizational role transitions, image and “demeanour” are used to “signal competence”. But what demeanour is prototypic is affected by the demographic composition.

In her earlier research looking at homophily - social similarity – Ibarra (1992) showed that in interpersonal work relations same-sex relationships develop quicker and smoother than those between different sexes. This is obviously relevant to work situations where individuals may not have others of the same-sex available. This builds on research into relational demography (Tsui & O’Reilly, 1989) which suggested that cross-sex interaction in work relationships tends to be characterized by less role clarity than same-sex interaction. Client encounters between a female employee and a male client were experienced by both parties as uncertain, unpredictable and unstructured situations. Feelings of uncertainty tend to place a premium on appearing to be “the right sort of person” (Kanter, 1977), which may cause the employee to behave in a way that they believe matches the client’s expectations. Ibarra (2007) suggests that this exacerbates stereotypes as when clients bring gender-typed expectations and biases to the encounter, they are more likely to elicit gender-linked behaviour from women professionals. *“When professional women expect their male clients to hold gender biases, they will look for those biases to reveal themselves in their interactions. Influenced by these beliefs, professional and client may negotiate a stereotypic male-female exchange.”*(p.21)

Women in male-dominated firms will perceive greater psychological and behavioural differences between men and women and will define these differences along sex-role stereotypes (Ely, 1995). Following social identity and self-categorisation theories (Chattopadhyay, Tluchowska and George, 2004a; Chattopadhyay, Tluchowska and George, 2004b), such women would evaluate women's attributes less favourably to the firm’s criteria of success. And as echoed by Eagly & Karau (2002), Ely found that women have two carefully circumscribed gender roles required for them to enact simultaneously - the masculine role and the seductress sex-object role. Ely found that sex-integrated firms (those with considerably more than token numbers of women in management at all levels) had greater latitude in gender roles, with the women consciously enacting masculine and feminine roles as they saw fit. In male-dominated firms, women’s discomfort with sex-roles and rating themselves less favourably in

relation to the firm's requirements for success would explain lower levels of job satisfaction, lower expectations and desire for promotion. In sex-integrated firms, biological sex was less tightly linked to bipolar construction of gender. Women had a greater sense of acceptance, higher satisfaction with firms and optimism about their careers.

Liff and Ward (2001) examined the under-representation of women in senior management positions within a UK high street bank. Junior and middle male and female managers were asked their perceptions of the personality and behaviour characteristics associated with success within their organization. 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 behaviours varied - particularly in relation to the perceived incompatibility between active parenting and senior roles. The uncertainties around succeeding as a female in this UK retail bank were considered to be reinforced by the very small number of visible senior women who could act as role models. Those women who had made it to senior roles were described by participants as having "lost their femininity". Characteristics and behaviours required for career success were reportedly more 'male' than 'female', and descriptions of what was required were of either a paragon or someone "not very nice" or "unnatural". This is a recurring theme in rationalist or voluntarist explanations of why women choose not to pursue high level careers. Paraphrasing Schein, Mueller, Lituchy, and Liu's, (1996) well-known phrase, Liff and Ward suggest "*think female manager, think childless superwoman!*"

Gibson and Cordova (1999) found that the proportion of women at the various hierarchical levels within an organization made a difference to men's but not women's cross-sex role modelling patterns, and women in sex-balanced firms were less likely to place an importance on same-sex role models. They found that across organizations, women were less likely to have specific role models for success and more likely to have negative role models. In firms with a greater number of female partners, women were more likely to say they had good role models available to them for career success, though their role models were not necessarily senior females. These findings are consistent with many of those of Ely (1994; 1995).



Some practical implications are clear from these findings. Increasing the number of women in senior positions may help organizations both reduce turnover and draw on a wider range of female talent. These studies also suggest that visible role models of women in authority could be associated with an increase in women's ambitions, not just because the exemplars prompt the individual women to increase their career aspirations, but because, by their presence, they start to change the old gender schema of status and power (Ragins and Sundstrom, 1989).

### ***2.5.3 Demography and Sex differences in role modelling***

So far in this review, I have examined the process of role modelling, whether and why this may affect women's work identity, and am now considering the significance of the gender demographic context. I am interested in investigating how a lack of senior female role models affects women managers at senior levels, who I expect to be in their 30s to 50s. Gibson's (2003) work illustrates that there are career stage differences of role modelling within the professional services context. Gibson's mid-career group average age was 38, whilst the late career group average age was 47 years, so findings related to both those groups are of interest. From organizational demography research, the work of Kanter on minority group interactions with the majority, and research by Ely on the influence of different sex compositions of organizations on women's career outcomes are particularly useful in helping to understand the context.

In addition to Gibson's work, there are a few other studies on role modelling and sex differences, but they are predominantly limited by undergraduate or junior samples and experimental designs. Lockwood (2006) examined same-sex and opposite sex role models with undergraduate students, revealing that women are inspired by outstanding women in their field, although not by outstanding men. Lockwood suggests that female role models are particularly inspiring in situations where they are in the minority, such as in the organizations studied in this research. They provide evidence that barriers can be overcome despite discrimination, and may be an important means of undermining negative gender stereotypes. However, I suggest that the efficacy of the role models would depend on how "similar" they are perceived to be. Lockwood suggests that for women, exposure to another successful woman can make them rate themselves more positively, and possibly also perform better. As she predicted, however, gender did not affect male participants' identification with a role model, and their self-evaluations were not affected by exposure to

male role models. Lockwood suggests this is because men do not face the same career barriers, and have no need for exemplars of success. However, she did not say whether the men in question were white, based on her premises of women being a minority, perhaps men from a non-white ethnic background may have fared differently. This overcoming of obstacles seems to be one component of what makes successful women into role models for other women, although in her studies both male and females said that gender was relatively unimportant. This was an interesting study, although limitations in terms of generalisability include the fact that the subjects were undergraduates and it was experimental in design. Lockwood suggests that future research should look at the long-term effects of role models on women's career performance, and to assess whether same-sex role models are important in non-traditional careers, as in this study.

A further recent study looking directly at role models is that by Murrell and Zagencyk (2006). As previously mentioned, research on organisational demography and power suggests that the demographic context of the working environment influences women's identification processes as managers. In addition, the perceived availability of female role models may itself be influenced by the gendered nature of the organizational context affecting how role models are defined. The stated findings of this study were that in order to be considered as a role model, women needed to give, but not ask for advice, have earned organizational rewards (i.e. pay and status), hold leadership positions, and maintain strong ties with other employees. In contrast, in order to be seen as a role model, men only needed to have a number of friendship or advice ties. Whilst these findings appear interesting, the definition of role model used in this study is questionable. The participants were all junior undergraduate administrative staff at a university who had all been asked to rate each other's job performance. The authors prescribed that any individual who scored above the mean score was defined as a role model – this was a third of the group, and took the definition of role model away from the individuals involved. The relationships between the participants and role models were described as informal dyadic relationships, whereas most accepted definitions of role models (as opposed to informal mentors) specify that the relationship need not be dyadic – the role model need not be aware of his/her role model status. However, the authors' claim that women have to do more than men to establish their legitimacy is in line with findings of other studies (see below). Interestingly, the issue of whether or not someone who asks for advice (as opposed to just gives advice) can be seen

as a role model came up in the descriptions of senior women of the pilot study (Sealy, 2008).

In her 2007 paper, Ibarra explains how her male sample used role modelling techniques to develop the 'acquisitive' style which they see successfully displayed by the men above them. The women in her study did not believe that they would succeed using the acquisitive style and so used more true-to-self techniques and developed a more 'protective' style. Their beliefs are supported by a body of evidence showing that women using masculine leadership styles are judged more negatively by both men and women than men using the same style (Eagly, 2007). "*Since they perceive that 'acting like a man' or 'acting like a woman' would likely backfire or reduce credibility, many chose to adopt a neutral or protective stance*" (Ibarra, 2007, p.22).

Although Gibson (2003, 2004) did not take a gendered perspective, he does address sex differences in his discussion. Stating that women typically have fewer available same-sex role models, he suggests that women face an arduous cognitive task of translating male role model behaviour into behaviour that works for them. The pool of role model material for women is constrained, providing them with lower-quality information than that available to men. Women must adapt the types of behaviours that work for men in order to make them work for them. Women's role modelling requires greater cognitive processing. Whereas men can **take** the attributes that the organization has recognised and rewarded in their male role models and add those behaviours to their own repertoire, women have to **make** such images from role models that come from more diverse and fragmented sources. This would suggest a structuralist rather than developmental standpoint – in other words, that patterns of modelling are dependent on the gender context that individuals find themselves in, rather than on inherent differences in modelling tendencies between men and women. This structuralist position contends that men and women have equivalent abilities and similar desires for role models and organisational achievement, suggesting that a failure of equality of achievement is due to contextual factors. Therefore, any differences in the identification patterns for men and women are likely to be due to systematic differences in the demographic availability of role models to men and women.

## 2.6 Argument for the research gap

After a decade with little interest, organizational researchers are again beginning to treat role models as an important developmental relationship. However, as this review has thus far shown, the extant literature on role models is limited. Despite Gibson's excellent work into the cognitive processes, the conceptualization of the values of role models is lacking. The symbolic or affective value of role models needs much deeper level research. Studies that highlight the role of affect between the individual and potential socializing agent are not new (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Yost, Strube & Bailey, 1992; Kram, 1988), but as Ibarra states "benefits of modelling styles and behaviours that do not feel very self-congruent have not received much empirical attention" (1999, p. 785). Previous role model research has relied on mainly experimental research with hypothetical 'role models' looking at how various characteristics might affect performance, but using undergraduate samples or poor conceptualization of the role model construct. With the exception of Gibson's and Ibarra's studies, there is little empirical research in organizational settings concerning the criteria for choosing role models and how this impacts identity construction, which I argue from this review is likely to affect successful role modelling. Apart from Gibson's career stage study, I found no research on role models at a senior organizational level. More research is needed to develop a better understanding of the process and the relevance of role models and work identity in demographic context.

One of the problems often cited with the psychological study of identity is that it is often treated from a Functionalist perspective (Gioia, 1998) – i.e. as something that exists and can be tested, as opposed to something socially and symbolically constructed. Gibson (2003) explored the cognitive processes of role modelling but even in his own definitions, (e.g. the basis of construing positive role model attributes was "*the degree to which the individuals think they are sufficiently similar in their environment*" (p. 599) he explicitly includes the social context. This review suggests that role models play a part in the continuous development of identity transitions in social contexts. Such issues "*that question the definitional dimensions of identity are a healthy sign of an underdeveloped but high-potential concept*" (Gioia, 1998, pp.24)

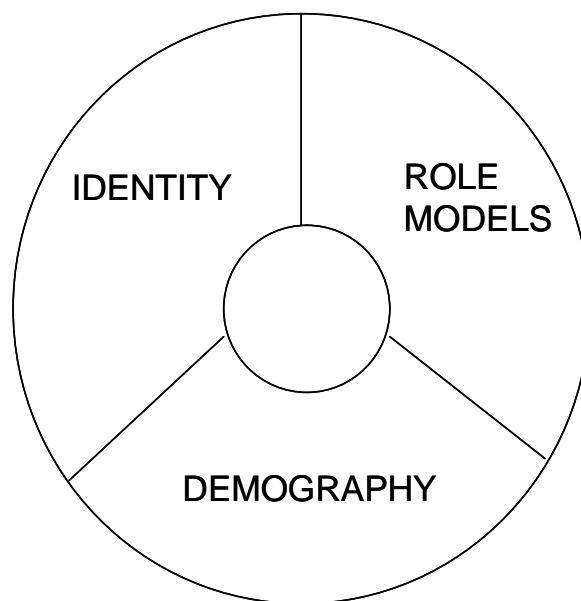
From the literature on social theories of identity, identification with a group is an important factor that affects the person's readiness to accept that social category as

part of their definition of self. People organise and construe the world around them in ways that reflect the social groups to which they belong. For women at management levels in token or minority demographic contexts, the lack of availability of senior female role models highlights the limited access of women as a social group to top levels of that organization. If an individual can identify strongly with the organization, they may interpret the world and their place within it, in a manner consistent with the organization's values, ideology and culture. This may be a key point when looking at women's common disillusionment with their organization (eg the 'off-ramping' described by Hewlett and Luce, 2005 and 2007), explaining how they do not comfortably share the social identity of their work environment. If they cannot easily identify with the organization's (masculine) culture, perhaps it is at this point that the need for an individual role model becomes more salient. Alvesson and Wilmott (2002) talk about the emotional labour of counteracting imposed identities – which they describe as *micro-emancipation* (pp. 637). Women may find social and emotional support in networks and groups, but similar to Gibson's arduous task of cognitive processing, it is hard work to continually push back against an identity that others assign, if it is not congruent with one's own self-concept.

Social identity theory explains that the individual's belief structures regarding social mobility are key to understanding why some individuals take action to achieve a more positive social identity, whereas others assimilate the attributes of their social group to their personal detriment. But where do these beliefs stem from and who or what determines whether the desired group boundaries are permeable or not? As hinted in Gibson and Cordova's (1999) paper, perhaps the importance of the role models is mainly symbolic, to help both genders change their cognitive schema of what is possible. The presence of the senior female proves that boundaries are permeable. Gibson would argue that there needs to be some degree of attraction/similarity for the role model to be perceived as 'available', and Ibarra would suggest, for the role model to be used successfully. But perhaps the symbol is sufficient to provide permission to change the gender stereotype role?

Kossek et al (2003) show the challenges of taking a purely structuralist approach of just recruiting more women, 'throwing women at the situation', as the result was that the male majority group started to acknowledge the competition as a threat to their

own careers. In the UK, underlying organizations' structural or attitudinal factors may still tend to go unnoticed and unaddressed by equal opportunities legislation. That inequalities at work can predominantly be overcome by ensuring opportunities are available to all and that women try hard enough, is very much the liberal feminist idea on which such legislation initiatives are based. This can have negative connotations as it places the responsibility squarely on the women's shoulders, emphasising deficiencies in their own behaviour or attributes. Men perceive the prevailing attitudes and norms to be gender neutral, and are at ease with them (Simpson, 1997). Women are more aware of barriers, but often find them hard to define, as individual successful women are held up as examples of why the system is not at fault. But all too often the example is not an attractive one for women aspiring to get to the top, in terms of either the style or behaviours used, the similarity to them, or the sacrifices made to get there - hence the requirement for more relevant and attractive role models.



**Figure 2-2 Identifying the literature gap**

Having established that role models are used in identity formation, one of the biggest challenges facing researchers trying to establish why role models are important for senior women is the paucity of literature that links or integrates the various findings and levels of identity work. This is something that Cornelissen, Haslam and Balmer (2007) noted in a recent article looking at the disparate areas of social identity, organizational identity and corporate identity. In the emerging field of work identity, there are a number of competing literature areas: the social identity literature which

focuses on the cognitive psychological aspects of identity formation; the literature on human assets, social capital and networks; and the more sociological investigations of structures, demographics and institutional behaviour. The recent research on relational identification attempts to integrate personal and social aspects and shows promise in its relevance to the use of and perhaps the construction of role models. But I feel that work on role models could go further in combining these literatures and show how micro-level cognitive processes, affected by macro-level demographics, feed into larger systems and the underlying mechanisms of organizational structures.

## **2.7 Conclusion**

A number of surveys recently cited the lack of senior female role models as a major barrier to women's career success. A comprehensive literature search of research on role models, as distinct from mentors or coaches, conducted in organizational settings produced a very small sample of studies. The behavioural value of role models has been well documented (Bandura, 1977b; Ibarra, 1999; Gibson, 2003). The above review has indicated how role models are used, drawing on Gibson's work on the cognitive and structural aspects of role modelling, and Ibarra's work on how behavioural role models guide the development of provisional selves. These studies in particular provide a partial answer to why role models are important: they are needed for identity construction. But as Yost, Strube and Bailey (1992, p.10) propose "although we know *what* the self becomes, we lack an understanding of *how* the self becomes". The initial review of that small body of role model literature led to the inclusion of two related areas – work identity formation as a key explanatory factor behind the link between the lack of senior female role models and the lack of career progression, and organizational demographics as the contextual factor affecting the availability of role models. Organizational demography research has highlighted that women struggle to find suitable role models in organizations where the demographic profile is not sex-balanced, and I have argued that this difficulty is likely to become stronger as women reach senior levels. Ibarra (1999, p.788) concluded that issues concerning gender and demographics should be investigated to "further our understanding of processes that affect the course of women's careers".

Work environments in the UK have changed in the past 15 years and a new generation of female middle managers have senior and executive management

positions within their sights. They are armed with the qualifications and experiences required and hence there should be few barriers to their success. So why are their plans thwarted and why do they cite the lack of senior female role models as critical? Previous research suggests that both men and women struggle to adapt stereotypic cognitive schema of gender in the workplace, and this may be the key value of role models.

Building on the review of literature above, a research gap was identified to ascertain further the value of female role models for senior female managers. As well as the behavioural value, the symbolic value has been mentioned but not explored in depth, but there may be other values that help explain why female role models are important for senior women. We need to understand whether the availability, proximity and successful use of role models are key antecedents to the identity formation and career success of senior female managers.

To clarify the value and importance of role models for senior women there is a need for research to:

- take a more integrated approach to the study of role models and work identity formation, by pulling together literatures on organizational demography, the cognitive construal of role models and the importance of behavioural and symbolic role models for successful work identity formation in senior women;
- to provide insight into why the few women at the top of organizations are often rejected as role models; and
- to increase the conceptual understanding of the symbolic value of role models.

This thesis seeks to address these gaps in knowledge by asking *why* role models are important for senior women? In order to address this issue, the question of *how* the process of work identity formation is influenced by the presence or absence of role models needs to be examined. Therefore, supplementary research questions are:

- What are role models?
- Who are role models?



- How are role models used?

And the main research question is:

- *How do role models influence the formation of senior women's work identity in male-dominated firms?*

N.B. An earlier version of this literature review has been accepted for publication by International Journal of Management Review (co-authored with my supervisor, Dr. Val Singh, forthcoming). A copy of that manuscript can be found in the Appendices – see Appendix 1.



## **Chapter 3 - Methodology**



## Chapter 3 - Methodology

### 3.1 Introduction

At the end of the previous chapter a research gap was identified and this chapter will now explain how the study moved from theory to practical research. The main research question being considered is *How do role models influence the formation of senior women's work identity in male-dominated firms?* Additional questions to clarify *what and who role models are*, as well as *how role models are used* are also addressed. I start, in section 3.2, by considering various philosophical approaches to academic research, and then make the case for a realist approach to be utilised in this research. Section 3.3 outlines the research design. Section 3.4 and section 3.5 describe the processes of data collection and analysis. In section 3.6, I look at some possible limitations of the chosen methodology, and I finish the chapter with a short conclusion, explaining how the findings will be presented.

### 3.2 Philosophy and research approach

#### 3.2.1 Philosophical approach

Every researcher consciously or unconsciously, has philosophical preferences and fundamental assumptions about the nature of reality (ontology) and the approaches used to gain understanding of and knowledge about this reality (epistemology). The purpose of each piece of research, the theoretical perspective underpinning it, research questions and research design should all be in alignment (Partington, 2002) and social science researchers need to be cognizant of the options available to them so they can ensure this is the case.

“Examining your beliefs is difficult, but extremely worthwhile” (Blaikie, 1993).

The philosophical approach is viewed through the research issue. As there is limited empirical data into the conceptualization of role models, there is a need for exploratory research in order to gain a deeper understanding of its constructs and values. In addition to extending our understanding about what a role model is, this research seeks to answer the question of why the concept is important, with reference

to work identity development, and it is hoped that patterns in the data will give rise to explanations of how role models are utilized, in the research context.

### **3.2.2 *Ontology and Epistemology***

The many different philosophical perspectives can be organized on a continuum ranging on the one hand from the scientific and objectivist positions of the natural and traditional sciences, called “positivist”, through to the more subjectivist approaches, usually labelled “interpretivist” on the other - although this covers a wide range of approaches. (See Morgan and Smircich, 1980, p.492 for a good summary table, and Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe, 2002, for an excellent overview.)

Positivist ontology holds that reality exists separately from the researcher, and that this reality can be observed and explained. The positivists’ social reality is a system of causal relations between humans and events, causes of which are external to the individual. Knowledge of this reality can be observed and predicted, but the purpose of research is not to explain beyond that which is observable. The approach to the research of positivism places an emphasis on the objective measurement of facts, where the researcher is independent of that which is being studied and the research is designed with objective criteria. Positivism has strong links with quantitative research methods, where hypotheses are developed based on existing knowledge, and the data are used to test these. The recent role model study by Murrell & Zagenczyk (2006) took a positivist approach to the definition of role models, looking at differences between men and women’s survey responses. Such a perspective ignores the importance of context and the experience of meaning. Further such quantitative analysis of surveys may not shed sufficient light on the concept to generate the understanding of how individuals define the construct for themselves and why it is important to them. Therefore, the positivist approach of objective, scientific studies is not considered appropriate for the research issues of this study.

At the other end of the continuum Interpretivism regards reality as consisting of meanings, culture and social institutions - the product of social actors negotiating meaning through their actions. Social reality is not something that can be observed, it is an interpretation. As Blaikie (1993: p.176) states:

“For Interpretivism, the social world *is* the world perceived and experienced by its members from the ‘inside’. Hence the task of the social scientist is to discover and describe the ‘insider’ view, not to impose an ‘outsider’ view on it.”

The social researcher grasps the concepts and meanings from the actors and reconstructs them into social science language. Interpretivists seek to understand the meanings and interpretations that individuals experience, which motivate their intentions and guide their behaviours. For example, Grint (2000) challenges the positivist approaches that much leadership research takes, saying that the concept of leadership can only be understood by understanding the meaning for those involved. Interpretivist philosophies have strong links with qualitative research, where theory may be built through the analysis of data. Account should be taken of the external context, and in the case of business research, the workplace environment. In this study, the context given is the imbalanced gender demographics of the senior levels of global investment banks. Interpretivist research would be cognizant of the effect that the context can have on the meaning and experience of the social actors.

### **3.2.3 Realism**

Sitting mid-way between the extreme poles of positivism and interpretivism is Realism. Realists adopt some of the principles of the natural sciences and accept that an objectively knowable reality exists. However, in line with the interpretivists, realists propose that this objective reality is interpreted in many different ways by the agents involved, acknowledging the roles of perception and individual thought processes. As “an alternative to the conventionalist positivist notion”, Layder (1993, p.16) describes how realism intends a “scientific attitude towards social analysis at the same time as recognising the importance of actors’ meanings”.

Bhaskar’s notion of critical or transcendental realism, focuses on the ‘generative mechanisms and takes the view that the “social world is reproduced and transformed in daily life (1989, p.4).

“We will only be able to understand – and so change – the social world if we identify the structures at work that generate those events and discourses... These structures are not spontaneously apparent in the observable patterns of events;

they can only be identified through the practical and theoretical work of the social sciences” (1989, p.2)

It is the generative mechanisms, offering the prospect of change, that make this approach *critical*. Unlike positivists, critical realists are happy to include in their explanation “theoretical terms that are not directly amenable to observation” (Bryman & Bell, 2007, p.18).

Sitting between positivism and interpretivism, there is no necessarily strong link with either qualitative or quantitative research methods. And as Morgan and Smircich (1980, p.499) say:

“the range of possible approaches to qualitative research indicates clearly that the dichotimization between quantitative and qualitative methods is a rough and over-simplified one. Qualitative research stands for an approach rather than a particular set of techniques, and its appropriateness – like that of quantitative research – is contingent on the nature of the phenomena to be studied.”

### **3.2.4 The case for a Realist approach**

Approaches to social enquiry range on a continuum from the absolutist extreme position of the Positivists, believing in objectivity and truth, with the researcher completely detached, to the relativist extreme of Hermeneutic Interpretivists, who believe there can be no objectively valid interpretation of a social situation, as the researcher cannot stand outside of the situation. Interpretations shared by participants may be regarded as objective, in as much as they are their reality, which can be communicated. Realism attempts to avoid the challenge of objectivity by separating the tools for explaining reality (transitive science) from reality itself (intransitive objects of science).

“If the mechanism that is hypothesized in a model can be shown to exist and act in the manner postulated, then it must be true. Theories can be regarded as being either true or false, a claim that is regarded as unproblematic” (Blaikie 1993, p.212)



Realist ontology states that the objects of scientific enquiry do exist outside the research. The **empirical** consists of observed events, the **actual** exists whether observed or not, and the **real** consists of processes that generate these events.

“Realist science is to explain observable phenomena with reference to underlying structures and mechanism” (Blaikie, 1993, p.98)

As Tsang and Kwan (1999, p. 762) said, in addition to observable events we can see in our empirical research, there is another real domain “in which generative mechanisms capable of producing patterns of events reside”.

Reality can be experienced and observed in different ways and it is rare that there is only one answer to a research question. As Wilson said:

“It would be naive to think that there exists a ‘true’ response to any given question, because every reply is an artifact produced by the particular interviewer’s interaction with a specific respondent in a given context” (1996, p.117).

Taking a critical realist approach allows structural and cultural conditions within the investment banks of this study to be seen as having an existence – a degree of objectivism. And each person’s experience of a role model, their requirement for it, their definition of what it means, their utilization of it, and their expression of understanding of the concept will be affected by their context. However, patterns of experience may emerge when analyzing the data that throw light on the interaction processes of these women with their work environment. Realist epistemology is based on the construction of models to explain the underlying mechanisms of reality.

Realists critique positivists as they cannot account for how social reality is constructed, or how people interpret their own and others actions. Critical rationalists have similar ontology as positivists but observation is used for deductive reasoning, and theories that survive the trial and error are only ever temporarily accepted as true until proven otherwise. Realists’ main critique of critical rationalism is that theory-testing cannot be purely rational as there is no way to observe reality. And of interpretivism, the realists criticise their view that lay accounts are incorrigible. Bhaskar (1979) described this as ‘linguistic fallacy’ as it fails to recognise that there is more to reality than that which actors describe, and if the constructionist researchers

are constructing the very reality they think they are studying, then this leads to the question of what are they studying? Similarly, in comparing a critical realist perspective to the interpretivist approach of post-modernism, Fleetwood (2005) proposes that the former is better suited to organization and management studies, as the latter has an ‘ontological exaggeration’ of the role of language in determining reality.

The ontology of feminism states that both the natural and social worlds are social constructions, but that these constructions differ according to different life experiences (i.e. those of men and women), and hence multiple realities are possible. As historically, the dominant view of science has been constructed by men it is necessary to focus on women’s constructions of the world. Conventional dualisms: e.g. subjective/objective; true/false; logic/emotion are rejected as androcentric and feminist researchers are encouraged to integrate rational and emotional, feelings and experiences. Descriptions are story-laden, not theory-laden. Knowledge is based on possible shared visions of the future, a tool for liberation not domination, and feminists are committed to change in an emancipatory form, to create a better world. The main critique of feminism from a realist perspective is that there cannot be *a single* feminist epistemological standpoint as the experiences of women are so dependent on race, class and culture. In addition,

“Feminism’s opposition to domination stories locates feminism in an antagonistic position toward any attempts to do science – androcentric or not” (Harding, 1987c, p.188, cited by Blaikie, 1993).

The organizational issue to be researched was the importance of role models and how they were used by senior women, as a number of surveys had cited the lack of senior female role models as an important career barrier for women’s further career progression. A perceived consequence of this was that women were leaving senior corporate positions (Hewlett, 2007) possibly denying themselves the opportunities of the most senior jobs, and certainly withdrawing many years of experience and intellectual capital from the organization. My approach to this research was not that of a liberal feminist, proposing that more women should become and behave as role models, whilst at the same time chastising them for being too masculine and not having made the situation better for the women behind them. My assumption from the

start was that this was likely to be an organizational issue, both in terms of the responsibility for the current situation and any possible change for the future. The aim of the research is to attempt to discover what underlying mechanisms were at play in order for senior female role models to have been identified as so important even for senior women. Following Mavin's (2006, p.361) suggestion that "there is a need to focus future action on challenging and changing the overall gendered structures and systems in place affecting all women in organization", this research adopts a radical feminist approach; committed to change and to producing a better world for both women and men (Blaikie, 1993). It is based upon a sample of women only, and focuses exclusively on their perspective on the experience of having/not having senior female role models, something they may not have considered in depth before. What are considered by liberal feminists as essentially personal problems in a gender-neutral situation - for example failing to get promoted or being sexually harassed - are seen by radical feminists as "a more general condition of the social system, as the consequence of male gender privilege in a society where the male and the masculine define the norm" (Calas and Smircich, 2006, p.294). Through this approach, this thesis attempts to identify some of the effects that the systems and structures operating at a macro-level have at the micro-level of the individual.

Having considered the ontological assumptions of a number of perspectives, it is those associated with critical realism that underpin this research study. It acknowledges that an independent reality exists, separate from the individual, but that reality is produced and reproduced by its members. The philosophical perspective fits well with the intention of gaining a better understanding of the interviewee's understanding of the concept of role models, within the reality of the extremely imbalanced gender demographic context. Taking an exploratory approach to phenomena from the analysis of the subjective, collective accounts of individual women's experiences, the research will seek to understand in what way having or not having female role models has affected their experience of the development of their identity within that work environment. In addition to being well-suited to deal with *what* (descriptive) and *why* (explanatory) questions, this research will seek an explanation of the *how* question to uncover underlying mechanisms and structures that explain unobservable phenomena, through the analysis of the subjective accounts of social actors.

### **3.2.5 The Research strategy**

A critical issue for any researcher is how to answer the *what*, *why* and *how* questions. Where does the research process begin? According to Blaikie, the major approaches to organizational research “imply a particular position on this issue” (1993, p. 131). Deductive strategies move from a general statement to a singular conclusion. The researcher formulates hypotheses based on prior information and gathers data to test the hypotheses. Inductive strategies are the opposite. They start with a singular statement and conclude with generalizations. Inductive strategies are driven by the data, theoretical ideas being produced by the data, and the theory is the outcome.

Realists reject both *induction* (producing generalizations from data) and *deduction* (producing hypotheses to be tested or proved later) as unsatisfactory. Sitting between the two, the *Retroductive/Abductive* research strategy is concordant with realist social science. In order to explain this strategy, a commonly cited example is the ‘discovery’ of viruses. It was known that certain diseases could not be explained by the presence of bacteria. So it was proposed that there must be another type of agent, though at the time it was not known what that agent may be or how it may function. In time research was able to prove their existence and how they work. The same is true of the structure of the atom. It involves a process of description, explanation and redescription. It is a methodical, thoughtful process of reasoning which results in *a* solution proposed for the research problem. In social science it is

“The process of moving from lay descriptions of social life, to technical descriptions of that social life” (Blaikie, 1993, p.177)

It is an iterative process, eliciting mechanisms and underlying processes, and in this study will come from description and re-description of the data. A model is proposed of what is producing an observed regularity, working back from observation to explanation, using “a combination of reason and imagination” (Blaikie, 1993, p. 169) and the research attempts to establish its existence. It is the integration of the theoretical and practical. This approach takes into account the reality of the underlying mechanism, the perceptions of the social actors produced and reproduced, and the philosophical assumptions of the researcher.

### **3.3 Methodology and Research Design**

Much of management and social psychological research uses quantitative methodologies, either using controlled experimental studies or gathering data in the form of surveys and questionnaires. Whilst these methods may be appropriate in many settings, e.g. those with tightly operationalised and clearly defined variables, they have limits with regards to collecting process data, and getting rich contextual information about organizational settings. As discussed above, research should use the best methods available for answering the research questions and when the context (i.e. organizational setting) and individuals' accounts are important, then 'in situ' qualitative methods are more appropriate for the richness of data required. Qualitative research is best used when methods of analysis and explanation are required to understand the complexity of actors' interpretations of and responses to contextual situations. The realist approach taken in this study seeks to understand and explain these actors' realities.

#### ***3.3.1 Rationale for choice of interviews***

I chose interviews as the method of data collection as they are suited to ascertaining individuals' understandings of their experiences, and, crucially, how they reach that perspective (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe, 2002). I did consider alternative methods, such as Repertory Grid for this study. However, as previously mentioned, the methods used in social science research need to be in alignment with the issues being researched. Whilst I felt that Repertory Grid would be likely to produce a good deconstruction of the concept of role models from each individual, it may fail to pick up on the underlying processes that were explaining the importance or the utility of those constructs. Realist interviews assume that the accounts individuals give, reveal true insight into their organizational and personal worlds outside of the interview situation. The interviews were semi-structured. This allows for consistency across the cases, ensuring appropriate information is collected regarding the research questions. However, they are flexible enough to allow me, as the interviewer, to probe any areas of particular interest, or to allow the interviewee to take the discussion in a direction most relevant to them. An advantage of interviews is that most people are relatively comfortable with their format, and many people like talking about their work and lives, thus giving a unique richness of data. A possible disadvantage is that they can

be time-consuming and produce a very large quantity of data. Another possible challenge with transcriptions of interviews is that they can erase context, but notes taken during and immediately after the interview, including contact sheets (see below) may help combat some of this.

### **3.3.2 *Previous pilot study***

As mentioned in the Introduction chapter, this PhD followed on from a previous study I conducted in 11 financial institutions (seven investment banks, two fund management firms, and two retail banks). There I had interviewed 12 Heads of Diversity (HoD) - one organization had both a UK HoD and a non-UK HoD. Part of a HoD's remit is to be seen to be enhancing the career prospects of those from various 'minority' groups, which includes women. As various industry surveys had cited the lack of senior female role models as a barrier to women's career success, the earlier study was designed partly as an initial exploration into what organizations see as the value of role models, and partly to gain access into the organization. The main findings from this exploratory study confirmed the importance of role models, and gave an initial conceptualization of the symbolic value of role models. This was the starting point of the PhD.

### **3.3.3 *Rationale for context***

In this section I will give a brief overview of some of the contextual issues pertinent to organizational cultures; firstly within the finance sector and secondly specifically within investment banks.

#### **3.3.3.1 *The finance sector***

McKinlay (2002) plots "the birth of the modern career" through the banking system of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, describing how remuneration and development were linked to staff commitment, and how in return for good pay and prospects, employees managed themselves with loyalty "and deep conformity with the organization's culture" (Tempest, McKinlay and Starkey, 2004; p. 1530). Career prospects were based on long-term relationships, within a culture of trust and a basis for cooperation and collective action. However, since the mid-1980's, the security of the banking career has declined due to the pace of change in the financial services. The decline of

cartelization, increased competition, and transformations in communication and information technologies have created an industry in turbulence “characterized by accelerating demands for competitive performance” (Tempest et al, 2004; p.1531). With a shift from long-term to short-term perspectives, employees are under increasing pressure to deliver improved results in “an increasingly insecure and hostile environment” (p.1532). Low levels of trust, insecurity and high anxiety, concomitant with such short-term approaches, together with the embeddedness of knowledge in individuals mean that organizations are vulnerable to the loss of vital human resources (Alvesson, 2000). In strong economic climates, the banks attempt to mitigate this risk and buy employees’ loyalty with high performance related pay.

Against this backdrop, in the UK, women have been joining the banking sector in increasing numbers over the past two decades. However, the lucrative positions in the boardroom and on the trading floor are still very much seen as male territory (Ozbilgin and Woodward, 2004; McDowell, 1997). In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a substantial influx of women to the secretarial and administrative positions in the banks. Whilst similar numbers of men and women today are employed in financial services, there is still a concentration of women in the lower ranks of financial organizations, with fewer career opportunities and lower financial benefits (Metcalf and Rolfe, 2009). Reflecting this, and despite increasing numbers of women attaining financial qualifications during the 1980’s and 1990’s, women are substantially under-represented in the finance workforce in central London, reflecting their lower employment in more senior roles in head offices.

Research has suggested that banking has been more forward-thinking in its equality and diversity policies in the past than other industries (Parker, Pascall and Evetts, 1998) with policies on work-life balance, flexible working, maternity leave and career breaks. However, it should be remembered that having policies does not necessitate their implementation in practice and often these benefits are only taken up by those at lower levels, as they are believed to demonstrate a ‘lack of commitment to career’ at medium and higher levels. In addition, motivation for developing such policies in the predominantly American-owned investment banks is likely to have come from the spate of high profile, high pay-out sex-discrimination court cases in the USA. This belief was suggested by a number of the HoDs in the pilot study. Similarly high-

profile employment tribunal cases have also been evident involving City of London finance houses, revealing “the existence of an endemic sexualised culture of male dominance” (Ozbilgin & Woodward, 2004; p. 682). Despite such policies, Ozbilgin and Woodward suggest there is still “widespread and persistent sex discrimination in the sector”, and certainly there appears to be very little evidence of the banks endeavouring to meet the requirements of the 1970 Equal Pay Act (Metcalf and Rolfe, 2009).

Citing Storey et al, (1997) Ozbilgin & Woodward, suggest that technological changes over the past two decades have promoted “masculinist values”, within the banking sector, with a “precarious combination of deregulation, cost reduction strategies, and increased competition”. Whilst banks may profess to demonstrate best practice in terms of human resource management (HRM), in reality the ‘ideal employee’ for promotion still typifies the “perceptions, beliefs, norms and prejudices of the managerial male elite” (p. 677). Through the restructuring of the sector, HRM practices may have legitimized gendered promotion practices with their “spurious objectivity” (p.678), and ‘the right person for the job’ ends up being a male or someone capable of working “in accordance with the male norm of isolating work from domestic life”.

Liff and Ward’s study of retail banks (2001) found a culture which still regards temporal commitment or presenteeism as the main indicator of performance. Two men from their study said that in order to consider a senior management role, they would need to be single or divorced. This is in line with Halford, Savage and Witz’s (1997) findings which suggested that careers in banking are strongly orientated towards single people or the male career model. And conformity was still highly valued, as demonstrated when some of Liff and Ward’s male bank employees said that if women were not prepared to conform “to male behaviour, then they have only themselves to blame” (2001; p. 27) for their lack of career progression.

### **3.3.3.2 Investment banks**

Following the pilot study described above, I chose to focus on those organizations of the original eleven, which were investment banks. There was more parity between those organizations – firstly they were more similar in size and span of activity, and



secondly they had similar corporate hierarchical structures (see below). Investment banks serve as intermediaries between clients and a range of other parties, offering an array of advisory services. Even internal divisions of the banks (e.g. IT and Operations) function in a similar fashion. External services are split mainly between Corporate Finance/Investment banking, which creates and underwrites security issues and performs mergers or acquisitions on the one hand, and Sales/Trading functions which distribute and trade in securities, on the other. At Director and Managing Director level, the roles consist of client advisory work and require generating new business for the firm. According to Ibarra (1999; p.768) “All promotions are up-or-out decisions; those who are not promoted must leave.”

The corporate cultures of investment banks are considered different from fund management firms, and from retail banking organizations “in terms of culture, compensation and fundamental business economics” (Valentine, 2007; p.37). The market is extremely competitive and reputations are key. Keogh (2002; p.19) describes it as “intensely relationship-driven”. In the wake of the current collapse within the banking sector, much focus in the media has been placed on the role, as well as the levels, of performance-related pay. However, in a recent review, Lord Turner of the Financial Services Authority (FSA) concluded that “excessive risk-taking was driven more by systemic behaviours than high levels of pay and bonuses” (Phillips, 2009). These are not cultures where people can ask questions, where performance structure is open or where management can be openly challenged. Investment bank cultures are also anecdotally understood to be very ‘macho’ and aggressive – more so than other male-dominated industries such as, for example engineering, science or technology. The *ideal worker* presents a masculine and instrumental management style (Cames et al, 2001), and there are very few women at the upper levels of these organizations. The pace is fast and competitive, with what were described in this study as “nano-second conversations”, and a large emphasis on individualized performance-related pay in many sections of the bank. Aggressive, domineering behaviours are accepted as a normal part of working life. All of this points to cultures that not only do not *have* many senior women, but may also give the impression that they do not *welcome* senior women, unless they conform to this more masculine style.

As Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep (2006, p.1034) state in their study on identity work, previous research “has shown tremendous benefit in studying problematic organizations, situations, or occupations”. With so few women at the top and substantial negative press over the past two decades in the USA and UK for lawsuits for sexual harassment and discrimination against women in these organizations, the upper echelons of investment banks could well be considered “problematic”.

In order to study what impact a lack of senior female role models may have, this research needed to be conducted in organizations which have such a lack. Investment banks are well-known for being extremely male-dominated. My initial desire was to be able to make comparisons between those investment banks with very few or no women at the top of the organization, and those which were more sex-balanced. However, unfortunately, in the UK, the latter do not exist!

### **3.3.4 Sampling**

Of the seven investment banks I had previously worked with, six agreed to participate in this PhD research. The investment banks studied have clear hierarchical structures that are consistent across the banks. This makes inter-bank grade comparisons possible in a way that might not be so straight forward in other industries. The levels are:

- Associate (post-graduate entry level, of the first “professional” grade)
- Associate Vice President
- Vice President
- Senior Vice President/Director/Executive Director (ED)
- Managing Director (MD)

The six global investment banks each considered themselves a premier global financial services firm, and all had offices in more than 20 countries across the world. Four of the six had head quarters in New York and the other two in Europe, though not the UK. They all had at least 3,500 permanent employees in their London offices. One of the American banks has collapsed since conducting the study and one of the European banks has been acquired by another also European bank. They were all organizations of long-standing, 70-150 years old. Several of them were the result of various mergers over the years. Five of the six banks had total numbers of employees

ranging from 25,000-50,000, with the sixth being considerably larger. In those banks for whom I have figures, the percentage of women on the Board of Directors ranged from 0%-15%, and of women in the senior executive roles figures ranged from 0%-14%.

Access via the HoDs from the previous study was very valuable as the women I wanted to interview are so senior and there are so few of them. For example, in one of the banks, at MD level, there were only 20 women globally, five of whom were UK based, of whom I interviewed four. As well as having substantial jobs and working long hours they are constantly being called upon to speak at various women's events both within and outside of their organizations. Therefore, they tend to be very protective of their time. Through my contact with the Head of Diversity (HoD) at each organization, I requested interviews with four to six of their most senior cohort of women in each bank, with the following criteria:

- Managing Director or Senior Executive Director level
- A variety of banking divisions, except HR (given that the previous study had interviewed all the Heads of Diversity)
- Age 35-55
- Been at the bank at least two years

The sample of 33 senior women was for the most part supplied by the HoDs that I had previously interviewed, with the exception of three women who I met personally through relevant networking events, who were employees of the participating banks and who fitted the criteria. The HoDs were informed of and consented to these additional individuals participating.

I acknowledge that this number (33) is unlikely to be considered a statistically valid sample, but the research will make no such claims. It is an exploratory qualitative study and therefore comments made by one or two interviewees are given as much credence as those made by a number of them. I also acknowledge that it could be said the sample, being predominantly proposed by the HoDs could be considered favourably biased in some way, in terms of the organization. However, given the small numbers of women each bank had who actually exist at that level (see later findings chapter 7), it came down to a sample of convenience, according to who was

willing and available. In addition, as can be seen from the transcripts, these women were very often not particularly positive in terms of their descriptions of the banks.

### **3.3.5 The Women**

The sample of 33 women was comprised of 23 MDs and 10 EDs. They had an average age of 41.6 years, with a range of 29-52. Their average tenure was 10.4 years within their current organization. All were long-term UK based, although 12 were not UK nationals. Substantially more demographic and other individual information is given in Chapter 4 below.

## **3.4 Data gathering**

### **3.4.1 Interview schedule**

From the research interest, the question of why role models are important for senior women was derived from the practitioner world. Then from the literature, the main research question was constructed: *How do role models influence the formation of senior women's work identity in male-dominated firms?* This question was designed to encompass identity formation and demographic context, as I believed from the literature that they may be important (Sealy and Singh, forthcoming – see Appendix 2). An interview schedule was compiled (see Appendix 3) to address this and the supplementary research questions of *What are role models?*, *Who are role models?* and *How are role models used?*. Initial questions were concerned with the woman's own demographic information, and then also their impression of how they saw the demographics of their work environment. They were then asked about who they had found to be inspirational in their work and the reasons why they considered those individuals as such were investigated. This often involved definitions through comparisons with similar others who were not considered role models. Their opinions were sought as to whether they were aware of any impact of a possible lack of female role models may have had on them, and also asked to consider how their working lives might have been different in a more sex-balanced environment. As previously mentioned, the interviews were semi-structured and in all the interviews I endeavoured to cover all of the questions. There were, however, intentionally few questions for the allotted interview time, to allow the interviewee to talk in depth

about their opinions and experiences and for me to probe and question further where I felt clarification was required.

### **3.4.2 Conducting the interviews**

One-to-one interviews were arranged separately with each of the 33 women. The interviews were all face-to-face. They were held on site at the banks' premises, either in the interviewee's private office or a private meeting room. At the start of the interview the interviewee was assured of confidentiality and anonymity for both themselves and their organization and permission was attained to digitally record the interview. The use of a digital recorder meant that I was able to concentrate better on what the interviewee was saying, and respond and probe deeper where appropriate, rather than just taking down the words.

The 33 interviews had an average length in time of 70 minutes and 11,700 words, which when transcribed gave an average of 22 pages of transcript per interview. They were conducted between November 2007 and January 2008. Transcripts were written up within two months. Contact sheets (Miles and Huberman, 1994) were written giving initial impressions shortly after the interview, with further notes added after transcribing and then again after first round coding (see Appendix 4 for an example). During the process of doing these, it often felt like the notes were moving from a more subjective/descriptive to a more objective/analytical understanding of what had occurred.

## **3.5 Data analysis**

### **3.5.1 Units & aspects**

According to Lofland, Snow, Anderson and Lofland (2006), research ideas relate to *units* of organizational scale and to their substantive *aspects*. The combination of these units and aspects is the formation of *topics*. The units considered in this piece of research may include:

- *practices* – which can be considered recurrent or unremarkable talk or action. The analyst makes them remarkable by collecting instances
- *episodes* – remarkable incidents, normal or abnormal
- *encounters* – tiny social systems with two or more people, the lifespan of which is only as long as they remain together

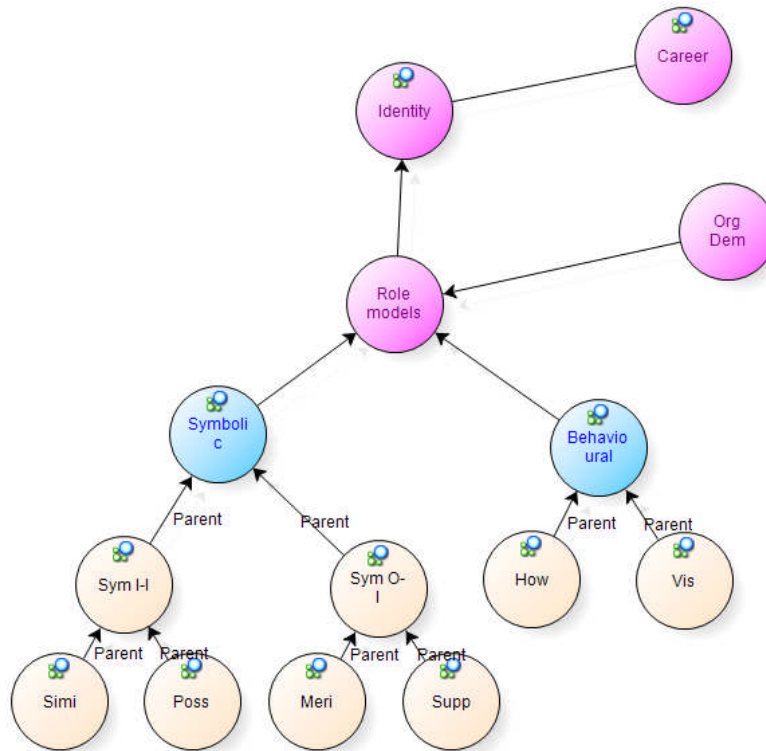
- *roles* – ascribed, formal or informal, consciously articulated and abstracted categories, a role is a label people use to both organize and make sense of their activity
- *relationships* – interactions over time

The fundamental aspects of any unit are the **Cognitive** ones. Meanings are trans-behavioural and interpret, justify and explain the human experience of reality. **Emotional** aspects cannot be separated from meanings, but should be recognised, as a focus on emotional aspects of organizational life may elicit additional understanding of that unit. A common area for research in social sciences is the **Hierarchical** or **Inequality** aspects. Hierarchy can be studied at the level of Groups (e.g. gender) or Relationships, or at the more micro-level of Encounters where one can observe “both the *operation of macro systems of inequality* (e.g. based on class, race, sex) in the lives of human actors and the *creation and re-creation of those systems* by the individual human actors” (Lofland et al, 2006, p.139 – italics are original authors’). Studies at the Encounter level can demonstrate how hierarchy can be “communicated and enacted through diverse practices” (Lofland et al, 2006, p.139).

### **3.5.2 Coding**

Coding is an organizational process, which through identifying themes becomes an interpretive act, and by definition is subjective. But through interaction with the data in an open-minded way, both the researcher and the data bring information to the surface. From a review of the pertinent literature, and following the pilot study mentioned above, a preliminary *a priori* list of themes was identified, but which was open to change. From there, using a computer assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDA) software tool, NVIVO 8.0, an initial framework was constructed to organize and categorize the data (see Figure 3-1 below). Transcripts were then coded both top-down using the identified themes, and also bottom-up with each theme fleshed out with more detail, both generalizing and specifying (see Appendix 5). Thus the coding followed an interpretive framework (Spiggle, 1994) rather than truly emergent coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The NVivo software usefully also has the ability for the researcher to keep a journal and write memos or anecdotes whilst coding, and make linkages between various documentary sources. I found these particularly useful during the early stages of coding. It is important to note, however,

that the software just supports the analysis of data, rather than actually conducting it (Bazeley, 2007).



**Figure 3-1 Initial coding framework**

### **3.5.3 Preliminary coding**

Template Analysis (King, 2007) emphasises the use of hierarchical coding and is a balance between the structured model/framework approach and the loose phenomenological approach. It allows for a good overview but also by taking coding down 4-5 levels, allows detailed analysis of specific data. Sections of data were coded (in size, anything from a phrase to a paragraph) either onto the initial framework of *tree nodes*, constructed following the pilot study and the literature, or ideas and concepts that did not fit onto the initial template were coded to new *free nodes*. Several codes can be overlaid in a passage of text. Simultaneously to conducting initial coding, I read and extensively re-read the field-notes in order to build up a sense of the whole. Initially this did, inevitably, lead to a substantially long list of nodes. King (2004) cautions against having too many levels, as the template can become unwieldy, but I found that often I needed to get down into the minutiae detail, in order to then pull-back and re-categorize several nodes at the same level.

### **3.5.4 Clustering Codes**

Descriptive codes have little intellectual shape on their own, but after coding about eight interviews, initial memoing and re-reading of annotations was conducted, and some more common themes began to emerge. Clustering codes, organising the nodes, in *meaningful* rather than *logical* groups helps to create an operative coding scheme, like a “conceptual web” (Miles & Huberman, p.63), and codes started to take on more interpretive elements, rather than purely descriptive. Pattern Coding is the quest for “repeatable regularities” (Miles & Huberman, p.69) and is analogous to cluster analysis or factor analysis in quantitative research. At this stage of analysis, a quantitative stance can be useful, and I considered the list of codes to see what is of interest numerically. Whilst it is important not to mistake frequency for importance, as some interesting things may occur only once, this did give a sense of what the most commonly discussed themes were. Clustering codes is a more inferential and explanatory process and I began to discern more emergent patterns, themes or relationships. A *conceptual structure* or *template* began to emerge. As coding of the remaining data continued, earlier categories were moved or removed, and the number of new nodes added at each interview diminished, until “saturation” point was reached (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) – in this instance at about the twentieth interview coded. Further iterations and re-reading lead to more abstraction of the coding to meta-categories.

### **3.5.5 Asking Questions**

Lofland et al (2006) suggest that *topics* – i.e. *units* and *aspects* – are entities about which one should ask questions as one analyses the data. They suggest eight areas: types, frequencies, magnitudes, structures, processes, causes, consequences, and human agency. The purpose of asking questions about *topics* is to develop social science *answers* – i.e. *propositions* about a social/organizational situation. Taking a Realist approach, but also trying to be self-reflexive as part of the research journey, I was also asking questions such as how did the language I used, my suppositions, and my responses to the interviewees, influence their responses? These questions asked are an attempt to interpret the embedded experience of other people. However, ultimately, the perspective taken for this research was more reflective or calculative, rather than reflexive or meditative. But, as Lofland et al suggest, it is often not until



one starts writing that the core ideas and new connections become more apparent, and this can lead to a modification the coding template.

For example, the initial template had four meta-categories of Career, Demographics, Identity Issues, and Role Models. However, after discussion with colleagues, I decided to disregard the nodes in Career category, as, whilst interesting, they did not seem initially directly relevant to the research question of the study. The organization of nodes in the Role Model category was relatively clear-cut, with many of them falling within the initial framework predicted from the previous study. However, the contents of the Identity Issues category were at first much less clear. Some nodes clearly followed from the questions asked but others had emerged. From reading and re-reading the contents of just these nodes, it became clear that they could be organised into the (obvious in hindsight) temporal themes of *Past Me*, *Present Me*, and *Future Me*. However, it then became clear that there was not much data in the *Future Me* theme. I went back to the sources in NVivo and could see that what data I had was also often coded in a node called *aspirations*, which had been in the Career category. I then revisited the career nodes, recoding where necessary. I re-categorised all the data from the Identity Issues nodes into *Past Me*, *Present Me*, and *Future Me*, and further re-reading lead to the groupings such as those listed in the Findings section – e.g. Early career role models; Adapting for career progression; Adaptation and integrity. It is important to recognise that the coding structure is a summary of where the research is up to, the template is unlikely ever to be a “final” version, but rather a “good enough” version to tell the story (see Appendix 6 for full list of nodes). It is the continuous and parallel practice of analysis and synthesis of the empirical data and emergent theory, operationalizing realism, that helped me to understand some of the underlying processes occurring for these women.

## **3.6 Methodological limitations**

### **3.6.1 Validity and reliability**

Researcher bias is often problematic with qualitative research, as it is highly likely that my personal interests and opinions will be echoed in my interpretation of the results presented. As a researcher I have to take responsibility not only for sometimes leading the conversation and therefore biasing what is discussed, but also for the interpretation of that. However, in a qualitative study such as this one, the concepts of

validity and reliability need to be reconceptualised in line with one's philosophical approach. There is no *control group* with which one compares the findings from the participants. Miles and Huberman (1994) use terms such as "credibility" or "authenticity". Lather's (1993) criteria of validity is does the research have an impact, will it lead to social change? Lofland et al (2006) describe how the concept of "trueness" can be aimed for with theoretical candour regarding empirical details, accurate account of the ethnographer's path, and good field-note evidence. Rigour is then associated with being consistent and trustworthy in the collection and interpretation of the data. They do not suppose that these processes lead to objective factual truth, but they do help to provide a mindset for the researcher, to heighten concern about empirical trueness.

As Willaims and May (1996) said

"our own biographies are an unavoidable part of the research process" (p.118)

It is inevitable in such qualitative research that the researcher's beliefs, experiences, and approaches to the research will affect how the data is both collected and analysed. Observation, by its nature, is selective, and a researcher is constantly making choices about what to record or leave out, and in interviews which subjects to pursue, and may not be consciously aware of these choices. In the process of writing we may simplify and lose some of the richness of the immediate context. In addition, one should remember that informants are also selective, whether unwittingly or deliberately, they may omit, overplay or downplay significant aspects of their behaviours or perceptions. Being cognizant of and addressing these issues as much as possible should help reduce some researcher bias.

In order to address issues of reliability, at several points along the journey of analysis I engaged with peer review of progress, including conceptual and theoretical discussions of the findings with colleagues. I also had the opportunity to present initial findings at two round-table conference sessions, in the UK and USA, with peers. In addition, towards the end of the coding process I presented my initial findings back to approximately half of the interviewees, which were then discussed in an open forum. The meeting was only attended by interviewees, under "Chatham House rules" and the focus was around clarity of their meanings and experiences.

### **3.7 Presentation of findings**

In this chapter I have outlined how the PhD moved from theory to practice, how the data was collected and analyzed. The research findings will be presented over the next four chapters. Chapter four looks at the demographics details of the women, including a more in-depth description of four of the sample. Chapter 5 looks at the findings regarding the conceptualization of role models, answering the questions *What are role models?*, *Who are role models?*, *How are role modes used?* and *Why are role models important?* Chapter 6 looks at the importance of role models for work identity development, and Chapter 7 considers the impact of the demographic context within which these women work.



## **Chapter 4 - The Women**



## Chapter 4 – The Women

In the Literature Review I highlighted a number of surveys that have suggested that a lack of senior female role models is a career barrier for women. In addition to looking at the literature on role models, the review was expanded to include literature on work identity development, as this appears to be a utility of role models, and also research on the demographic context, as this affects the availability of role models. The research question proposed is: *How do role models influence the formation of senior women's work identity in male-dominated firms?* As described in the previous Methodology chapter, this question has been explored via interviews with 33 women from six global investment banks, representing very male dominated work environments. In this the first of four findings chapters, I present the demographic information gleaned from the women in the sample. Whilst this is a qualitative piece of research, in this chapter, I am presenting descriptive statistics which I believe are relevant for gaining a greater contextual understanding of who these women are, and the lenses through which they view their careers. The next sections will cover personal demographics such as age, tenure and family information. Then I will look at some basic results or statistics describing the proportions of women dealing with some of the major issues discussed in the subsequent findings chapters five and six, concerning role models and identity issues. The information is summarised in Table 4-1 (below). At the end of this chapter, in order to give the reader a better sense of who these women are, I present four short case studies, with descriptions of four of the female interviewees. The subsequent three findings chapters, with qualitative analysis, will consider the more substantial areas of findings on role models, identity development, and organizational demographics.

### 4.1 Age

The mean age of the 33 women in the sample was 41.6 years, with a range from 29-52 (see Table 4-2). The sample consisted of 10 Executive Directors (ED) and 23 Managing Directors (MD). The EDs were understandably younger, with a mean age of 37.4 years and a range of 29-45. The MDs mean age was 43.5, with a range from 35-52. A subgroup of the MDs, eight women referred to as the Pioneers, were those women who

Alias	Front/Back	Rank	Pstv Female RMs	Ngvtv Female RMs	Women in Career	Pstv Male RMs	Tough Issues	Self-C Issue	Tenure in Org	Tenure in Banking	Age	Nationality	Children	Husband's Occupation
Zara	B	ED	1	1	1	1	1	0	3	3	29	UK	0	Teacher
Carol	F	ED	0	0	1	0	1	1	12	12	32	French	4yr, 1yr	Husband in coporate banking, IB
Susan	F	ED	0	1	0	1	0	0	9	9	34	UK	0	Wants one!
Amanda	B	MD	0	1	1	1	0	1	3	15	35	UK	0	Divorced
Abigail	F	MD	0	1	0	1	1	1	4	14	35	UK	15mths (surrogate)	Stays home - ex-mgmt consultant
Kate	B	ED	1	1	1	1	0	0	15	19	37	UK	4yr, 3yr, 1yr	Works in IB
Kathy	B	ED	1	1	1	1	0	0	7	7	37	UK	2yr + on maternity	Self-employed Sports therapist
Sophie	F	MD	0	1	0	0	1	0	10	10	37	UK	4yr, 2yr + pregnan	Academic (just married)
Vicky	F	ED	1	0	0	1	0	0	10	15	38	Indian	6yr	Is married
Louise	F	MD	0	1	0	1	1	1	11	15	39	USA	Trying	MD in M&A also at MS
Felicity	B	ED	1	0	0	0	0	1	7	17	40	French	3yr, 6yr	Events mgmt, long hrs, poor pay
Lisa	B	ED	1	1	1	1	1	0	2	2	41	UK	step-ch. 18yr, 15y	CIO in a bank
Ellen	B	ED	0	1	1	1	0	1	7	12	41	UK	9yr, 2yr	Gay, part-time nurse- had the ch.
Clare	F	SEVP	0	0	1	1	0	0	13	20	41	UK	1yr	Is married
Penny	F	MD	1	1	0	1	0	0	7	16	41	French	5yr, 1yr	Banker
Jackie	F	MD	0	1	0	1	1	0	4	18	41	UK	Trying (IVF)	In Private Equity
Hannah	F	MD	0	1	0	1	1	1	17	17	41	UK	9yr, 6 yr	Self-employed, football coach
Mel	B	MD	1	1	1	1	1	0	12	17	41	USA	0	No - wants one!
Marion	F	MD	1	1	1	1	1	0	15	15	43	UK	9yr, 6yr, 3yr	Part time IT consultant and home
Faith	B	MD	0	0	0	0	0	0	10	21	43	USA	0	Single
Diane	B	MD	0	1	0	1	1	0	14	19	43	UK	0	Logistics director
Sarah	F	MD	1	0	1	1	0	0	5	23	44	USA	8yr	Hedge Fund Partner
Jill	B	MD	1	0	1	1	0	0	12	12	44	UK	0	Sort of engineer
Anna	B	ED	0	1	1	1	1	0	3	3	45	USA	14yr, 11yr	Banker
Julia	B	MD	1	1	1	1	1	0	10	19	45	UK	14yr, 11yr	Stockbroker
Alicia	B	MD	1	0	1	1	0	0	21	21	45	UK	15yr, 14yr	Solicitor, works from home
Chloe	F	MD	1	1	0	1	1	1	10	22	45	UK	grown-up step-ch.	Sort of in property
Angela	B	MD	1	0	1	1	0	0	19	21	46	UK	0	Retired
Mary	B	MD	0	1	0	1	0	0	22	22	48	Asian	17 yr, 15yr, 11yr	Home-husband
Fay	F	MD	0	0	1	1	0	1	7	22	49	UK	3x teenage	Architect, not long hours
Amy	F	MD	0	1	0	1	1	1	13	26	50	Aus	0	Single
Celia	F	MD	0	1	1	1	0	0	27	27	52	USA	18yr, 15yr	Retired
Joanne	B	MD	1	1	0	1	1	0	14	14	52	UK	17, 20 & 22	Self-employed, microfinance

**Table 4-1 Demographics, role models and identity issues**



had started work at a time when there really were very few women at any level of the bank, and whose longevity of tenure made them stand apart. Their average age was 47.4 and ranged from 44-52 years. In comparison to the main three other studies which inspired this one, Gibson’s mid-career group had an average age of 38, whilst the late career group’s average age was 47 years, in other words, reasonably similar to this. In comparison to Ibarra’s sample, however, the sample used for this study is both older and more senior. The individuals in her sample were transitioning into Vice President (level below ED) or Director (ED) roles. Their age range was 27-36, so considerably younger. In comparison to Ely’s study, her all-female interviewees were working at ‘Associate’ level of law firms, with an average of five years tenure. Their mean age was 32 years, so again, considerably younger than the women in this sample. These comparisons are made, not only because the research of Gibson, Ibarra and Ely is mentioned a number of times in the subsequent findings and discussion chapters, but also to highlight the unusual nature of this sample. These women are very senior in their organizations, which are major global investment banks.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age (yrs)</b>	<b>Age Range</b>	<b>Tenure in Org (yrs)</b>	<b>Tenure in Banking (yrs)</b>
Whole Sample	41.6	29-52	10.4	15.4
EDs	37.4	29 - 45	7.5	9.9
MDs	43.5	35 - 52	<b>12.2</b>	<b>18.5</b>
Pioneers	47.4	44 - 52	<b>15.5</b>	<b>23</b>

**Table 4-2: Age and Tenure**

## **4.2 Tenure**

The mean tenure in their current organization for this sample of women was 10.4 years (see Table 4-2). Some had worked for one or occasionally two other banks prior to their present employment and so the mean amount of time in banking was 15.4 years. For the MDs, the mean within their current organization was 12.2 years but they had served an average of 18.5 years within the industry. For the Pioneers subgroup of MDs, they had been at their current organization for 15.5 years with an impressive average 23 years each in banking. The longevity of tenure for women

within their current bank was surprising, and future research should compare this with a similar male population. Anecdotal evidence suggests that, certainly within those banks based in London, men move between the banks every few years. For reasons which will be explained more in depth in Chapter 7 on Demography, women, being in the minority, may find it much harder to 'fit in'. They invest tremendous emotional resources to manage this. Therefore, they may feel they have made such a substantial investment, that whilst they may not find themselves in a perfect work environment, at least the situation is known. When women have invested in the work relationships with those around them, it is often only over time that they feel stereotypes begin to fade and they feel more accepted as an individual rather than necessarily a representative of their type (Marshall, 1984). Longer-term relationships are significant and therefore help keep the women where they are.

Only three of the 33 women had been in banking for less than five years – Zara (3 years) had been a management consultant and had been consulting to the bank in which she now works. Likewise, Anna (3 years), who had a varied background in media, had also been consulting to her current employer. Lisa (2 years) joined the bank to do Finance IT, having done similar roles in other large non-banking organizations. This does make a difference to how they view the organization in which they work, as they have come from different organizational cultures with different demographic mixes. It is also likely to affect how they see themselves in terms of 'fit' in their current organization, if everyone around them has been there a long time. As Anna said: "I work for a bank, I'm not a banker".

### **4.3 Nationality**

Twelve of the 33 women interviewed were not from the UK: there was one Indian, one Australian, three French, six Americans, and one woman who described herself as EuroAsian.

### **4.4 The husbands**

Twenty-eight of the 33 women interviewed were married. Of the five who were not, one was recently divorced, and two declared they were looking! Of the 28 husbands, more than a third (10) were described as not having a career by their interviewee

wives. This ranged from being a “*house-husband*” to “*he does bits of sports coaching, but mostly he’s at home*”. The main point about them was that they provided substantial domestic support for their working wives. But equally interesting was the number of women whose husbands were bankers of some sort – nine out of the 28 – almost the same proportion. I did not ask directly about domestic arrangements, but one or two of these women mentioned paid domestic help – particularly in terms of the fact that they are the ones who have to manage it.

## **4.5 The family**

It should be noted that I did not directly ask about family responsibilities outside of childcare, such as eldercare. Twenty of the 33 interviewees had children under 18 years old, nine of whom had pre-school age children. Two had grown-up step-children. There has been some anecdotal evidence that senior career women with children often only have one (which those who have more than one know to be very different in terms of the logistics and impact on domestic arrangements.) And one interviewee said that it was the case in her bank – she was the only one at her level who had more than one child. However, only four of the twenty women had just one child (i.e 20%). The more interesting and perhaps worrying figure is the 39.4% of these women who did not have children. Given the average ages of this sample, the figure is unlikely to change substantially. Two of the women had been trying to become pregnant for some time, with one having had rounds of IVF treatment. Two said they would love to have a family, but had not yet managed to find a husband, a situation they both felt their career had impacted. The issue of waiting until attaining a certain career level – such as MD – before trying for children was discussed by a few of the women, and most said they would not recommend that to other women. However, the extreme concern expressed by those who were hopeful for children in the future, regarding the possibility of maintaining a career is not disaffirmed by the figures, or by the image often presented by women still working very long hours, with a team of domestic help. This is not dissimilar to Simpson and Altman’s (2000, p.196) findings, saying that women that do succeed, who do survive the choices and processes suggested by those authors as barriers to women’s success, are likely to be: “of a higher quality and calibre than men, with a full focus on careers in the absence

of a family or, if managing a family and career, high levels of stamina or unusual levels of support, to cope with the dual role”.

## 4.6 Role Models

The information gleaned in Table 4-1 allowed me to look for any differences within the sample. Table 4-3 summarises this with numbers and percentages of the sample who talked about positive and negative female role models, having women around them in their career, positive male role models, and whether they struggled with self-confidence and/or being tough/soft. This last issue is something that is discussed in detail in Chapters 5 and 6 below. This section is simply a descriptive summary and the qualitative analysis of these findings is to be found in the following chapters.

In terms of the whole sample, less than half had positive female role models and almost 70% had negative female role models, which would confirm other surveys that women are stating there is a lack of attractive female role models. Fortunately, a little under 90% of the sample said they had positive male role models.

Group		Positive Female RMs	Negative Female RMs	Women present in Career	Positive Male Role Models	Struggle with Tough/Soft	Struggle with Self-Confidence
Whole Sample	No.	16	23	18	29	16	10
	%	48.5%	69.7%	54.5%	87.9%	48.5%	30.3%
Eds (n=10)	No.	6	7	7	8	4	3
	%	60.0%	70.0%	70.0%	80.0%	40.0%	30.0%
MDs (n=23)	No.	10	16	11	21	12	7
	%	43.5%	69.6%	47.8%	91.3%	52.2%	30.4%
Pioneers (n=8)	No.	4	4	5	8	2	3
	%	50.0%	50.0%	62.5%	100.0%	25.0%	37.5%

**Table 4-3: Role Models and Challenges**

There are some interesting differences within the sample, when comparing EDs and MDs. There is a striking difference between the two when looking at the percentage of positive female role models and those who have experienced working with other women (i.e. have not always been the only one,) with EDs having 60% and 70% respectively, whereas the MDs 44% and 48% for the same. This presumably reflects the growing numbers of women in investment banking over the past 15 years. However, both groups report the same percentages of negative female role models. Also interesting is that 100% of the Pioneers group reported using positive male role

models. This is not surprising in that being the ‘firsts’ they would expect to be focused on learning from the men around them. However, 50% of them reported positive female role models (more than the MD group) and 50% reported negative female role models. This is less than either of the other groups, and possibly due to there just not being that many examples ahead of them.

The struggle with the issue of presenting a “tough versus charming” image of themselves is covered in more detail in the next two chapters. From Table 4-3 it can be seen that this is something that more than half of the MDs are still struggling with. Of the EDs, 40% consider this a problem, but only 25% of the Pioneer women reported it as a problem. This lower figure for the EDs than the MDs may be because they have experienced slightly better demographic balance and more egalitarian attitudes thus far in their working lives.

The much lower figure for the pioneers may be due to their own decisions about identity, conscious or otherwise, given the abnormality of the situation they knew they were putting themselves in. In contrast, the non-Pioneer MDs, of whom 67% said this was an issue to some extent, have been “*frankly confused*” by the varying messages they have received throughout their careers about what a woman can become and how she should behave. See Chapters 5-7 for further discussion.

## **4.7 Case Studies**

In order to give the reader a better sense of who these women are, four short case studies follow, with descriptions of some of the female interviewees. As I am including more personal information about the individuals, they will be referred to simply as A, B, C and D, to help preserve anonymity.

Case A was chosen because she is one of the “Pioneers” group of women. She did not have female role models, but did have a couple of very positive male role models. She has a pretty good sense of self identity, a very supportive husband, has maintained her femininity, has not really struggled with the issue of “toughness”, but is very much lacking in self-confidence. Case B was chosen as a very positive member of the interview sample. She was the only one of the 33 who had multiple positive female and male role models throughout her career and dealt with multiple other senior

women on a daily basis. She did not mention struggling either with the 'tough versus charming' issue or a lack of self-confidence. She was one of the most grounded and content of all the interviewees. Case C was chosen as she was one of the younger MDs. She had not had any female role models and was clearly struggling with some gender-specific issues. To some extent she felt she was representative of her generation whose mothers had worked and who had been the first to believe they could 'have it all'. Case D was one of only two interviewees who claimed not to understand the requirement for or benefit of female role models. But her interview was full of contradictions.

#### **4.7.1 Case Study A**

A is an MD in a front office role and is one the 'Pioneers'. Although at her current bank for seven years, she has been doing the same job in various banks for 22 years. Being as she described it "*so long in the tooth*", she has often been "*the first*" and therefore as she stated early on in the interview has never had a female role model "*and actually I think that's had a big impact on me*". She was only the third woman ever to do be in her department, the first "*lady professional to have children, first lady Director and first lady MD*". Note the use of the now rather outdated term "lady".

A very attractive 49 year old woman, she was dressed in a very feminine fashion, and asked to describe herself, she is, she says, first and foremost a wife and mother, "*but the job is an incredibly important part of how I perceive myself.*" She has three teenage daughters with whom she has a very close relationship. She spoke very candidly and emotionally about a couple of occasions where the clashes of work and family life had been resolved with her daughters. Her husband is a professional, but she is "*the main earner*". Whilst being very clear that her family is the most important thing, and she would not compromise those relationships, she was also explicit about needing the stimulation of a challenging job.

"*If you don't have role models it makes you less likely to aspire.*" She describes one of the biggest problems for the women of her generation as that they have surprised themselves with how far they have got. "*Unlike most of my male peers, I'm not thinking I want a job running a division or to be on the board, I'm just thinking 'Wow,*

*I got here'*". She feels it is necessary to believe you can achieve without negating who you are, which she said is what you get from role models with whom you can identify. Despite having experienced discrimination – *"my first boss told me you couldn't do [this job] and have children"*- and sexual harassment, that was more prevalent in previous decades, she has been extremely successful. She puts this down in part to having had good male role models. She described one in her very first job, saying he was demanding, dedicated, a very good coach, inspired loyalty, stood up for principles, and was very fair. These are all attributes she values and took as proof that an individual can be successful without compromising important attributes. Despite her success, she does not have a huge amount of self-belief - *"I'm very proud of how professional I am, but...always surprises me when I get external recognition."* She feels the lack of role models affects identity and self-confidence, and she suffers from the impostor syndrome – a term coined in the 1970's to describe the fear that one is not as smart or as capable as others think. Her argument is that if you see similar others above you, you start to believe you are or could be as good as they are. *"We need to build the expectation that for women, it [promotion] is a right as opposed to a privilege"*.

Many senior women in the organization do not have children. On being a role model, she felt she *"had a duty to prove to other women coming after me that you could have children, and also to my boss"*, whilst emphasising that she was *"just a really average person, who's reasonably good at her job."*

She gets a sense of worth from giving back and is involved with a lot of extra-curricular activities to assist women – e.g. sharing hints and tips, talks about mistakes she's made, at networking events, and talks at her daughters' school about jobs in the city. She emphasises that it is not necessary to have strong male characteristics to succeed, that she has never adopted a more aggressive style, nor engaged in political behaviour. She speaks her mind, and is clearly passionate about what she does.

#### **4.7.2 Case Study B**

B is 44, works in technology and is the most senior female in Europe in her division. Her boss in the US is a woman. When asked who was inspirational, unlike many of the other interviewees who had to think about the question for a moment, she

responded immediately and reeled off five names straight away, two of whom were women. She explained there was no one individual but *“different things, you take different pieces from different people...so lots of people. I’ve always felt very supported.”* Her immediate boss, whom she has known for ten years, is female and a role model *“she’s very grounded...she’s got a family, she is very emotionally aware of people, and very kind, thoughtful...she’s very supportive, but driven...to make the organization successful.”*

They have known each other ten years, and B found *“a lot of similarities in the way we operate”*. And whilst she said she is happy to disagree if she has differing opinions on things, *“some of the values she has in terms of people, and thinking about the organization and the strategy, I’m very aligned to her way of thinking.”* B described how throughout her career at this organization, even if she has not seen eye-to-eye with a current boss, there have always been *“supporters around”*.

She also felt there was a lot of support from the organization *“it’s a great place for actually just having appreciation of the whole team...in [division name] in other organizations you’re very much a second class citizen, you haven’t necessarily got a seat at the table in the same way you have here.”* This inclusiveness that B feels extends to her function as well as her sex. *“We care about the whole team contributing...if we’ve got people from different backgrounds and different genders then we’re going to get a better solution in the end”*. Interestingly, this was the organization that, according to the interviewees, placed a greater emphasis on team work than others did; *“people who are out for themselves here don’t succeed...It’s a team environment”*. She also felt the organization *“is very focused on diversity and how important it is.”* Whilst she admitted that perhaps it was easier in the supporting divisions, i.e. technology and operations, to be more diverse in the workforce and have less aggressive environments, she also praised the *“senior leadership here for reinforcing the business case all the time...there’s lots of sponsorship”* and she went on to explain that all MDs now have diversity score cards linked to their compensation *“so we can measure how much people are really doing, as opposed to turning up once a year and saying ‘yes, I believe’.”*

About being herself, she explained: *“it’s been very helpful having a female boss because I can just talk to her about mundane things as well as business things...I*



*think I'm more comfortable being female". She attributes this not only to her female boss in the US, but also her European Head, who is male, and also cited as a role model. "He's hugely supportive...has quizzed me on trying to understand what the challenges are for women...very supportive of the women's network here...he's been fantastic, very enlightened...so I think both of those people...[Name] is so switched on and gender aware, he's so supportive."*

Again the importance of values being in alignment was highlighted by this interviewee, and how that allowed her to be herself, and that was why she felt she had been successful. She was delighted that when discussions were in place around her MD promotion the previous year, that she was not expected to 'go on the campaign trail' – *"that would not have been me...and I would not have done it...so I would not have been promoted"*. Again she highlighted *"it's very important for me that the way I operate and my values are aligned"*. Having had a female role model in her boss, with whom she felt aligned, she had an example of success the way she felt it ought to be.

When asked how she felt her experience at work would change with more women she said *"I actually don't think my experience would change, because I've got a lot of women around...I don't feel impacted by a lack of women"*. Her division works closely with operations, compliance, asset management and private wealth, which may have more balanced male/female ratios than other divisions. She described nine senior clients she deals with on an almost daily basis, and three of them (33%) were female.

Having recently made MD, she was content to stay at that level. She felt there were bigger roles she could develop into, still at MD level. She was pleased to have made the grade both for herself and also for her 'groups' *"It's great for Europe that we've got a woman in [division name] who's an MD. It's great for asset management that they've got an MD in London"*. She was very positive about her role, her relationships and the organization and was content in her achievements. She appeared to be a very grounded individual, and appeared cognizant of the impact that having positive male and female role models, as well as balanced proportions of senior men and women around her in her working life had made. *"My career is important in my life, but it's not more important than my life...I am ambitious, I want to do well, I*

*want to get satisfaction from my job, I want to get recognition, and for me MD is much more about getting recognised for what I have achieved and the role that I do, and it's great for my team."*

### **4.7.3 Case Study C**

C is an MD, a group co-head front office role. She is 39, attractive, direct, quite fast-talking, American, and had been in the UK for fourteen years. She is married and her husband works for the same bank, in a similar area, at a more senior level. She loves her role and was passionate about her work. She had clearly worked very hard to get where she is, at quite a young age, and was rightly proud of her achievements. She wants to pursue her career, but was obviously troubled by a number of issues, which she raised in the interview.

She described four role models, all men, one of whom was her husband. The first she had worked with on a project with over a long period and another had been her boss. As well as being extremely good at their own jobs, and great with client relationships, what set these men apart was that they "*got me*", by which she meant they could talk to her, they gave her constructive feedback on what was good and what was not, they were very supportive of her to her face and in public. There was a sense that to other men she has worked with, she was too much of an anathema and an unknown quantity. None of the role models she mentioned were female and this is relevant to the two major challenges she faced, as they were pertinent to her sex.

The first was the *toughness versus charm* challenge, which she raised early in the interview. The most senior female in the company had just been fired and there was discussion in the press as well as the organization regarding that woman's style as well as her competence. The woman had not been a role model for C, as she was "*too removed from my business*" and C had never interacted with her. But C was shocked at the negative press the woman was getting regarding her "*abrasiveness*". C reported a conversation with her husband about it where, not for the first time, she realised that there appeared to be no happy balance regarding "*gender stereotypes that are uni-dimensional.*" This was something she herself had negative feedback on, and was still struggling with. She did not mention any exemplars of women whom both she and her male colleagues felt had the balance right.

The other issue very prevalent in C's mind concerned her desire to start a family. She was about to turn 40, but appeared in turmoil about how to manage this and her career. Again, what quickly became apparent was that she had no examples above or around her of women who had successfully managed this. Earlier, she had mentioned there was one woman above her, but did not list her as a role model. When asked to describe this woman, C said she is *"an interesting character...for a long time an androgynous being, she made a real effort to in no way call attention to herself as a woman – you know, play by the boy's rules. She was the first woman to make MD...she did have a child, she claimed it was by mistake, she hid it from people until she was eight months pregnant and then came back very quickly"* She spoke of how this woman had been criticised *"But my argument is...she's getting ahead the only way she can"*. She went on to mention a similar case of a more senior woman in New York. These were the only role models of working women that C mentioned. This was a major issue for C, as she was really struggling, without exemplars to know how she could possibly make this work. She had no personal friends who had made it work, they had all stopped working, and C spoke of the *"identity crises"* that she felt many of them had experienced. *"I think everyone's so insecure about the choice they made they almost assume that if someone made a different choice it's got to be wrong otherwise it draws into question their choice... 'Oh she's such a bad mother, she's never around' or 'Oh she's copped out she's stopped working'. I don't think either of them is fair."* Unfortunately, her husband had also expressed an opinion devaluing stay-at-home mothers as having *"nothing to contribute to the dinner conversation."* C's own mother had always worked and C told of how when her sister decided to stop work after starting a family, their mother took it as a personal affront. C felt she was very much caught up in problems of *"our generation"*. She also explicitly recognised that her sense of self [and self-worth] was very much bound up in the recognition of her achievement.

She expressed how only in the past couple of years had she really begun to understand the depth of the challenge that women at senior levels face. She talked about how as a junior she believed her working environment was *"Totally fair, the world is fair!"*, but as she'd become more senior she realised how the things she is being judged on are more and more subjective, and it was *"harder and harder to prove you can play with the big boys"*.

She was a part of a development programme for a small number of senior women and was really appreciative of it, both in terms of feeling “*we were valued*” by the organization, and also for the experience of being with other women – it was quite revelatory for her to hear that other women experienced many of the same doubts and challenges that she did. Also important for her was to have heard the “*business argument for diversity*”. She felt it was important to spread this message throughout the organization, because “*there a lot of people who don’t buy it. They don’t think it’s nice, they think it’s a pain to have us around.*” Again, apart from her “*exceptional*” role models, there was a clear sense of alienation. And so she was very conscious of being supportive to other women – “*I make an extra effort to see how they’re doing, give them advice (both personally and professionally), to support them and give them constructive feedback*”. She was clearly appreciative of the help and support her male role models had given her, but the clear requirement for female exemplars who had successfully navigated these two gender-specific challenges was all too apparent.

#### **4.7.4 Case Study D**

Case D’s interview was full of contradictions. From the start she was quite vocal about not believing there were any specific challenges particular to being a woman, and not understanding the espoused need of women to have female role models. She is the CFO of an international service division, had worked in that bank for over a decade and was in her early forties. She had an 18 month old child and possibly one of the reasons for the many contradictions in her interview was the change of circumstance that she had experienced over the previous year since returning after maternity leave.

“*Working in a male-dominated environment, I’ve never really sought out specific advice being female*”. This suggested that she felt there was no point in seeking advice about being female, as there were no other women around, it was necessary to fit into the male way. “*I’ve done my own thing and I’m not a big fan of giving specific advice for women...from an early age I’ve been taught to stand on my own two feet.*” She said she did not see the need for female role models, she had always been in very male-dominated environments, “*so my role models have been male*”, and she gave very behavioural examples of how she used two or three male role models.

However, when asked about any women more senior than her, she said there were three or four women above her in the organization as a whole. One of whom she then said

she sees as a role model *“in terms of she suffers from many of the things that I suffer from, lack of confidence in her ability, can’t quite believe that she’s got to where she’s got to. So it’s useful to have somebody to talk to”*. This individual had gone onto become a good friend. She does not see the need for any advice particularly for women, however, she acknowledges that this feeling of *“we’re frauds”* is specific to women *“Men would never think that, I’m sure”*. She described how she and her role model also discuss other capabilities they believe their male colleagues possess more than themselves, such as being better at networking and self-promotion. She also lists a number of similarities she believes this woman and her share, and they are all traditionally feminine traits: *“we’re both very focused on doing the best for the organization, maybe at the detriment of ourselves...the skills that are recognised as women’s strengths, empathy, coaching...we spend a lot of time with our teams and making sure they are okay, sometimes pushing them forward, again probably at the expense of our own recognition”*. So she says she does not need female role models, and yet has one with whom she shares many similarities, appreciates, and uses to discuss female versus male skills.

D was one of only two interviewees who did not respond very positively to what their working environment would be like with more women. *“I don’t know whether I would enjoy it...I actually enjoy working with men probably more than women and, again, is that because I’ve been doing it for so long that I find it easier to talk to guys than women?...Guys are easy to talk to, women are more complicated”*. She has spent her working life most commonly as the only woman in the room, to the extent that she now feels uncomfortable being in a room full of women. She reluctantly speaks at women’s network breakfast meetings and said *“I find it disconcerting there’s so many women...I know and understand men a bit more than I probably understand women.”*

She said there was no need to distinguish women working in this environment, and claimed she had never thought of herself as someone who should be distinguished *“aside from being distinguished by my own capabilities, which I don’t regard as being any different from a man’s capabilities”*. However, having claimed there are no differences, no dispensations for being a woman, D then goes on to say she believes that there is a benefit to being the only woman *“I think men appreciate having women around and you get paid more attention if you’re the only woman...you get noticed*

more.” She spoke passionately about the belief that women should only be promoted on merit and should not get any special treatment, but then says “*I’m quite happy being noticed...if I was a man, would I have got to this position? Would I have had as many breaks? I’m not sure...if that helps you to progress or move forward then that’s fine*”. She did not seem to be aware of any of these contradictions.

D professes not to understand women who want “*the environment to be more tailored towards their needs, whatever they are...I struggle with these conversations...I don’t know what their needs are, but I think they want some recognition that it is more challenging for them to operate. I don’t really understand that. It’s a challenging environment, full-stop*”. Note how she alienates herself from *them* and *their needs*.

She appears so adamant that there is no requirement for gender-specific advice, no gender-specific challenges, and no differences between men and women’s opportunities. However, throughout the interview, she had plenty to say on the challenges of being a working Mum with a big job, but did not appear to link these issues. “*If someone had told me how difficult it is to juggle being a working Mum...*” Of talking to other (more junior) Mums at work she said “*it’s comforting to know that the issues I go through, the levels of guilt, the juggling...is not unique to me...it’s useful to realise the issues I deal with on a daily basis...are something all working Mums are dealing with*”, but does not appear to acknowledge this as a gender-specific challenge.

Towards the end of the interview, D described having to do “*the walk of shame*” everyday at five o’clock “*I have to walk through all my teams and I feel very guilty about doing that*”, even though she works for 2-3 hours later at home. Later she explained how a colleague had said to her she was acting as a role model by letting people know it was okay to work in a different way, to which she responded: “*It’s all very nice to say it’s role modelling, but the fact is I have no choice about it...I’ve never left in eighteen years of working, at five o’clock. I’ve always struggled with that.*” However, she concedes that whilst the organization espouses flexible working, it does not promote it and this is something she feels is “*important for senior resources to be seen to be doing these things, so it’s [should be] almost mandatory*”. And finally she concedes “*there are more things the organization can do...to make it work for more junior staff, it does need to be role modelled. That’s where I can buy into the argument of a role model.*”

## 4.8 Conclusion

This chapter has detailed the individual demographics of the women interviewed in this study, with a purpose of giving the reader a more holistic understanding of who these women are. Information on their ages, tenure in their organization and banking, and their current marital and family status was given. Four individual case studies were highlighted to give the reader a more holistic sense of who these women are. I also described findings on the proportion of the sample who talked about positive and negative female role models, having women around them in their career, positive male role models, and whether they struggled with self-confidence and/or being tough/soft. These issues are addressed in more detail in the next three chapters. Chapter 5 looks at the findings regarding the conceptualization of role models, answering the questions *What are role models?*, *Who are role models?*, *How are role models used?* and *Why are role models important?* Chapter 6 looks at the importance of role models for work identity development, including the struggles with self-confidence and tough versus soft, and Chapter 7 considers the impact of the demographic context within which these women work, and how this affects the availability of role models.





## **Chapter 5 - Role Models**



## Chapter 5 – Role Models

This PhD considers why role models have been cited as a career barrier for senior women. The Literature Review revealed a paucity of recent research regarding role models conducted within organizational settings, with the exceptions of Gibson's work which focused largely on the cognitive construction of role models, and Singh et al, which looked at junior female managers. In order to answer the main research question of *How do role models influence the formation of senior women's work identity in male-dominated firms?*, a greater understanding of how the senior women in this study understood the concept of role models was required. In this aim, further questions regarding the conceptualization of role models were researched. This second of four findings chapters addresses these conceptualization issues. Section 5.1 asks *What are role models?*, and looks at the characteristics of those whom the interviewed women described as role models. In section 5.2 I consider *Who are the role models?* in relation to the interviewed women. Section 5.3 looks at *How are role models used?* and section 5.4 considers *Why are role models important?*

### 5.1 What are role models?

This section looks at the individual traits, characteristics, and behaviours that the role models chosen by the interviewees have in common.

#### 5.1.1 Knowledge and expertise

First and foremost for an individual to be considered a role model, they need to have some greater knowledge, information or ability than the observer, generally based on greater experience within their particular division or organization than the observer. This was the case for all the role models discussed.

*“He was extremely competent, very technical, obviously displaying a very high level of expertise but also someone as a person, as a team member, extremely approachable, a good pedagogue.” Carol*

The quotes above and below describe what could be seen as rather traditional and general role model qualities.

*“She’s just one of the wisest, most capable individuals I think I’ve ever come across.” Alicia*

As well as practical knowledge or ability, there were examples of the more intangible aspects of navigating organizational life.

*“She taught me so much about how this place worked...and showed me how to deal with this very, very demanding boss...She took me under her wing to show me how to navigate this place... she knew the organisation, had been here forever and knew everything.” – Julia*

There were also examples of learning about how to manage the non-work aspects of working life. This may be an issue particularly relevant to women, as many of the sample mentioned it. I would not expect to hear this as commonly from men – further research could investigate whether men were as likely to seek wisdom about balance.

*“...someone that I feel is balancing as much as I’m balancing and has learned maybe... I would want someone older than I was... has sort of managed through some of the things to get where they are and has some guidance and wisdom to add to the road on the decisions one has to make.” - Anna*

In addition there was the element of the role model being in some way “*ahead*” of the observer, in career or life stage.

*“It’s really important to see someone in the next stage of their lives, having done what you’ve done and come through it, and someone that you think you can talk to about those stages... someone that isn’t necessarily your peer but is someone that you can aspire or learn from in a different way, in an experience way, a years experience way. I think that’s important. Why? Because I think it helps you get through with the most intellectual and emotional intelligence and allows you to make good decisions for yourself, otherwise you’re sort of left doing it on your own.”  
- Anna*

This quote makes the important point that having role models leads to better quality decision-making for oneself but hints also for the organisation.

### 5.1.2 Values and integrity

Secondly, in order for these interviewees to be motivated to take on or assimilate some of that knowledge or expertise, they had to perceive that the individual does what they do with similar values to the observer or with what the observer deems to be integrity. These appear to be essential distinguishing elements for an individual to be considered a Positive Role Model. So, it is not just about what the individual does, but *how* they do it. All but one of the sample mentioned this as key.

*“It’s how they lead and it’s also how they lead in times of uncertainty or change or difficulty, and it’s who you are...it’s the value that you inspire within people and the value that you inspire can only ever be the values that you have in your inner core.” - Amy*

*“He has conducted himself unbelievably well throughout this rather difficult period...He has really stood out as somebody who has always been honest about the situations we find ourselves in. And also making people feel that he really wants to help them and he’s behind them and he’s very loyal towards them as individuals. He’s been inspirational ...the reason why he’s been this fantastic role model is we’ve looked at him and said this is someone who hasn’t compromised either in his professional style towards the clients or towards the business but he’s also been somebody who we feel we can reach out and say can you help us ...if I could be in the position he’s been in and shown the strength and personality and professionalism that he’s done I’d be very proud of myself.” Fay*

Note the use of “we” to denote the sharing of male role models. This woman talked about discussing some of these issues with two other senior women. Intrinsic in this quote and extrinsic in the one below is also the element of *care* or *humanity*, this was more or less critical for the women depending on how it sat with their value set. According to Gilligan (1982) women tend to know themselves through relationships and judge themselves by their standards of care and duty.

*“They’re very different the two of them. But they’re both very humane people. They really care about the people that work at [Company]...*

*should anything happen to you or your family or a crisis on the ground; 7/7, 9/11, their true colours really come through. They are really caring people and they'll just go to the ends of the earth for the people that work at their own company. So I found that to be a very top leadership vision person."*

Included in most of the women's definition of "integrity" or "having values" was an element of not being what they perceived to be "political".

*"To me the role model is somebody that achieves it by doing it, sticking to their values and beliefs and not playing the system, and doing well. Not someone who plays the system and does well." - Hannah*

These descriptions appeared to be deemed as mutually exclusive, as political behaviour was seen to be inauthentic, deceptive and even dishonest.

### **5.1.3 Negative values**

Whilst most people will be familiar with the concept of a role model denoting positive facets in an individual to which one aspires, building on previous research by Gibson, these interviewees were very clear about also having negative role models, illustrating what they did not want to be. Interestingly, most of the negative role models that interviewees described were women, whereas the positive role models were a mixture of men and women. Often it was that they were noting negative elements of individuals from whom they were also "cherry-picking" positive elements (see below, section 5.3.1 on Cognitive Constructions, for more detail on negative and cherry-picking). In addition, they were also describing negative female role models as explanations as to why particular women more senior than themselves were not role models for them. The negative elements seemed to offend the required necessity for similar values or perceived integrity. The main negative elements for women appear to be:

- "Trade offs" that were too major by their own standards – usually referring to family, and/or work/life balance, or
- that the individuals were too masculine in their style, too aggressive.

This they felt meant the individual lacked personal integrity, in terms of being true to themselves and may also denote behaving politically.

*“I find some of them truly inspirational and other ones who I find have really had to trade everything off and I’m not inspired by that. The ones I find really inspirational... all of us have had to make trade offs, so I’m not saying that they haven’t ...I see them maintain their femininity at a senior level. The ones that really inspire, remain female and in the organisation as well. A lot of... because I’ve been in the industry long enough I’ve been able to watch the role of women evolve and initially, in order to grow, you had to become a man. You had to wear the masculine-cut suits, you had to be able to swear like them and you had to be able to play with them basically and allow them to continue as they were without changing and just have you join.” - Amanda*

*“The ones who I feel have had to trade a lot off, often have had to rise to the scale of those positions in lieu of some of their family demands which I find really tough for them.” - Susan*

#### **5.1.4 Overcoming Adversity**

Finally, there was for some, although not all, a defining element of someone who was inspirational that focused on overcoming some sort of challenge or adversity. The role model had risen above the context they found themselves in and/or did not let that situation affect their beliefs regarding what was achievable. For some interviewees, the very fact that an individual was female meant they presumed she would incur additional challenges. And, again, in facing challenges or adverse circumstances, it was necessary for an individual who was to be a role model not to lose their perceived values or integrity through the manner in which they conducted themselves.

*“He is a male role model. And I could relate to the fact that he has challenges more than the usual challenges one would have... And that was inspiring for me because I thought of myself as non-standard high-achiever. The constraints could be anything, but you can still make it happen, and I think that was inspiring in that sense for me... Situations*

*are blamed a lot for what happens but I think there is a lot you can do and that male role model really showed me that you can.” - Vicky*

*“My last boss, why he inspired me... he taught me above everything, to reach for the stars. Nothing was...whatever obstacles there are, he would get you to try and think round it and, anything’s achievable if you really put your mind at it.” - Julia*

## **5.2 Who are the role models?**

Fundamentally, the answer to *who* are the role models, appears to be someone with whom the individual has had some sort of a relationship, or connectivity. For most of the examples given by the interviewees, the connection was either something long-term and constant, e.g. with a boss, or something short and/or intermittent, for example what Dutton & Heaphy (2003) include in their High Quality Connections. Already the differences between who these women’s role models are and other developmental relationships, are beginning to become clearer. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the Literature Review above, mentors, whether informal or formal are almost never one’s boss, and often not from the same company. In this study about a third of the women cited someone who at one point had been an immediate boss. The mentor relationship tends to be a fairly long term one with pre-arranged meetings, with designated purposes. The long-term relationships discussed here were of a constant nature, in other words working together everyday or on a project basis. Many of the women that were at MD level had been given a coach by their organization, and some at ED level had arranged this themselves. This, again, is a different type of developmental relationship. Again, meetings are pre-designated, in terms of times and purpose. With the coaching relationship, the focus is entirely on the coachee, and usually the coach is not from the same industry – for example, they might be a psychologist. These individuals would not then meet the imperative characteristics of a role model given above – i.e. that they had to have superior knowledge, expertise and experience in the work that they women do, and that the women need to have witnessed the role model carrying out their work with integrity and values.



### 5.2.1 Relating

The main dimension of who the role models were, concerned someone to whom the interviewee could relate. Gilligan (1982) proposes that, in comparison to men, women's development relies more on connections and relatedness. One obvious dimension on which they could relate was to do with their sex.

*"I'm not sure it's totally female/male, but I do think sometimes people find it easier to relate to someone of their own sex. And when, you know, a lot of our seniors are men, I do, I think some of the women, they want to see how a woman does it." - Julia*

*"I guess I was after that kind of anchor into the MD community, that was something aside from the functional interaction I had with MDs, that you imagine you might be able to open up on things you might feel you can't always be open on...So I suppose I was looking for some gender-specific experience there that I could learn from, in specifically looking for a female rather than a male MD contact." - Ellen*

This metaphor of an anchor is an interesting one, inferring grounding and securing. This woman is also seeking a connection, but as the metaphor implies, not just with another woman but also the organization.

*"It is good that she is a female doing her role. It is also that she looks at management and the area of business development in an extremely creative way. She brings a touchy-feely side to it in terms of her values around people and her understanding and getting their motivations...which is a completely new perspective on how to manage people... And that is very inspirational because it's very new and not something that I've previously been exposed to at such levels. Also, it's very inspirational because just to see her operate and how she can manage different things and coming to something new and have a fresh perspective on it." - Zara*

The role model being described is this interviewee's direct manager. The interviewee had previously described herself as a "much more rational, logical type" and so had been surprised by her own opinion of her manager's values and style, which she had

come to appreciate through experiencing this relational way of working through their own role-relationship.

One woman described her first boss, initially with some of the traditional dimensions – that he was an expert in his field, she had come in with a PhD in an unrelated subject, and he really taught her the detail of actually what to do in her job. Then she talked about his values towards the role: “*unbelievably good, very driven, very passionate about the job*”, and then about his values more generally towards work: “*and at the same time quite human and valued things perhaps that I would value, you know, family and not getting carried away with material things. His heart was in the right place, wanting to do good.*” In addition, she perceived that this role model displayed a very positive relationship with women, so whilst obviously she was not relating to his sex, she could connect with how he related to her sex.

*“Most of all, he was a great role model...and I don't know if this is an exaggeration...but he worked really well with women. [In what way?] I just don't think he had any hang-ups, I don't think it even occurred to him that there might be a difference and there was no prejudice at all. So it was really important, I think, especially at that early stage of my career, to sort of be given all that... and recognised. So he was very, very good that way. [And did you see that as something unusual or, because you had just started, was that the norm to you?] I had just started, so I didn't realise how unusual that was. I think I realised it over the time.*

From the start of her role in this organization, this interviewee had identified this male as a role model. Highlighted as important in section 5.1, he had the knowledge and expertise that she did not and she quickly realised his values around placing importance on family, rather than the more material ideals that some of their colleagues demonstrated. He was her first corporate boss and remained so for a number of years. Crucially, because of his values, the role-relationship that was established did not place a focus on gender, which she later realised allowed her to grow as herself, because of the projection of this “norm” in her working life. It was only later that she realised how unusual this was, but by that time had already been promoted and established a belief in herself and her abilities. She is one of the very few female MDs in a production or front office role (both in terms of my interviewees

and more generally the demographics of such roles) and later went on to describe how she endeavoured to “collect” women in her department and make them feel more normalised.

*I think it's probably been two or three people and they've usually been people who I've worked for as a direct report. And each one is somebody who I can relate to, whose values I respect and somebody who I valued as a leader; so they've listened to me, they've directed me, they've given me space. I guess they've been people who I've really respected, valued their time they've invested in me and valued their opinions...And through them I think I've probably learnt to place more value on myself as a person than I did do. I have a tendency to underestimate my capabilities etc. So I guess learning the meaning and value of me as a person as well. - Clare*

This quote shows the multidimensional way that individuals perceive “values”. Initially she is talking about respecting her two [male] managers’ values, but then quickly uses the verb valued as a subjective assessment of them. The interpersonal aspect of exchange becomes apparent when she values input from both managers into her and the result being her own increase in the value of herself. This appears to be an outcome of the role-relationship between her and each of the managers. Because she respected the managers, both as individuals and in their roles, and because she felt they encouraged her and invested in her in her role, in identifying with that role relationship, she grows into that role identity. This is a clear example of Relational Identification, which will be explained later (see section 8.4.2 below).

### **5.2.2 Structural Dimensions**

In addition to who the role models were in terms of individuals, building on Gibson’s work, there was also considerable discussion about who the role models were in relation to structural organizational elements. In other words, how did they fit into the interviewee’s organizational world. In organizational hierarchical terms, were they close or distant, or, as in one or two cases, were they from outside of the organization?

Those whose relationships could be described as short, intermittent High Quality Connections (HQCs), as opposed to the more regular long-term contacts, were more

likely to be structurally, and sometimes geographically, more distant. The CEOs were cited as role models in three of the six organizations. Even though these are substantial global organizations, the seniority of the interviewees meant that they had had more than one, and in one case regular, meetings with their Chief Executive. Due to the nature of the organizational hierarchy in investment banks, in terms of professional grade, as MDs these women were often only one level below the Corporate Board (or two for those who were EDs). However, rarely should this be interpreted as proximity.

*“But in some ways that’s why [Name] is such a great role model for me because we do get past that hierarchy thing and we’re able to have the discussion where I can learn from him. And that is part of being a role model I think.” - Anna*

*“Between you and me I would never work for a company where their Chief Executive was an asshole. I did that for a lot of years and it sets a really bad tone amongst the whole company about how people can behave.” - Angela*

*“The direction is set from the top...our CEO is absolutely passionate about it [gender diversity].” - Kathy*

This shows the effect the CEO can have on the organizational culture, via role modelling and was seen in three of the six organizations.

In the interviews, the questions were specifically about who the interviewees had found inspirational at work. However, because of the semi-structured nature, the conversations often broadened out to discuss the wider notion of role models and what it meant to them. Only two interviewees mentioned a non-work well-known person as a role model. The first was Mrs Thatcher *“in her early days, before she got corrupted.”* The main trait admired by the pioneer woman was Mrs Thatcher’s ability to overcome adversity, to push the boundaries and not be deterred by her biological sex. Clearly, this is a very distant role model to that individual, as she had never personally met her, and this individual did not aspire to be a politician. The second was Baroness Sarah Hogg. Whilst the woman did not know Baroness Hogg personally, she had heard her speak at events and knew about her varied career: *“She’s been a journalist, she’s worked for the government. Then there’s the portfolio*

*[of Chairman and non-executive director positions]...it's fantastic to have a really long career like she has". And similar to the example of Mrs. Thatcher, there was the additional factor of her gender: "...and as a woman in her days, it must have been that much harder to achieve all of this. So it's her as well."* This last phrase acknowledges the individual behind and as well as the impressive career.

One interviewee talked very specifically about two role models who were above her hierarchically and distant geographically – however, because global teleconferencing is common-place now in such organizations, access to observe or listen to distant individuals is somewhat easier. It may be relevant to note for future research the impact that the introduction of new technologies has on reducing geographical distance and providing new opportunities for “global” role modelling. In this quote, Name 1 is female and Name 2 is male.

*“Oh definitely because I think, watching [Name1] in a meeting, listening to [Name2] in a meeting, deliberately grabbing five or ten minutes of their time whenever I can. Even to the point of getting to know [Name1's] secretary pretty well so that when she's in London and there's a group of 20 that she's going to sit down with to talk about the business, I make sure that [the secretary] puts me on that list. She'll do little things for me because she knows [Name1] hired me. Like if we're off to a 200 managing director dinner in the Halls of Justice after this group of 20 meeting, she's nice enough to ask [Name1] if she wouldn't mind taking me in her car, so I get an extra 20 minutes with her. Then I feel like I can be myself and I can just be open and honest with her and I can hopefully sometimes ask her for things but I could also actually be her mirror to what's going on in the organisation from a morale perspective; what I think people think need changing, what are the issues, you know, all that kind of stuff. And same thing with [Name2]. He's globally head of everything but when he's here um I make sure definitely that I have 20 minutes of his time and if not we catch up by phone.” - Sarah*

Note how this interviewee has a special connection with Name1 because she was hired by that individual. Also note how the relationship works on different levels – Sarah makes sure she is in front of her role model in an exclusive work environment

(group of 20), a large working environment (200 MD dinner), and the very intimate setting of a 20 minute taxi ride. Despite the distance from this individual, in the more personal setting the barriers come down and Sarah describes how she can be herself, and ask her superior for things, but also reciprocate and offer her services as a provider of information. This is like the 'deep sensor' and organizational learning role suggested by Wilson & Elman (1990) in their study of organizational benefits of mentoring. As well as the individual gaining knowledge, they can also pass upwards knowledge that can be crucial for the organization. For that brief 20 minutes the relationship becomes more human, more natural and more personal. This may only happen once or maybe twice a year, but clearly holds particular significance for this individual.

In contrast to the more intermittent relationships, a number of interviewees gave an example of a close on-going HQC working relationship with a more senior male. As with the examples given in section 5.2.1 above, having a close role model relationship allowed them to recognise the many levels on which the individual was inspiring for them. It is noteworthy that many of the interviewees who described close male role models described them as "exceptional", both in terms of their capabilities, but also in terms of their atypicality in the bank.

*"He does a similar role to me but for the Head of Equities, at a more senior level. It is just a very rewarding relationship because I can 100% trust him and he has a great way of working with management in a similar role to what I do. So we've always had similar roles, so I find it inspirational because I can really learn from how he interacts at his level to how I can interact at my level. And also what's inspirational about him is his ability to manage a work/life balance, his ability to have a tremendous attitude of can-do with work, and not letting people and things get him down, and I really respect that. He's very inspirational in terms of getting an issue and being able to resolve it and knowing what to do and who to go to. Also it's just the way he operates. He's not at all into titles and the politics. He's just very much, you know, this is my role, I understand it, I enjoy it and, I respect what I do and people respect what I do. [And is that unusual?]*

*Yes, he's pretty unusual within the context of some of the other male people that are other senior people within the bank, because of the importance of his family and his attitude when things are bad. And he manages to have a great family life and manages to do well at work and avoid the political world of the investment bank. So I think that's what I find inspirational in him." - Zara*

So she is able to relate to him on a work level due to their similarity of roles and can learn from his experience in terms of how to interact at a more senior level. She is inspired by his attitude to work itself, how he approaches work and the people involved. She also admires his ability to manage his work/life balance, and his integrity in terms of a perception of a lack of political behaviour and consistency in good or bad times. She can relate to both the role and the person who carries out the role. And to the extent to which she feels she can learn from him and take on board how he does his work, she is also identifying with both the role identity and the person identity. Note the use of the very relational words *trust* and *respect*, which are clearly valued by this interviewee. Another clear example of Relational Identification, which will be explained later (see section 8.4.2 below).

An additional structural dimension considered in Gibson's role model studies, as well as organizational distance, was organizational hierarchy. He called this Above/Across-Down, meaning is the role model hierarchically above the individual, at the same level (across), i.e. a peer, or below (down), i.e. a subordinate.

*I think when I worked with people, whether they could be a peer, a senior or a junior, and I've seen something that works, an approach, and you're impressed by it, I try and sort of think and understand what it is that impressed me and is that something I could do? -Clare*

*I've got other peers I suppose that I feel I could go and say, 'gosh, I don't know how to deal with this', or 'what would you do'. - Hannah*

However, contrary to Gibson's findings, when asked to talk about specific individuals who were inspirational, none of the interviewees talked about someone who was a peer or subordinate. Hence it is necessary to distinguish between someone whose

opinion or advice is occasionally sought and someone who could be designated as a role model.

### **5.3 How are role models used?**

Having established firstly what a role model is in terms of the necessary dimensions, and secondly who they tend to be, both in terms of individual qualities and in relation to the interviewee, this next section will consider how role models are used. One of the most important outputs of Gibson's work was his explication of the cognitive processes by which individuals chose their role models. He highlighted how role models can be used for both their positive and negative attributes. This section will illustrate how this process is working for a specific sample, i.e. these very senior women.

#### **5.3.1 Role Models as Cognitive Constructions**

All the interviewees described how they used the individuals recognized as inspirational or how they identified them as role models, and for most, they appeared quite conscious of the cognitive thought processes used. This is usually quite straightforward to identify on a behavioural level, as it emerges when they are describing observing *how* somebody does something. The interviewees often then describe what they do with that observation, how they use it, for example by trying that behaviour themselves.

*“I try and think and understand what it is that impressed me and is that something I could do? And so, the people who have been real role models to me in this organisation, I look and see how they tackle things, how they present themselves, how they deal with difficult situations and I've tried to use that to help me develop my ability to deal with those situations. And you always end up putting your own mark on something but I just look and think and, when I'm dealing with a problem that I'm struggling with, I do sometimes think, “Well, how would Ron deal with this one? How would Gary deal with this?” So it might not be somebody you see very often but you think, wow, that's a really smart way of dealing with that.” - Clare*



Note the comment about putting her own mark on the behaviour, which is a more developed way of mimicking rather than the pure replication.

*“I think it’s seeing how different people deal with different issues and the types of questions that they ask...And how they approach certain things, and how you behave with a customer...So I like observing people, I like observing situations. [And you do that quite consciously?] I do, yeah. [And then do you consciously try that out yourself?] I always mean to, but sometimes I forget!” (laughs). - Faith*

*“I think without her [female role model] I would have floundered for a while in such a big organisation and not being used to it. I think I would have really struggled... From a learning point of view, and development, I took a lot, especially of how you handle senior meetings. You learn from watching role models and you sometimes see with the guys how they do it. It’s probably different from how a girl would approach it, just because of their, you know, they can get away with their whatever sporting analogy, which doesn’t naturally flow off most women’s tongues in the same way. So I think it is important that people have people and can watch and see how they tackle things. I mean that’s how I’ve used them is, you know, I watch and observe and think oh yes, I could do that.” - Julia*

The above is also a very simple example of the greater cognitive processing that women have to conduct (Gibson, 2004) i.e. often they cannot just take the male behaviour and copy it, but they have to translate it into something more appropriate. This may seem like a small detail, but the repetition of this on a daily basis can make the learning processes much harder work.

### **5.3.1.1 Negative Role Models**

Because the questions asked were initially about people they had found inspirational, the interviewees often focused on the positive aspects of role models. However, as Gibson also described (2003), the interviewees processed *negative role models*, where they also identified behaviours which were unattractive. These were sometimes specific negative aspects identified in senior women who had previously been

mentioned as positive role models. Alternatively they were describing more general or group behaviours, tending to be considered male.

*“Ape behaviours. I was learning. So I thought, ‘Well that’s successful, I’ll do that’. Or, ‘That’s successful, I’ll do that’... Brutal, aggressive, you know. Brooklyn Bruisers we used to call them. And I worked for some of the real bruisers I can tell you so I learnt some terrible behaviours, you know, the works, including shouting. Horrible, horrible person. Brutal environment. Learnt a lot but learnt a lot of bad behaviours. So it’s taken me three years to unlearn them.” - Angela*

In Gibson’s work, role models’ negative attributes were identified in order to avoid adopting them. But this example shows some negatively perceived behaviours which the interviewee did adopt and learn from, but only in hindsight was she able to identify them as “bad” and “unlearn them”.

In another example, having previously described some positive behaviours or characteristics that she had learned from a female role model, an interviewee said

*“I think I also learned what I didn’t want to, how I didn’t want to do things. I think she was not necessarily a very good manager, she was very much working on feelings and emotions, which is not something I do. I think I learned that you have to do politics even though you do your job really well and you think it’s enough, it’s not enough.” - Freda*

Another example describes how the interviewee admires an ability, but not a behaviour.

*“I wouldn’t act how she acts. She’s very aggressive and, you know, screams down the phone and I never would behave like that, so I’m not trying to use her as a role model, but I actually value her mind, the way she thinks. I just don’t...I don’t like her communication style.” - Julia*

In this next quote, the interviewee admires the individual’s skills and can relate them as similar to her own abilities. But again, she rejects the manner in which the individual conducts these abilities, as they clash with the interviewees values.

*“She takes very senior decisions, but she’s also very strong on understanding the underlying detail. I would say I’m very similar to her in that way. And she values people who understand their business. She is very, very good at making decisions as well. Her decisions are based on core facts and understanding of the business functionality, and that’s how I make my decisions. But she carries it through with confidence, she doesn’t care... she doesn’t worry about manners a lot of the time. I think you should be polite and I don’t think you should be disrespectful – she can be quite disrespectful to people...but it does mean people take her seriously. It’s quite interesting to see that actually if you are competent then the organisation will let you carry on with some inadequacies if they feel one outbalances the other. But I feel it doesn’t really bounce with me, with my core principles around being polite and core morals – I think it’s not very nice.” - Kate*

Also of interest in this quote, is the lesson that the individual learns from the organization, in terms of what it values – i.e. the result rather than the behaviours.

As well as negative aspects about individuals’ specific behaviours, there were also comments about the negative perception of individuals’ choices in terms of how they worked, and how they balanced their out-of-work lives.

*“When I started here as a junior, the Managing Director with whom I was working who was a man, was someone I admired a lot and learnt a lot from so definitely he was inspirational, even though he was counter inspirational as well in the sense that, as an MD, he was working very hard which is a good thing but clearly to the detriment of his personal life which is also one thing that made me think, you know, yes, I want to be successful but, if this is what it means to be successful, it’s not exactly what I’m aiming at.” - Carol*

One negative aspect that seemed to have made a big impact on the interviewees concerned some of the choices the observed women had made. When the interviewees viewed negative behaviours, they could still identify some positive behaviours and might still call the individual inspirational on some level. However, the choices that the observed women had made seemed to have more of an effect on whether or not

they were rejected outright by the interviewees as possible role models, rather than noting negative aspects not to be emulated.

*“And still today, I mean you go to things sometimes and ... very senior colleagues who, you know are proud of the fact that they went to New York instead of their child’s seventh birthday. I just think, well that’s not a good role model to me. A good role model is being a perfectly normal person who is actually able to have a family and a life. It doesn’t have to be a family, but a life as well, otherwise you’re not a good role model.” - Hannah*

*“She’s grown through the organisation – she’s been here about twenty years. She is English, but she’s based in America. She has a husband and four children. But she’s very aggressive... on one hand she’s almost a split personality actually. She’s very family-orientated in terms of... certainly when I used to work with her a few years ago, the first thing she did when she saw you was she’d show you pictures of her children. But actually, in reality, she runs a household with three nannies, including one over the weekend. The hours she works you would say she could rarely see her children during the week, and the sort of job she’s got she must spend at least part of her weekends doing work and worrying about work. Her family’s quite little, in terms of age, but that’s her trade-off... that’s her choices. It wouldn’t be my choice, but that’s all personal. But she’s quite an aggressive individual... and I mean aggressive, not assertive. She’s assertive as well, but she has made grown men cry!” - Kate*

One interviewee only remembered half way through the interview that she had previously had female bosses, having described male role models.

*“I’ve had two or three women bosses – which is not bad. And all three of them ended up leaving the business. I think they found it really tough. And I didn’t name any of them as ones I would look up to, did I? Even though I respect them, but I didn’t want to be like them. Because I saw them as very lonely. I saw them as very lonely ... They were very isolated. And it was hard for them. I could see it was really hard for them. And I also felt*

*that there was not as much they could do to help me as they might have liked. Because they themselves were still trying to make their own way in the world... you know, they all got to Managing Director, they were running groups, but still... it just looked like a constant battle.” - Mary*

For her, it was a more generalised issue of what being a female at the top looked like that meant they could not be role models for her. She does not attribute any blame to them for their apparent inability to help her with her own career, in contrast to findings of Mavin (2006).

### **5.3.1.2 Cherry Picking**

In her 1999 paper, Ibarra described the processes by which her interviewees were experimenting with what she called “provisional selves”, using mimicry of those to whose roles they aspired. After Markus and Nurius (1986) she also described the concept of “feared possible selves”, to denote individuals seeing in other individuals what they do not want to become. This is similar to Gibson’s negative role models attributes, although it suggests more of a whole being rather than individual attributes. Ibarra does, then however, go on to describe the process of “cherry-picking”, where individuals identify positive attributes in a potential role model, who may also have negative attributes. So rather than mimic the entirety of the role model, the individual just picks up on and attempts to copy the desirable aspects. In Ibarra’s study, she described this as a more sophisticated form of mimicry and found it to be more successful in terms of work identity transition.

In answer to “Who has been inspirational for you in this organization?”...

*“No-one really pops to mind. I think you view people in different situations and say I wish I could have that person’s political savvy or I’d have their ability to get their point across and get their position achieved...but in terms of aspirational, I don’t really see that, to be honest with you. [Okay, so there are, sort of... there are bits that you could cherry-pick off certain individuals?] Yes, and seeing how different people deal with different situations, yes. It’s more behavioural probably. I don’t, sort of, say, “Oh that person...”, because I don’t know if it’s... it’s that*

*ideal individual out there and I don't think that person exists to be honest with you.” - Faith*

*“I do compartmentalise everything and pick up different things from different people, and watch how they do things, and see how I can learn from them. So I'm not looking for that one person to lead me, to pull me up and lead me somewhere. I'm looking at different people and different situations and seeing how I can learn from that and how I can better myself. As to whether I learn the lesson or not is a different story, but at least I'm... I'm observing. - Susan*

*“I've been inspired by aspects of individuals' managerial behaviour if you like...and I would extend it to say I thought, “Actually I could manage that way” - Ellen*

*“I think the thing around this whole role-model type thing is learning and taking snippets from people.” - Amanda*

What becomes clear here, that following on from previous work by Ibarra and Gibson, the women were not just looking for “global” role models, as they did not feel they existed, but were “cherry-picking” aspects of individuals' behaviours and styles that they then tried on for themselves. According to Ibarra, this is a more evolved form of mimicry. Again, the interviewees all appeared quite cognizant of this process of behavioural role modelling.

### **5.3.2 Behavioural Role Models**

The behavioural aspects of role models have previously been well-documented (Bandura, 1977b; Gibson, 2003) and we know from studies by Ibarra (1999) that having opportunities for relevant and appropriate behavioural modeling is important in making upward career transitions.

Building on findings of a previous study (Sealy, 2008), from the coding of these interviews, it appears that there are two elements of behavioural modeling. The first was about **visioning**, or the bigger picture, what does it look like to be that person in those circumstances, “*demystifying the career path*”, and what does juggling career and life look like? The other element was about **how to**, where the women had

focused on specific individuals and observed the specifics of behaviours, specific examples of real problems encountered, how individuals coped (or not) with particular challenges, and specific developmental tips, and many examples of these have been given above.

*“I think what you’re... what you’re looking at in role models are people at a point in time, maybe how they got there and understanding their career path and what their challenges were and what they learned, and then looking at them perform within that role, within their role that they’re in today.” - Faith*

These elements together were previously described as *professional role modeling* (Sealy, 2008) and the point was made that many of the benefits of such modeling were not gendered.

*“So, I mean with [Name], it’s just the sheer sticking power, you know, grind, grind, grind to build your career. And, you know, you’ve got to make sacrifices and I think women, typically, will have to make more than men, and she’s done that. And that’s okay if you want to get on.” – Diane*

*“It’s really important to see a woman in the next stage of their lives, having done what you’ve done and come through it, and someone that you think you can talk to about those stages.” - Anna*

However, some benefits were gendered, for example, what juggling motherhood and career looked like, and specific career tips relating to things women were perceived as not being good at – e.g. the value of networking.

### **5.3.3 Role Models as Symbols**

The focus of Ibarra’s study was entirely behavioural, i.e. she was just looking at mimicked behaviours. What my earlier study did was to highlight not only the behavioural value of role models, but also the symbolic importance of the individual being able to find someone they could identify with on some level of similarity, individuals from whom they could take messages of hope and possibility, and organizational messages of meritocracy and support. In addition to the **behavioural** values of role models, the interviewees in this study talked in great depth, producing

substantial rich data concerning the **symbolic** value of role models. This earlier study, conducted with Heads of Diversity suggested that role models provide symbolic value on four levels:

- firstly for the individuals looking at other individuals, illustrating concepts such as *possibility* and *similarity*;
- secondly for the individuals looking at the organization, illustrating concepts such as *meritocracy* and *support*;
- thirdly at the organizational level in terms of messages given to external stakeholders; and
- fourthly at the internal organizational level, in terms of communicating messages about, and perpetuating internal change.

These interviewees talked in great depth about the first two and to some extent about the fourth. Unsurprisingly, the third level was not really discussed, as they were being asked about their own experiences, whereas the previous group of Heads of Diversity were naturally also more concerned about the organizational level because of their role.

### **5.3.3.1 A symbol of possibility and hope**

Work on self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977a) demonstrates that when people believe in the possibility of their success, they are more likely firstly to try, and secondly to succeed. Therefore, one of the ways in which women use or hope to use role models is as symbols of the possibility of their own success.

*“Well I think sometimes it could give women an inspiration to achieve, because they see that it’s possible and if they see no women on the managing board and only one woman as an SEVP, which we had for many, many years, you think well why would I want to aspire to that if, in fact, that’s all they’ve allowed. Or your other thinking is well how can I aspire to that because obviously I’m not going to make that grade. I think that having more women in a senior role on the basis that they merit that seniority, can inspire others to think that they can achieve that. Now whether they can or not doesn’t really matter, but the fact that they can*



*aspire to achieve is really important because if they don't feel inspired or that it's possible to do well they're not going to try, or they go to other industries where there is greater equality between males and females. - Amy*

In a fascinating chapter in Dutton & Roberts' forthcoming book, Carlsen and Pitsis analyse the impact of experiencing hope in organizational lives, and suggest hope is a motive for positive identity construction in work. They acknowledge the overlap between hope and self-efficacy, but propose that hope, a positively charged emotion, is cross-situational, future oriented and is a wider concept. After Ludema, Wilmot and Srivastva (1997), they note how the processes of hope are "intensely relational, both in how they are born, sustained and in their functions" (p. 10), and the role model that the woman can relate to is the embodiment of this hope. Ibarra's (1999) work has demonstrated the importance of the opening-up function of hope in identity construction.

*"I think it's important whether you're a man or a woman...for people to hope and believe that they can achieve whatever they want to, without necessarily compromising their ethical beliefs or values." - Fay*

This quote raises the point that this need to hope and believe is not a gendered issue, it is a human need.

*"[Not having women above you] makes you think you can't succeed, because if you can't see evidence of other women succeeding then you wonder what it is about the environment which is not letting other women succeed...given that the intake of women in most areas is reasonable." - Joanne*

Whilst the need to believe may be universal, the fact that the norm of success is male means that men do not have any disconfirming evidence to suggest that they cannot achieve. They have plenty of male examples of success, but as the quote above illustrates, this is not the case for the women in this study.

### 5.3.3.2 A symbol of similarity

As well as possibility, the other important aspect at an individual level is that of similarity. What is not clear in Gibson's work is whether the similarity has to be actual or simply perceived. Previous research has proposed that personalization of role models is important, and that increased similarity and/or attraction increases the influence of the person-based identity on the role relationship. The more similar or attractive (at person or role level) the role model appears, the more likely the individual is to identify with them (Aron and Aron, 2000). Much of what the interviewees were saying would appear to support these ideas. Perceived similarity leads to identification. This is more complex than copying someone else's behaviour or trying on someone else's shoes, because it encompasses the concepts of *authenticity* or *being true to oneself*.

The issue of similarity is a complex one, as it can be defined on so many levels. For some the "like me" was very tangible, and as basic as biological sex:

*"People see men and women differently and women want another woman, someone they can relate to. Otherwise I think in their own minds they put the glass ceiling there themselves and think oh well, I'm never going to get there." – Julia*

*"So any time there is a woman, at a senior level, you do automatically think, 'Ok, let's understand who that woman is and how she's got there'. And you do that because you're a woman and because you're conscious that your experience is going to be different from the men around you just because of that very obvious difference. And you want to understand if there's anything you can emulate, or anything you can identify with. I've only been able to do that in literally a handful of cases, you know the women who were anywhere near close enough to me to somehow assess, and even that's been a pretty incomplete experience...and just because someone's a woman doesn't necessarily mean you're going to identify with their experience, right?" - Ellen*

For others, it was more about having similar values and approaches to work and life, or having similar life-circumstances. As illustrated in the quotes below, the

circumstances most commonly referred to were those concerning motherhood and work.

*“I think because we need success-stories to become a success-story. We need to feel that there are people like us who have made it. I have seen two women who have children and made it, and I think that’s... and the way they have dealt with that has definitely been one of the issues which has helped me to go through my own pregnancy and work through with my little child.” - Vicky*

*“Even when you have a lot of senior male colleagues who are – who can be inspirational for their technical skills and for what they teach you from the business etc, what you often have is that they don’t face the same constraints as you do at home, simply because more often than not their wife either doesn’t work or doesn’t in an investment bank. In any case, if they’re not the ones, carrying the largest part of the, well, of the burden of having a family.” - Carol*

Many of the women talked about how the importance of having similar life experiences. For one interviewee, one of the two women at the top of her division globally was an alumni of the same university, which not only meant that the interviewee felt an affinity with that individual, but she also assumed the affinity was reciprocated. She put this down entirely to their shared experience, as she explained

*“I did not know her while we were in university, but that connection I think, especially now that we are that higher echelon rank and I have more interactions with her, you know, I feel a stronger connection and I think she the same with me.” - Mel*

The interviewee had recently been asked to join the global finance committee, which the role model co-chaired as treasurer with the CFO of the firm out of New York, and the interviewee put that down to the relationship with the role model.

*“I have no proof, but given that she is the one that put the call in and she’s the co-chair, she may have had something to do with that nomination. I’m extrapolating but, there is that aspect that is, kind of, more personal because of our university ties.” - Mel*

This linkage, this connection is another element that helps motivate individuals to believe they can be like that person.

### **5.3.3.3 Dissimilarity**

For some the similarity was in fact their dissimilarity, i.e. their atypicality to the dominant norm – white, middle class, European male of a certain age.

*“I’m not a very standard success story... once you can prove to a person or that people can see any non-standard success story, whatever that might be, it inspires them in their own particular way. You don’t have to replicate exactly the circumstances, but when they see lots of non-standard success stories around I think that inspires lots of people. And in my case, it’s not just being a woman, but not being a white European as well.” - Vicky*

### **5.3.3.4 Superwoman**

The concept of the ‘superwoman’, a term commonly used in the public press and on several occasions used in these interviews differs from the women described above in section 5.3.1.1, aspects of whom were sometimes used as *negative role models*. The interviewees used the negative aspects of female role models to learn how not to be, usually referring to specific behaviours or styles. However, the ‘superwoman’ is rejected as a role model outright, because they are perceived to be too dissimilar to the interviewees, their lifestyles are simply too different and they cannot relate to them, or see how they could ever be in that position.

*“Those women to me, they are not role models because they live in a totally different world. Most of the women who were doing the talking were kind of ‘superwomen’ in banking, with a very different lifestyle. One woman said, very bluntly, very naturally ‘my role was that I was an MD in this organisation, my husband was in private equity but, my ex-husband, we’re divorced now, and if you want to have a career you have to get the proper organisation in place.’ ‘So,’ she was saying, ‘So I had a day nanny, a night nanny and I had a PA which was a home PA and...’, all the young women there they were all going, ‘oh yeah, this is the way to do it’, ‘and I was like, ‘no this is not the real world’.” - Freda*

*“To the vast majority of women in this firm, they're never, ever, ever going to be in her job or earning her wealth to be able to do the things that she can do to make her life easier. And therefore, in reality, is she really a role model? In that regard I don't think so. Most of the other women in this firm, even in their divisions, and certainly within my division, which is more of a support function, people can't do that. They're not going to be earning that kind of income to be able to do that. They're not rounded role models in that regard. It's a fallacy to think that they are.” - Diane*

Some of the examples given were clearly from very high-earning divisions, and the interviewees knew this, that for example this one had a chef and childcare, and a private jet!

*“And, so for her to stand up periodically at some women's conference, and say ‘well you know, you've got to make choices, you've got to get balance in your life, you've got to make decisions’. Her husband doesn't work either, which helps because at least the kids, you know, have one parent there. And she's forever travelling round the world.” - Jackie*

So, not only was it the money, but the support systems and also the lifestyle which the interviewees could not relate to.

*“I'm already struggling to pay my full-time nanny, the school and I want to see my children...I can't look at her as a role model...there is no way I can look at her life and say this is the way I can do it.” - Freda*

Apart from their being the same sex, there is nothing that the interviewees can relate to with these ‘superwomen’.

*“And I look at her, I think she has a great career, she's an MD in the organization, that's fantastic and I want more women MDs in the organization...But, honestly? You can't be a role model for me...” - Lisa*

*“How would I describe them? Hugely successful, hugely capable, pretty impressive. Would I describe them all as role models, for me? Not necessarily...I admire what they've achieved in the business world in a very, very male environment...So, I mean using [Name] as an example.*

*She's fantastic at running a business, and you know she gets sometimes pushed out here as a role model.” - Zara*

This raises the point that this is very much an organizational issue, not just something for women to sort out. This was illustrated in the previous study (Sealy, 2008), that organizations are putting forward role models or organizational success models (Ibarra, 2007), and the women take messages from this about what being success looks like in that company.

*“This is one of the problems also in trying to present superwomen in the organisation as, ‘this is your role model.’ And more and more women in the organisation are kind of complaining, saying, ‘all these women, I don’t want to be like them, they are man eaters,’ (laughs) and they are worse than, you know, the average Alpha Male in the organisation.” - Freda*

So there was a clear call for women to be successful but also to be more “normal”, so that other women could relate to them. And this often meant acknowledging the mistakes and the very mundane challenges of a woman’s everyday life.

*“So it’s debunking that myth. Because otherwise there’s a sort of slight perception that you’re sort of superwoman and only a superwoman could cope. Well I’m absolutely anything but, I’m a sort of really average person who’s sort of reasonably good at what I do... So what I do with other women is I start talking about the mistakes I made, the things I do wrong. I mean for example, in terms of the relationship with my children, my daughters, there have been two or three rather seminal moments when I sort of have failed and they’ve sort of helped educate me as to what I should be doing better in the future.” - Fay*

*“I sometimes find it difficult to acknowledge what I’ve achieved. And maybe I am inspirational by the fact that I got here, but I didn’t do anything special. You know, I’m not an extraordinary person. I’m not hyper intelligent. I am definitely not a superwoman... I can understand a lot more, what my junior members of staff are going through. I mean, I’ve gone through teething and no sleep and sitting in a meeting feeling shit and having to do it and the guilt and why’s it always women who have to*

*organise the cleaning lady? Why do I know when something needs to go into the washing machine and my husband seems totally ignorant of the washing basket that he puts washing into every night? But, it's funny, everybody says the same and sometimes it just helps and it does help me I think to understand that, whilst it's funny, everybody, every woman you talk to always smiles with that look of, "It happens to me too and there is no answer and it is what it is." - Clare*

One woman raised a different issue of dissimilarity to amazing successful women.

*"Look at [Name1] and [Name2], they are extraordinary women and so if you look at the Fortune top 100 women in business... all amazing, extraordinary women. If you look at the Fortune top 100 men in business, you might not describe them all as extraordinary. So that can limit...having so few who might be considered to be somehow amazing could actually be almost as bad as...as having...as having no female role models." - Angela*

She points to some women who had made it to the very top of their industry being *so extraordinary* that actually this was a de-motivator, because of a belief that she herself could never be that extraordinary.

### **5.3.3.5 Symbolic of messages from the Organization**

When women look at the organization, the presence or lack of senior female role models has a symbolic value in illustrating concepts such as *meritocracy* and *support* for their development. Some talked about the organization needing to prove that women can succeed. In the earlier study the point was made that this is particularly pertinent the more senior the women are. Junior women expect the organization to actively support their career development, and have no reason to believe this will not happen. However, for senior women this cannot be assumed.

*"If you have an entirely male senior executive management team that's...that sends a message and having [Female Name] there sends a different sort of message" - Lisa*

*“This question of role models is difficult, because I can’t point to anyone in particular...but you know what I do think is important is the symbol of having a woman in a top position...regardless of whether they’re role models...it’s just the fact that they’re there.” - Joanne*

So this interviewee talks about the importance of having almost any women there, just to show that a woman can be there. However, the following quote puts forward the counter-argument that this can sometimes have negative effects. And, as seen in the above quotes about “superwomen”, their presence can have detrimental effects.

*“I think it’s just that sometimes the role models that do exist can be tainted to extreme in certain ways and that sort of perception of the organization...and if you don’t have direct contact with them you can default to what the organization’s perception is.” - Zara*

She was describing a very senior woman in her bank who had a reputation for being very tough and aggressive and working extremely long hours. The interviewee had subsequently got to know the individual and had amended her opinion, but was conscious of what she had previously thought.

In the Heads of Diversity (HoD) study, whilst it was understood that the ideal situation was to be able to have very senior women who had grown within the organization, for one organization who had “imported” some senior women there was some discussion around the positive message of having women in senior positions versus the negative message that they had not progressed from within. Most of the interviewees in this study talked about the numbers of women exiting their organization at various levels. The issue of potential progression was seen as key to this.

*“They don’t see a progression and they don’t see the acknowledgment of what they’ve done and where they’re going, or they can just get paid better somewhere else, but mostly it’s the progression...it’s what they’re doing and do you see where you can go in an organisation. If there is a track record of women making it to the top you believe you too can make it to the top, and when there isn’t, I suspect, you know, one even doubts ones’ own capabilities because you wonder...what does it take...there*



*have been talented people before and they haven't made it, what does that mean for my career path, my ability to make it to the top? Do they really believe, whoever they are, that we don't merit that seat at the table? If I don't see women taking decisions and running business units, is it ever going to happen? And, you know, if there's no future for me, why don't I just jack it all in?" - Faith*

This 43 year old woman was single, and did not have any external factors pulling her away from the organization. However a number of others talked about the combination of this lack of evidence for future career growth as an important 'push' factor from the organization. When combined with external pull factors, such as family commitments, this could prove to be significant ....

*"So, if you've already encountered discrimination in that, you know, the best projects are not given to you because you're perceived to be less numerical than the next guy, so they get to do all of the hard modelling, which obviously helps them acquire the right skill set. If you perceive there's a difference in which your leadership skills are valued versus those of your male colleagues and, therefore, that impacts your promotions and your comps. Then it takes very little pull from the outside. There's a push and a pull, you know, always and I think that if we avoided most of the push factors, the pull of having a family wouldn't be that much of a deal." - Penny (Gender Champion)*

*"It's the perception that people drop out because of family, it is not reality. And the reality is because we don't promote these women, we don't give them the positions where they actually can make enough money, or the positions of power, such that when they get presented with alternatives like, 'why should I be spending all this time doing this instead of being home with my child,' then why bother, right? If you are always stuck at making some nominal amount of money and you're never going to get promoted and it's going to be the same thing year in and year out then why bother?" - Sarah*

Whilst the impact of having a family is likely to have more effect on women than men, as previously mentioned, the need to believe in one's ability to progress through

the evidence of role models, and to see a future role applies to both sexes. One interviewee demonstrated this when talking about the possibility of her becoming a partner. She was very cognizant of the positive effect it would have on the whole of her division (Operations) as until recently there had not been very many MDs in Operations and no UK partner.

*“The reason why I say it would be such a buzz and a boost for the division is that we’ve made more managing directors in Operations over the last two or three years, and the feedback I get from people, men and women, is that ‘this is fantastic, more MDs, God it makes us think now we could be one’...So if we had a homegrown partner, it would be a great thing for the division.”*

There is a clear example of the perception of increased opportunity, if there is already ‘one of us’ in the aspirational position. The belief is that if the organization supported that one individual, then they will support another similar one as well. Sometimes, the belief was not based on organizational evidence but on transference from an individual – meaning that if a woman sees her boss continue to support her development, she will believe her organization will do so as well (i.e. that her progress does not rely entirely on her boss remaining her boss).

At one organization, whilst there were very few senior women and the majority of the interviewees from that organization had not had a female role model in their career, four of them had recently been part of a senior women’s development programme. There were only 20 female MDs globally, but they had been gathered in New York every six months for a two day programme. All four expressed positive views of this and three said they were encouraged by it in terms of feeling the organization was investing in their development.

Just two of the whole interviewee pool did not believe there were any gender issues, and took the line of ‘what’s all the fuss about?’ – despite contradictory evidence in their interviews. However, the interviews are littered with what could be understood as evidence that there really is not a level playing field, it is not a meritocracy, to varying degrees of consciousness. For example, quite overtly, one woman said:

*“So while I don’t think we absolutely need just solely women role models, we need supportive men, we need men who think more like a meritocracy*

*and aren't afraid of women, but you know it's not an exclusive need per se." - Sarah*

Another woman made a plea for a positive message to be sent out from her organization:

*"I think it would, it [having women at the top] would send a very powerful signal to the more junior women in the organisation, and in fact junior males within the organisation, that women are capable of making it to the top, that they have as authentic and as capable, a voice as men. That they have the ability to be decision makers; they are regarded as peers with senior males...again it would set the tone." - Alicia*

What is apparent here is the assumption that this is not currently the case, that men and women in this company do not believe that women are as capable, as authentic, as able and are not regarded as peers with senior males. With very few women as leaders, holding directorships, women and men do not see evidence that women's managerial capital is "sufficiently valued for boardroom and role model positions" (Sealy and Singh, 2008, p.212). As Myatt (2004) reported, what is valued in the boardroom is valued throughout the organization.

## **5.4 Why are role models important?**

The main premise of this section is that the role models that the individuals choose affect how the individuals make assessments concerning how they should behave and who they should be(come). Below, I focus on some of the main areas that appeared to be most important in terms of why having role models was important for these women.

### **5.4.1 Being a Minority**

There was a clear sense among many of the women of some of the struggles they endured, in such an extreme demographic setting and for the most part the women were particularly aware of their minority and in Kanter's terms 'token' status (see Chapter 7 for more detail). There were a number of indications that having senior

female role models was perceived as helpful in terms of working out both ways of working and also in ways of “being”.

*“You need to latch onto people who are on the same wavelength as you...whose moral code lines up with yours. Because otherwise I think you leave. If you don’t find those anchors, and they are anchors, I think you do leave.” - Celia*

Again, note the use of the metaphor of an anchor. This really illustrates the value to the organization of these women being able to find role models, in terms of retention.

*“Feeling like a minority is a very difficult thing because you’re not really yourself. So I think they [role models] would allow women to be more genuine if there were more of us, because we would know that we wouldn’t stand out so much.” - Penny*

This quote raises the issue of increased visibility when in such an extreme minority – this concept is discussed in the Demographics section below – see chapter 7.

*“In the early days I didn’t [have any role models] and I was surrounded by men and I tried to become a man and clearly that wasn’t the idea, so I learnt better. So female role models are very important because it took me five years longer to get to the position I’m in than perhaps it could have done if I’d had more role modelling around me. So I think it takes longer...because you feel isolated and because the concept of different styles and ways of working is just not there. With more role models... I think you’d feel less like a minority.” - Angela*

#### **5.4.2 Tough versus charming – the perpetuation of stereotypes**

There was a substantial amount of data around the issue of women being aggressive versus timid, tough versus charming. No questions were asked directly relating to this but it came up at some point in the majority (21) of the interviews. The fact that it came up so often, emphasises the extent of the struggle that many women face with a lack of role model exemplars of how to resolve the issue successfully.

From research we know that this is an issue that women struggle with across industries (see section 2.5.2, in the Literature Review). From the previous study with HoDs, one of the interesting findings in terms of the perceptions given of the senior

women, was how they were described. In ten out of the twelve interviews positive descriptions of the most senior women were uniformly given as an agentic trait followed by a communal trait or description. For example “she is an extremely successful banker, *yet* charming”; “she is highly skilled at what she does, *but* is also a very nice person”. This requirement to clarify the individual woman’s work success with a positive personal attribute, plays to the societally held gender role negative stereotypes of women who are successful in male-dominated work environments.

In this study, in one of the organizations, half way through my interviews there, their most senior woman globally in the bank was fired, as a result of the “credit crunch” problems. As the most senior female in the organization, she was obviously very visible to women in that company. She also happened to be the most senior woman on Wall Street, and so was highly visible to the press. Naturally then there was a lot of comment about her and how she was perceived at work and by the press.

*“She had quite a charming way of speaking but at the same time was quite sort of direct and so she...I think she clearly paid a lot of attention to how she came across...When [Name] left there was a whole load of things in the Wall Street Journal and New York Times...saying that it wasn’t just the credit write-down, it was also that she was a bit abrasive, she was a bit this, she was a bit that and...you know, that would not have been described if it had been a man, it just wouldn’t, and yet she had to do that because if she hadn’t been abrasive people would have wondered whether she was tough enough.” - Joanne*

Another woman at the same organization described discussing this issue, referring to the same senior female ex-employee, with her husband (also an investment banker). Her husband perceived the senior female to be *really tough*, but then when pushed was unsure as to whether it was actually possible for a woman to be tough enough but *not a bitch*.

*“I thought she was quite charming... One of the things my husband said to me very early on in our relationship was, “As a woman in business, you’ve got to figure out where charm is more powerful than aggression”, because for most of us who get there our natural instinct is to put our dukes [fists] up. And that’s so often not... it’s counter-productive,*

*particularly with men, and you need to figure out when you can influence with your charm.”*

Men and women clearly have different comprehension of what is acceptable and what is attractive. However, the next quote does raise the issue that stereotypes can begin to dissipate through longevity of relationship, but only for those directly involved.

*“I actually thought she was pretty charming, and the problem with being a woman is if you’re too charming then you’re not considered tough. If you’re too tough then you’re considered a bitch. And I think it’s much harder to get that line of combining the two... I find a lot of women, they have different personas – the people who really work with them closely like them a lot, but then their persona more broadly within the organization...it’s harder for your good reputation to travel, and it’s easier for your bad reputation to travel. Your bad reputation being, ‘She’s a bitch, she’s tough.’” - Louise*

The interviewee, age 40, attributed this partly to her generation and partly to stereotyping of women by both men and women.

*“I think because we are different. You and I grew up in the same generation and I think there was a time when we all tried to pretend we were the same but we are different. And I think we don’t fit into male stereotypes and therefore... I think unfortunately female business stereotypes aren’t very good and so it’s easy for a woman to be quickly, if she distributes a couple of symptoms, to be diagnosed with a certain style. I think also it’s harder for a woman to be tough and not be seen as a pushy, aggressive bitch. Whereas, for a man I think it’s considered aggressive go-getter. He can switch on and off. I think it’s harder for people to see a woman having both sides. I think they try to put her in gender stereotypes that are more uni-dimensional.” - Louise*

These women are very aware of the dilemma they face, most of them could see and describe it in other women in their organization and some still had or had had a conscious battle with it themselves. This issue was perceived to vary depending on what division of the bank they were in, which appeared to be affected also by what

the demography of that division was. So for example, one woman talked about how in her own division, Operations, there were a lot of ‘*people initiatives*’, and her department was populated by quite a number of women, so

*“I am more conscious of the role I play...being a woman in Operations actually plays to...to it [being softer], because we manage differently and have a different focus. So...but on the other hand when you’re with business units you have to play a bit tougher, a bit harder, you just have to come across differently so... come across a bit more, sort of strong ...sort of more of a tough edge, and that’s why I think you need to be more conscious and you have to be conscious of the way you have to move in and out of those two things.” - Joanne*

So whilst there is an assumption of a need to be more *like them*, there is no question of a different way of behaving with the Heads of business units. This particular woman had just been through an interview process for a promotion, during which she had been acutely aware of the need for a perception of toughness, as required by the organization. The role was a direct promotion and she felt she had been successful in her current job by bringing a more ‘human face’. She knew that this was not the prioritized competence given to the new role, and she also knew the male that she was up against to get the position, but was not comfortable being disingenuous in the interview process.

*“I think it’s a very difficult balance...and I think the role will go to a man who is really tough and who...he will play it tough, you know, ‘In my last role I squeezed the cost out til the pips squeaked etc. etc.’ I just would not do that, in the interview, because... I don’t think that’s how I would run the organization, I’m very conscious of the people underneath it. But in terms of what’s coming across, I’m probably going to come across as sort of not willing to go that last mile, even though I would...it’s just how you portray yourself so...I’m just saying that there’s a different persona but then if you go too far down that line people then think you’re a bitch so it’s...it’s hard.” - Joanne*

For some it was about the struggle to adapt their more or less aggressive side, in order to fit in with the acceptable limits of those around them. For many of the women there

was a process of trying to work out what was deemed acceptable from their own and others' perspective, usually through processes of interaction...

*“I am told I am too aggressive at times but interestingly, at times when I actually don't think I'm being aggressive I'm actually accused of being aggressive. So I know when I'm doing it sometimes, but then there are other times when I think it's a perception issue, and maybe my view of acceptable aggressiveness is here... and certain people's is here (gesticulating). So I think some of it is definitely “my fault” and some of it is other people's fault. But I think men have a little bit more latitude to get away with being a bit more pushy and aggressive... but I think it's more important to adapt your style to what the audience wants and is receptive to.” - Mel*

But in addition, the women gleaned feedback through observing others' reactions to other women's behaviours.

*“So I was so surprised how judgmental women were of her... But you have to do what's good for you... But the interesting thing with her is she's known for years as being a total bitch, but recently she's become much more charming and now much more people like her... but there's still a lot of people who remember how much they hate her – it's just weird to watch. Maybe when people are on the climb they are tougher and then you learn that you can kind of calm down a bit. I'm not sure...” - Louise*

These may be the sorts of uncertain comments that one would not be surprised to hear from a young adult starting their working life. But this comment came from a woman who is a relatively senior MD, who, despite her own success appears to still be trying to work out what works and what does not: “...how I should behave”. This woman did not cite any inspiring female role models during the interview, nor had any examples of women who she felt got this balance correct.

For some it was more about managing a perceived image specifically for other women, a clear conscious enactment of the feminine.

*“I hope that I am the kind of female that has been tough enough to survive but also has an image that is not so hard. So I hope that I do actually inspire and help, rather than people having this image, she was just very*



*hard and tough. [So how do you manage that? What do you do?] Well, it's very difficult. It's very difficult because, I think, most people do have the impression that I am tough but I guess it's just having those little female, soft, human touches, and, from time to time, making the time to speak to young women.” - Marion*

But again it comes back to struggling to *get the balance right*, something many of the women talked about. Even being cognizant of the issue and of why it is such a problem did not necessarily appear to help the women manage it. From the women’s perspective the stereotypes are there, and they feel it is their job to manage them.

*“I analyse it to death... it's a very, very strange environment to be in when you are constantly a minority and you are constantly working with the opposite sex, in that there are times that I am conscious – in fact, most of the time in my career I have been conscious – that I need to prove myself. I need to prove that I'm tough... it's a really difficult balance to get right and, at the same time, sometimes I feel as if I get respect for that. I have had comments "Oh, she's a tough cookie." Because you're a minority, you're always trying to prove yourself. Sometimes I think, perhaps, I don't have to try that hard and, perhaps, it would be better and I might get a better response if I don't try that hard. And I don't know what the right balance is and I think it's difficult to get the right balance.”*

She had had feedback that she sometimes comes across as too aggressive, but goes on to explain:

*“I think it's a question of style in that I think women have a tendency to say what they believe and what they think, whereas I think men are a lot better at not necessarily saying exactly what they think. And I have heard other female colleagues express similar thoughts.” - Marion*

Other women also talked about the assumption that they need to be assertive to get noticed and be successful.

*“But I think that some women that are client facing, they do come across as quite assertive because they've had to assert themselves to be into that position to be seen as an equal...but it would be seen as assertive,*

*whereas an equal male probably wouldn't be tagged assertive. Whereas that same behaviour in a female, would be tagged assertive, and then I guess an extension of that is that women may actually be more assertive in certain instances to actually get noticed.” - Amy*

This highlights the double-bind women find themselves in, as mentioned above, the need to prove they can be tough enough, but that being labelled as tough is considered a negative thing. Many women expressed frustration at having to deal with this. The lack of female role models was recognised as an issue here both for women, in terms of demonstrating how to overcome this problem, but also for men in terms of combating their stereotypes.

*“And, yet, it's a non-issue for men and it's all about how good they are, what they do, what they've delivered in business, you know, and it's almost kind of this fantastic thing that the male is tough. But the female – and pardon my French – she's a bitch. And why is that? Why is it that we cannot cope? A woman has to be this mother Eve, almost figure, and we just can't cope with a woman being...” - Marion*

This woman goes onto explain how she thinks that part of the problem is that her male colleagues only really see her in the “*tough environment of tough meetings*”, and therefore that they do not see the “*softer side*”. She felt that having other women around would allow her to show this soft side and the more complete side. Heilman and Okimoto's (2007) research suggests how people need ‘proof’ of women's communality to accept their success in male environments. And yet, ironically, this woman, in a production, front office job, has three young children, and took three months maternity leave each time, so has plenty of ‘proof’ of her womanhood. Like with so many of the other women, there is a sense of not being sure how to address these issues. There were no examples given of women in her organization that she knew of who had successfully negotiated this challenge.

Another interviewee describes how she had had quite a confrontational meeting with a member of staff, with whom she was unhappy:

*“He'll not make the same mistake again, I'm pretty sure of it. And quite honestly, I think that's okay. When I first joined, they were very, very*

*tough on me and very, very demanding on me. So if I'd screwed up and my people screwed up, I knew about it.”*

She describes how then she feels the organization, in trying to reverse a reputation of being overly tough, *went too far in trying to be nice and cuddly* as she feels some of the more junior staff need to understand about being accountable.

*“I honestly believe that I'm in this seat because I've learnt from all the mistakes that I've made in the past. So people need to understand.... they get paid a lot of money for what they do here, you're going to have to be accountable. And with that, every now and again, it's a bit rough. And that's what I learnt from all of the people that I've named as role models, you know.”*

None of the role models she refers to were female. So initially she appears to be quite content with her own image as a tough individual, as she sees it appropriate for her role identity. But yet, slightly later in her interview, she talked quite disparagingly about some other senior women, in that they

*“...sometimes, take on the colour of the aggressive men that they work with, a little bit, and can come across like them. And I just don't think that's nice.”*

And yet, shortly afterwards, she continues...

*“Now some people might say about me, to be fair, that I'm pretty tough and I'm pretty demanding, and there is no way I'd be in this seat unless I could be tough and demanding and stand up to them. Because some of the guys that we work with are pretty tough and they're pretty demanding. And, you know, they don't treat us like they would treat their wife...”*

There is a hint there of the cognitive splitting of women that may occur in perceptions by others, of the different roles a woman should be playing.

*“And sometimes I think women get more negatively judged on that point actually because even if you have to be a bit tougher.... other men, not so much women I think, other men who work for you sort of find it hard to deal with. Whereas if it was a bloke giving them a tough time or something they can maybe deal with it a bit better.”*

She goes on to explain this for herself...

*“I think it must be quite tough for a grown man to kind of come in and have a tough conversation with his female boss. Because normally like at home he's probably king of the castle and he'll make the decisions, etc. ... because the thing is, most men at [company name], their wives don't work, no matter what division you're in. All the guys who work for me, and even two layers below, most of their wives probably have stopped working.” - Diane*

As can be seen, this is a very complicated issue, which half of the interviewees were still struggling with, despite their maturity and career success.

### **5.4.3 Benchmarking the norms**

One of the main benefits of having female role models highlighted by a number of the interviewees could be summed up as benchmarking, knowing what is normal. Being often the only female in their work environment, they were not the norm, and were usually only too aware of this. There were some challenges which particularly related to being female. For example, one interviewee was really clear throughout the interview that one of the biggest challenges she had faced all through a career without any female role models, and almost no women around her, was knowing what should be deemed acceptable and unacceptable behaviour by her colleagues. Instinctively she knew what she was comfortable or uncomfortable with, but without exemplars, and being so isolated, it was very hard to work out when to react negatively to something she felt was unacceptable. From her language it can be seen that this is something she really struggled with.

*“...To know that there are things that are acceptable or not acceptable and you wouldn't necessarily have that agony or that discussion within yourself... if you've got role models or more senior women around it can be 'don't worry about that', or it could be, 'that's really unacceptable and I think you've got a right to feel aggrieved about that and let's talk about perhaps some of the options you've got... I think it's very difficult to address some of these issues with... if the issues are about gender, to address them with another male because like my own example of a male*

*just didn't really understand why I was upset. Even though he was very apologetic, and felt very unhappy that I was upset, but he didn't really understand why." - Amy*

Another issue particular to being a woman concerns the challenges of returning to work after maternity leave, and then the problems usually incurred when trying to juggle work and life.

*"But, you know I just felt so sorry for her because no-one prepares you for how hard it is initially, but they need people to talk to, to say, 'Look, you know, lots of people go through this.' [Having female role models] would mean that I feel more comfortable to discuss some issues about juggling personal and professional constraints with someone whom I know might have gone through the same juggling and same constraints. She might have the solutions to bring or at least her own personal experience... I think it would be perceived or judged differently by a man who might just think, you know what, it's difficult but tough luck." – Carol*

*"it's comforting to know that the issues that I go through, the level of guilt, the juggling and all that type of stuff, is not unique to me" - Clare*

The women who talked about this did not believe that materially anything would change through having more senior women around, but it was the supportive aspect of knowing that other women were struggling with similar issues. This allows one to realise that the struggle is not necessarily due to any incompetence on one's own part, but to situational factors.

*"I don't think the men know how to relate to the women so well so there isn't a lot of championing of the women... for women to have senior women that have had children, come back, are juggling it, balancing, or have taken care of their mother when she's been ill and moved through that. I think that is important and I didn't have that really." - Anna*

There were also plenty of examples of dealing with work challenges that were in themselves not necessarily gendered issues, but the women were aware that perhaps their "natural" approach would not necessarily be that of those around them, so issues

of acceptable style. Because of the very strong cultural norms around ways of working, they perceived these to be significant issues. This quote is from a woman who had never had a female role model.

*“Well I think I would have been able to go and say, ‘actually I’m finding this really difficult and I don’t quite know how to deal with it and how should I approach it?’ because the way I would want to approach it I’m going to come across as being emotional and weak...I didn’t know what I was supposed to be telling myself really. That would have been really helpful I think, to just have somebody that could..., because you know, even if you go home, I was still getting a male opinion about how you have to present it.” - Hannah*

#### **5.4.4 Permission to be a parent**

As well as the issues surrounding new motherhood and realising the challenges of juggling work and home life, the challenges of being a parent continue long after the immediate return to work. Some of the women who were parents of pre-school or school-age children found it very difficult to manage their often conflicting identities of the ideal worker and the ideal parent. Some gave examples of having to deal with this on a daily basis, for others it was more of an occasional situation. This woman suggests that if there were senior individuals role modelling this behaviour, that it would be easier for both men and women to be open about actively being a parent.

*“Having a few women in the senior levels to see that it’s ok to take a day off on a sports day, probably you would see the behaviour changing in any parent – be it male or female. So you would see men sort of being at liberty to be themselves and saying ‘I’m taking a half day off because I’m going for a sports day’, and I’ve seen that happen. Men on a trading floor imitate each other not because of what they are, but because that’s the norm. Once you break that norm a lot more at the senior level, different opinions get expressed. That experience makes it better for women as well, because they see men not conforming to each other.” - Vicky*

One of the most startling examples of dealing with parent identity conflicts on a daily basis was from one of the most senior interviewees, who did not recognise the need

for specifically female role models and who really struggled with the idea that the challenges during her career had been any different to those of a man. And yet she provided a very emotive example of not feeling the permission to be a parent. She said she had started a family late in life, which meant that she was senior enough to have control over her working day, and explained how, for childcare reasons, she would not arrange meetings after 4.30pm.

*“If someone wants to call, they can call me after seven thirty when my son’s asleep and that usually motivates them to find a reason to make their diary available before 4.30.”*

She then went on to suggest that other members of her team should also do that if they were parents.

*“I also think other people more junior in the organisation could do that, but maybe people don’t understand as much. And I do try and encourage any working parent in my team, if they want to, because people say it’s really difficult to leave at five, so I say, ‘Well, why is it?’”*

However, towards the end of the interview she was talking about flexible working, dismissing the idea that it is in anyway harmful to ones career to work flexibly and said

*“I was explaining this to a couple of women at the breakfast that I still have to do **“the walk of shame”**. I walk out of my office at five o’clock. I have to walk through all my teams and I feel very guilty about doing that; despite the fact that I know that probably from seven thirty onwards I might do two hours of work.” - Clare*

She had never had any female role models and the only other senior female that she interacts with regularly did not have children, so she has not had exemplars of this. Organizational permission was not an issue, as she was senior enough to make her own rules of working. Earlier she had given a very pragmatic assessment of the situation, saying her nanny left at six and her husband could not be home by then. But still she deals with these negative emotions, experienced on a daily basis.

## 5.5 Summary

In this chapter I have explored and clarified what these senior women see as the core elements of role models. Firstly, what are role models, in the sense of what are the traits of the individual that make him or her a possible candidate to be someone else's (and in this case a woman's) role model? The traditional, perhaps obvious traits of greater knowledge and expertise were found to be essential, as were characteristics regarding *how* the individuals conducted themselves, in this case with values and integrity. For some women the role models had also overcome some sort of adversity. In addition most of the women also talked about negative traits of individuals that they actively would not want to emulate.

Secondly, the chapter considered who are the role models, in relation to the interviewee, both in terms of what is it the woman relates to about this individual and also where is this person positioned in the woman's working life? In terms of the women relating to the role models, the two dimensions focused on were either sex – i.e. being another woman – and/or, particularly given that other women were frequently not available, having demonstrated similar values. In terms of where the role models are positioned in relation to the women, the dimensions discussed included hierarchy and the amount of contact. In all of these interviews the role models were in some way hierarchically above the women, either in seniority or experience. This is contrary to Gibson's findings that older employees may also have peers and subordinates as role models. However, there were clearly some role models with whom the women had continual long-term relationships and some with whom they had short, intermittent contact. This did not appear to affect the quality or perceived value of the relationship, they were just different.

Thirdly, in asking how these women use their role models, the findings confirm studies by Gibson and Ibarra on the process of observing behaviours of the role models and trying them out for themselves. The women clearly engaged in cherry-picking the best bits from various role models and were also clear about the negative elements of role models. These could either refer to negative behaviours displayed, or choices made by the role models perceived by the women to be negative. All this adds to a body of evidence on the behavioural value of having role models, but the findings also point to a symbolic value of role models. Role models can be symbols of



possibility and hope for the women. Symbolic similarity, which can sometimes be as simple as dissimilarity from the norm, is identified as important and role models can also be indicative of messages perceived to come from the organization.

Finally, having looked at the what, who and how, this chapter considered why these role models are important. The findings suggest for the women this is about learning how to behave and who to be(come) within their organization. Even at their level of maturity and seniority, as well as in the past, for many this is still an ongoing issue. Being in a minority situation, and different from the vast majority of those around, having similar others above helps women establish ways of working and behaving that are acceptable both to themselves and the norm group. One of the main examples of this was the challenge of balancing the 'tough versus charming' act, which is closely bound up with stereotypes and socially prescribed views on how women should behave and who they should be (Eagly, 2007). Role models were seen to be and assumed to be extremely useful for being able to benchmark norms and work out whether the behavioural norms are acceptable or whether to challenge them and behave differently, according to one's own values and beliefs. Values and beliefs play a significant role in our sense of identity, how we behave and who we become. The next chapter will look in more detail at how the (lack of) female role models impact the women's identity construction and development. That will be followed by the fourth findings chapter which will examine the importance of demographic context.



## **Chapter 6 - Role Models and Identity Development**



## Chapter 6 – Role Models and Identity Development

### 6.1 Introduction

The starting point of the PhD was the fact that a number of industry surveys cited the lack of senior female role models as a barrier to women's career success. From the literature review, it was suggested that role models are important for work identity transitions, but there has been little research on the importance of role models at a senior level or a clear understanding of the requirement for same-sex role models. In the previous chapter I looked in depth at the concept and dimensions of role models, what they are, who they are, how they are used and why they are important. The title of the PhD considers the importance of female role models for senior women in the investment banks and the research *issue* raised is *why* role models are important. In order to address this question, the question of *how* the process of work identity formation is influenced by the presence or absence of role models needs to be examined. Therefore, the research question is: ***How do role models influence the formation of senior women's work identity in male-dominated firms?*** This issue has been explored through in-depth interviews with 33 very senior women in investment banking, as described in Chapter 4. The purpose of this chapter then is to establish how role models, or the lack of them, influence senior women's work identity development.

Being different from the norm naturally focuses attention on one's identity. Because an individual (in this case a woman) is different, the norm group will be asking "Who is she?" Because of social conformity pressures, aware that she is surrounded by people who are different to herself, she will be asking "Who am I?" in relation to these others. Some of the interviewees had started out many years earlier as graduate intakes, where a whole new group was trying to establish a new identity. All except four of the interviewees had been in investment banks most of their career and the average tenure in their current organization was more than ten years. Therefore the notions about who they are were likely to have changed. In addition both men and women in any career develop and mature and identity theories suggest we become clearer about who we are with age. If we accept that identity is a fluid, growing changing concept, then given the longevity of tenure for most of these women in

investment banking, the impact of any individuals, any role models, may well change over time and they may have different role models at different stages. As Gibson (2003) suggests, we look for different things from role models at different ages and stages of our careers.

Analysis of the interviews reveals, unsurprisingly, a major temporal element to the way in which the individuals talked about who they are and were at work. There were clearly statements made about who they were when they first joined the bank, finding their feet, being younger and less secure and aware of often very masculine environments. Then there were thoughts about who they are now, how entwined or not their identity was with their role at work. And they also spoke about what they thought the future would hold for them both in terms of work and often non-work aspirations and who they wanted to become.

In this chapter, I will address the issue of why role models are important to senior women's identity development by reporting what the interviewees said about Past Me, Current Me and Future Me. The context in which they do so will be reported in the subsequent chapter.

## **6.2 Past Me**

### **6.2.1 Early banking role models**

In early career the focus that came through in the interviews was often around behavioural role modelling – i.e. vicariously learning how to behave by watching the prevalent norms. For example, there were a number of examples where the interviewees talked about observing and deducing what were the successful behaviours, or more accurately what were the behaviours of those deemed to be successful within the organization.

*“At the beginning of my career I was not myself. I just mimicked the role models that I saw – they were all men – and I thought, if I do like them I'm more likely to be promoted.” - Penny*

*“You feel a pressure to conform to the organizational stereotype of what is successful...in [company name] it was a very polished, self-promoting*

*style...so I thought, 'well that's successful, I'll do that'...'til school of hard knocks makes you realise...you have to believe in yourself to be yourself. And the two people that are my role models in [company name] do that." - Angela*

The pressures to conform that the women felt came not only from those above, but also from their peer group, to take on their social identity – in the quote below, that of a “good trader”.

*“From what you see around you, you would just assume that you need to be very aggressive in your demeanour to make a good trader...So the expectations from peers as well as seniors is to be seen as aggressive to assert your authority in a visible way.” - Vicky*

One woman, who had no females above her in early career, described how she had looked for “*what makes you successful...or gives you the edge.*” She was the first female in her field.

*“I had to be grateful even to be looked at, I was the first female licensed [stockbroker] in [country name], and the first female money market dealer...you had to quickly develop an identity”*

This need to develop an identity quickly sounds quite defensive or protective of the self. In hindsight she realised she adopted quite masculine behaviours, and considered how it might have been different had there been women.

*“...you observe and learn behaviours from people in terms of how to achieve things, and with potentially a female role model, either through discussion, or just observing, one might have felt the system was more genuine than I was believing it to be, but also that there were better ways of achieving things.”*

This quote shows how she felt that at her previous organization, had there been a female role model, it might have given rise to a projection onto the organization about “*the system*” for career progression being more meritocratic. Later in the interview she was talking about her current organization, where still she had no female role models. However, she talked about some “*very positive*” relationships with some

more senior men, in particular a male boss, who she named as a role model, and in the same sentence said *“I was very much supported in [company name]”*. This was a clear projection of the qualities of someone she was describing as a supportive role model onto the organization.

Another woman who joined banking later on in her career, ten years ago, when she had been 35, aware of the fact that she was surrounded by men, felt the need to *“toughen up”*. She received very clear messages about what was and was not valued, and remarked how very early on

*“my American woman boss said to me ‘Don’t be such a woman’.” - Julia*

Not only did these women decide they needed to copy the external behaviours of those deemed to be successful – i.e. men - but a number of them also felt the need to *be* more like those individuals. On an internal, identity level, this meant a denial of femininity, to varying degrees of consciousness:

*“So for the first few years I did change my style in order to pretend that I was more like the guys” - Penny*

But it was consciously more than just about style, more than simple behaviours; she describes it as an identity that she enacted at work. She later said it took about six or seven years before she began to realise what she was doing.

*“I was creating an identity by looking at, okay, what does a banker look like? I left home and I put on this sort of new personality in order to act and be like a banker, and then I went back home and changed. When I started...I was the only woman in a team of fifty. You didn’t want to stand out...I didn’t want to be seen as a woman even.”*

Another woman was less conscious of her adaptations. She denied that there was any discrimination in her organization and rationalised her experiences by accepting the status quo. As can be seen, there were contradictions in her explanations, showing how she had justified the behaviours in advance.

*“My view was, if I’m going to go and work in an investment bank that’s the way it’s going to be and I have to accept that...I accept that if I go and work on a trading floor I do not turn up in a mini skirt, it’s very*



*simple...that's just the way it is and I cannot allow myself to be upset by, you know, the fact that someone will make a comment about your hairstyle, I accepted that...so that's why I don't feel I have ever been discriminated against...because it's not discrimination because I have never been discriminated against...I've never ever felt anyone's said anything to me that's really been just because I was a female." - Hannah*

In contrast, there was one woman who consciously did not deny her femininity, but had also had to deal with the consequences of that along the way:

*"I haven't adapted my behaviour in terms of male versus female. I've never been either more or less aggressive relative to my peer group or played a political game or anything like that. I am me." - Fay*

And interestingly this woman is a particularly attractive, stereotypically 'sexy' woman, which she made no attempt to hide. She told of an incident when she had been part of a team of eight who had just won a good project. The director called the team into the room and gave out jobs to each of the men in the team.

*"And at the end of it all I hadn't got anything to do, so I said to him '[Name], you've given everybody else something to do...what would you like me to do?' And he looked at me and he said 'How about taking your clothes off?' ...I didn't know how to react, there was a stunned silence. Nobody laughed even. And I just thought 'Oh God, that's how everybody thinks of me. I mean they just think of me as someone who's not even worthy giving a job to'...I felt so humiliated"*

She said initially she did not know how to deal with this, and clearly expresses how undervalued she felt. This woman had also been one the first women in her division, so there was no point of reference to help her make sense of the incident. Subsequently, she explained how she had felt this attack on her femininity was a complete devaluation of her [identity] as a woman. But rather than try to suppress her womanhood, in hindsight she realises she 'chose' to live with the devaluation. She still struggled with self-confidence. *"But it doesn't feel anywhere as lonely now because there are other women"*, she added later.

These inappropriate behaviours of men are explained by a lack of women in their work environment and the effect this has on organizational culture (Sheppard, 1989). Another isolated woman also talked about not knowing how to deal with what she felt were inappropriate behaviours. Having from the start been surrounded only by “others”, and foreign norms, it was very hard to gauge what is acceptable behaviour. And she felt that not having female role models, or reference points, was a big part of this problem.

*“So I think potentially the lack of role models could mean that women have a barrier to higher achievement because...they may choose not to take issue with things because they’re unsure...what is the benchmark, what is acceptable treatment, behaviour, attitude and what isn’t...should I be making a fuss. - Amy*

Although these are not recent examples, and these women had been working in banking for a number of years, they are examples of the learning experiences they had early on in their careers, which may have informed who they are at work. But Amy gave an example of a recent “outrageous incident”, the details of which she would not specify, but by which she was so shocked that even at her level of seniority (MD), she was unsure how to deal with it. When she told her boss, the male perpetrator was called upon to apologise, but Amy said she knew that the problem was he did not understand why he was apologising.

There were also some examples of very positive role model relationships that individual women had early on in their career, although they were predominantly male role models.

*“I’ve had wonderful men that I’ve worked for, my first boss was one, and I’ve had absolutely horrible men that I’ve worked for...and thank heavens, you know...you do latch onto people you are on the same wavelength with...the same moral code. Because otherwise...if you don’t find those anchors, and they are anchors, I think you do leave.” - Celia*

This quote shows the strength of impact a lack of appropriate role models – i.e. people with whom the individual can *latch onto*, can identify – can have. This is a major issue concerning retention, with role models again being described as *anchors*.

*“I’m very fortunate, there’s always been lots of people...I take different bits from different people...I’ve always felt supported...[Name 1], heads up trading, she’s very helpful...[Name 2] he used to run operations, a great role model, [Name 3]she’s very grounded, kind, thoughtful, she’s very supportive, but driven...she wants to make the organization successful” - Jill*

It should be noted, however, that this woman was the exception. She was the only one of all the interviewees who could cite more than a couple of positive female role models, who had had female role models throughout her career, and who dealt with other senior women on a daily basis as part of her job.

### **6.2.2 Adapting for career progression**

Once into their careers, how conscious were the women of making adaptations and in what way were these affected by what they saw around them? Most talked about having adapted their working styles in terms of learning how to become better managers and leaders. This involved using vicarious learning from others role modelling good management skills.

*Going into certain meetings with certain people, if you know they want succinct summaries or some people are more detail orientated, but that’s more adapting to your audience, which everyone should do. - Kathy*

This is obviously not a gendered behaviour and is relevant for men and women in most careers.

Those women who are non-UK nationalities also talked about cultural differences and how these have often meant making adaptations to suit different cultures. One woman who is an Indian national, and who did her first big management role in Japan before then moving to London, was very cognizant of how much adaptation she allows herself to do. She talked about consciously flexing as required but does not allow herself to “*go beyond my own comfort zone*”. She talked about how the culture in London is more aggressive than the previous two national settings she had worked in, but that those experiences had helped be aware of the differences – “*that’s one of my take-aways after working in different cultures*”.

Mel's role model, a fellow American woman, based in New York, was rejected by a number of UK women, when she was over and Mel had organised a women's dinner. Mel was very surprised by this, but it helped her realise that aspects of her own style, which she may have fashioned on her role model, and were possibly "*more American*", may also not be appreciated as much by the local population, as she thinks they should be.

Adapting to different cultures is again relevant for both men and women. However, also relevant here, in the cultural context, was the fact that four of the women felt that the fact that they were foreign compounded their "differentness" when added to the fact that they are female. Interestingly, none of the six American women were in this group.

*"...they all came from the same place, and there were very few of us who were different...I mean, I'm both foreign and a woman, so there was a sort of double difference there." - Penny*

### **6.2.3 Adaptation and integrity**

The adaptations above could all be considered positive or appropriate, in terms of personal learning and development with changing roles or national cultures. However, there was considerable discussion around the topic of whether the women had felt the need to adapt their behaviours to a masculine cultural norm. Some were very clear in their belief that trying to be someone they are not would, for them be unsustainable.

*"I know [those behaviours] wouldn't be sustainable and they wouldn't be me" - Clare*

*"I don't know if you can sustain that...if you're not a political animal, which I'm not, you'll always get caught out" Celia*

*"To have a conflict with yourself is the worst thing, and that's not sustainable" - Vicky*

*"Those people who wear a visage...get found out...or become so damaged by maintaining a façade...they will leave." - Alicia*

However, there were plenty of examples given by the interviewees of other women who they believed had consciously adapted to more masculine styles of behaving, specifically in order to further their careers, and had been successful in doing so. But in the examples given below, despite the other woman's success, in each case the interviewee had still made a conscious decision that she was not going to follow this model.

Fay talked about a woman she had know a long time, who was a little more senior than herself

*“she looks sort of quite masculine and she behaves in quite a masculine way. I think [Name] probably has adapted...she manifests quite a lot of male characteristics...Many of those characteristics are one of the reasons why she's been successful.”*

Kate described a colleague who wanted to get promoted to Director so she consciously dropped the pitch of her voice and adapted the way she presented herself at meetings in order to be more male-oriented.

*“She deliberately did that to create a stronger impression in order to achieve her promotion. And she was successful”*

Kate described this as a “*huge reference point*” for her, and goes on to say

*“So I will adapt where I see an underlying business rationale as opposed to because that makes someone happy or fits a certain square box.”*

For most women this pressure to adapt or conform was something of which they were quite cognizant. A small number even recognised that their refusal to adapt lay behind them taking a longer time to be successful, or that they may have been further promoted had they chosen to adapt a little more. However, they were also very clear that this was a matter of principles and values to stay true to themselves.

*“I think that the compromise I made is that I had to be true to myself and so couldn't play the political game...And it took me a very long time to get promoted”. - Celia*

She later said that this was why it took 20 years for her to get promoted to MD, instead of 12, which she thought it should have.

Kate described a more senior female role model who maintained her integrity and her values but for whom this blocked her progression.

*“She carried through what she believed to be the right thing...she sought to influence people in a variety of ways, which is one of the things I learnt from her... She did lobby for the right things and it’s a much harder path to tread. Interestingly, that was her ultimate reason for leaving...coming head-to-head with other parts of the organization...But I think it’s important to stick by your principles, that’s what I mean by work ethic.”*

In contrast, this interviewee gave an example of another senior female who she thought “*behaved badly*” but had gone onto bigger and better roles...

*“without any constraint around this particular aspect of her behaviour...if you’re competent, the organization will let you carry on with significant inadequacies...But it doesn’t bounce with me, with my core principles of being polite and core morals.”*

So this woman has an example of a positive female role model failing and a negative female role model succeeding, and she was clear that the organization condoned this. She expressed no ambition to progress herself, and talked about her work with some detachment, giving the impression her approach was one of a job rather than a career. This may be led by the fact that she is a mother of three young children, but it also seemed like the lack of motivation was driven by what she had seen around her, and her unwillingness to compromise her principles and values.

Amanda talked having had four male role models in the previous bank she had worked at, who demonstrated integrity and values aligned to her own.

*“I watched to see if they would grow in the organization, but each one got knocked off at different levels...that’s what I was talking about integrity incongruous. But one made it to the top and that’s when you hold out hope...it doesn’t matter if you’re a man or a woman...you hold out hope for your ability to rise through who you really are, just having a high*

*sense of integrity, commitment to your role, operating on merit, and without compromising.”*

A further interviewee talked about making the realisation mid-career of the impact that taking a stand in terms of her identity could have on her career. Her organization had just been taken over by another and it appeared the culture of the larger organization was going to prevail.

*“I thought this is really tough and I’m going to have to be my own person and not progress with my career because I can’t be the person they want me to be. If this is the new [company name] I can’t be that person...you feel a bit like a cuckoo in a nest because, the messages you’re getting...is that you have to be a certain type of person and do things in a certain type of way...and anything else is less than acceptable.” - Angela*

She then went on to describe how within a year or so a new Chief Executive took office, and the espoused culture changed again. This demonstrated the impact of the distant role model – at mid-career this was not someone she yet had regular contact with, but felt close enough to get the messages about what was considered appropriate behaviour.

The choice to adapt or not adapt their behaviours was something that most of the women could talk about with relative ease. It was clearly something that most of them had consciously considered at various points in their careers, and often on a regular basis. I found this remarkable, and would question whether this would be something so often in the forefront of equivalent men’s minds. I would suggest not. Being the odd-one-out, not naturally part of the in-group forces the issue of identity in relation to the others onto centre stage.

### **6.3 Current Me**

Traditional identity theories would suggest that by the time individuals are in their forties, they would have a relatively clear sense of who they are. And given the degree of success that the female interviewees have had (i.e. 23 of the 33 had reached the pinnacle grade of managing director, and the remaining ten were not far behind), one could be forgiven for assuming that they might be reasonably self-confident in who

they are at work. However, it quickly became apparent that this was not the case for many of the women, neither in terms of a clear sense of self, nor a self-confidence commensurate with their organizational level.

### **6.3.1 How tough should I be?**

It was discussed in Chapter 5 how the question of ‘toughness’ emerged strongly in terms of using role models, but that there were so few positive examples of women who had the correct balance. Many of the women still do not have an answer to this question, and whereas when talking about their earlier career, it was about how much they should copy the behaviour of the men, at this stage or age, the issue seemed almost deeper in terms of trying to work out to what extent this is an integral part of themselves as well as their behaviour.

Approximately half of the women still felt that they had not yet achieved the right balance of toughness and softness, but interestingly some felt that at their level they need to toughen up more, whereas some felt now they needed to work more on being softer.

*“When you’re with business units you have to play a bit tougher, a bit harder” - Joanne*

Joanne talks about having to be *more like them*, them being all male and of a certain type. And because neither she nor they have any exemplars of different behaviours, she perpetuates the norm, *“more of a sort of tough edge”*. When reminding her that she spoke earlier of her former senior colleague who had left, being criticised for being *too abrasive*, she said *“yes...I think it’s very difficult to get the balance”*.

*“Working in a male environment, because I always have, but this environment, where I’ve had to toughen myself up is not to take things personally. But you can’t be soft...but if you come too sort of forceful on things, they say ‘Oh she’s being very aggressive’, whereas a man would be passionate”. - Julia*

*“I think I need to be less direct and I think the more senior you get, the more important that becomes. Do I think that’s because I’m female?”*



*Yes...because there's a tendency if you're female and direct, to be seen as aggressive" - Hannah*

Interestingly, Hannah felt this was important “*if you're going to do the role model bit*”, implying that the directness was something she would not want more junior women to see. She also said that working in a male dominated environment, because she is female, her style “*isn't necessarily going to work*”, confirming research that men do not like women to be direct or ‘aggressive’.

Most of the women talked about appraisal feedback they had recently received from their (mostly male) colleagues. (The interviews took place between November and January, which is pre-bonus appraisal time in the majority of the investment banks, so for most of the women this was fresh in their minds.) In addition, they themselves made judgements about the perception of any women above them, who were often used as negative role models. For Amy there had never been any external points of reference as to what is acceptable or normal behaviour for a woman, or again what is (un)acceptable behaviour of those around her.

*“Even in my situation at my seniority with my experience, to know what you let go...and what you don't, and then how you live with the consequences of why you did so...And again, having [female] role models would be very helpful in determining how you deal with those things.” - Amy*

So it would appear, she just stopped looking and just got on with it. There were a number of quotes during her interview that suggest that this woman does not really rely on external verification of her identity. As mentioned earlier, being the first, she had to “*quickly develop an identity*”. When asked to describe herself in comparison to her seniors she said “*I've never really thought about comparison. I don't really focus externally at all. I focus internally.*” When asked whether others would perceive her as confident, she replied “*Other people tell me I do, but I don't think about...I don't focus on that...I'm not aware of my style.*”

Throughout the interview, whether talking directly about herself, or more generally about others she made the point that without female role models, women copy the males, which she also suggests the men do not like. Her assertiveness is described as a

coat of armour, and in this next quote, in which she sounded rather regretful, she wondered if perhaps there could have been a better way if there had been some female role models.

*“I don’t necessarily play...I tend to be very assertive in what I require to complete my job, and sometimes that is very intimidating for men. And being in a predominantly male group, and I don’t just mean this job, but I mean generally in my whole time here, if I had perhaps been a little less, I don’t know, demanding, which I may have observed how from a female role model, had there been one, about well there’s a different way of achieving things, it may have been a slightly more palatable decision to make to promote me earlier.”*

### **6.3.2 Confidence to be oneself**

Hand in hand with the issue of toughness, that of self-confidence was still an issue for about a third of the women, irrespective of age or rank. Hannah, a managing director of two years, describes one of many examples of what is known in gender literature as ‘The Impostor Syndrome’.

*“...one day I’m going to get found out. And everyone’s gonna go ‘well actually, she’s not really very capable’. And I don’t know a single man who feels that [laughs]. They all think they’re brilliant and perfectly capable. And yet virtually every woman I know who is successful at what they do feels the same way”.*

Issues of adaptation were still very much present, but for some, they were a little more confident and therefore more comfortable to flex a little as they deemed necessary.

*“You do not need to adopt the leadership style of men, but you need to adapt your communication style.” - Mel*

Vicky talked about being aware of the “*herd behaviour*” and being willing to flex her behaviours “*consciously within acceptable ranges.*” Faith spoke of a conscious awareness that her natural style was more *cat-like* (introverted), but that in various situations she consciously enacted more *dog-like* (extraverted) characteristics. Kreiner and Sheep (forthcoming, p.10) describe how individuals may “seek to adapt certain

aspects of their identity to be congruent with expectations of their professional identity”, or *identity customization*, also depicted as “changes in identity made to fit work demands” (Pratt, Rockman & Kaufman, 2006, p. 246). These three women had all been at their current organization for more than a decade, and in banking for longer. However, Anna was one of the few women new to the investment banking industry, having been in her role for only two years. In her recent appraisal, she had been explicitly told to adapt style to the “*bank style*”. Quite superficially, this involved aspects like the speed at which she delivered information, the way conversations were framed, which did not allow for discussion, but was just about acceptance of proposals. Without exemplars role modelling that things can be done differently, whether explicitly as in this case, or implicitly, through peer pressure, minorities feel the need to adapt to the way of the majority. Anna was quite clear in her belief that these types of “*closed conversations*” were not the best way to get the best answers. Very interestingly, the issues she was raising regarding this bank style are some of those surrounding governance and good decision-making that have been asked since the recent collapse of the banking sector.

For some, becoming a Managing Director had helped their levels of confidence. Louise had felt very insecure on the way up, and felt a little more comfortable now, and was working on learning how to be more charming. For her, she acknowledged, “*making MD*” was very much about an external affirmation. Alicia described how she had relaxed a little more having become MD, and she was settling into both her role and title, the role identity.

*“Interestingly in the last couple of years [since becoming an MD] when I have got more comfortable about being myself, I think I probably deal with my team much better, having that sort of human bit, allowing that bit to show a bit more often.” - Hannah*

This is the woman who described how she used to “*leave her empathy in the car*” on the way to work. And later she says how it was this more human side that influenced the work behaviours that have made her successful with her clients, but which she had hidden from her colleagues (see below section 6.3.4). She puts this previous behaviour down to not being a very confident individual at work, which she says is “*because I’m not a very typical [company name] person.*” She had not gone to

university, but started working in the organization 17 years ago “*at the bottom*”. Being atypical, feeling different to all those around her had meant she had felt very insecure about who she was. She had not had any positive female role models and when asked whether they would have made any real difference to her, she replied

*“I think it might have made me a bit softer. I think I’m quite hard...that sounds terrible...I have a hard shell, and I think it may have allowed me to understand that it was okay to not always have to have that...that’s more than icing on the cake I think.”*

So, like Amy, above, the hardness which is now her norm has been developed, learned behaviour from those around her, and more genuine aspects of herself have been denied.

*“It’s probably taken me much longer to accept that it’s okay to be me as well as what I think I should be at work...that it is okay to be a bit more [her name] in work...So I think had I had a role model, that was like that...that would have been a good thing.”*

Another MD, Julia spoke of her lack of self-confidence and how she deals with it,

*“there are more women in the American team...very tough, superbly confident...So that’s probably one thing I have adapted. I can appear confident now, but it’s not me...my boss in the States she says ‘Come on, you know you can’. And I can put it on now”.*

Note how there is an assumption that even though she says she can put it on, she assumes that her colleagues actually *are* that confident. But then she describes how her confidence has also grown over the previous five years. It is a good example of how self-confidence can grow through a role model relationship, in this case one with her male boss.

*“I’ve had this inspiring boss...he gave me more and wanted me in on things...but he just gave me confidence by showing me trust.”*

And in the next sentence she was talking about how she trusts the organization will continue to develop her because “*they’re prepared to give me bigger roles*”. So she has transferred the affect (gratitude and trust) she felt for the boss for having given her

more responsibility, onto the organization. Through this positive relationship she has grown into both the role identity and the person identity, and identifies more with both the relationship and the organization. And she continues...

*“...it is about relaxation into the more senior role...I mean I don’t think I’ve ever had to behave in male ways, but one feels more comfortable in behaving as a female, as a woman, the more senior one becomes, or at least I certainly have. So yes, authenticity...it’s an interesting one”.*

It is interesting to hear how women say they’ve not had to become more masculine, but clearly they have not felt comfortable being feminine, until reaching this more secure position, implying an earlier androgynous work identity.

However, there were also some examples of women demonstrating positive identities. All of the three examples below, had had positive female role models in their career, which I would suggest is more than coincidental. Jill had described how she had had, almost from the start of her time at the bank (12 years) a female boss who was a positive role model and a “*very clued-up, switched on and gender aware*” male boss about whom she was extremely positive. She also had a lot of interaction with senior females on a regular basis, and said “*I am comfortable being female and being myself.*”

Another interviewee, but at the level below MD (ED) spoke eloquently about how she had come to terms with being herself at work and what that meant to her.

*“...we talked about fitting-in issues, you try and create something you are not in work...but over time I have realised that there is no need for me to compromise my real me by trying to be what I am not.” - Vicky*

This is the woman who earlier (see Chapter 5) spoke of the importance of having “*non-standards*” (i.e. anyone who was not a white anglo-saxon male) in senior positions. Having had at least one role model, whose similarity to herself was the level of difference from the dominant norm, had helped her to realise it was acceptable to be herself at work.

*“And when you bring your own self to work, you are exposing yourself to criticism. And that can hurt, because that is actually who you are. But I*

*think once you become a bit more strong...I think you say 'well, this is what I am, and get used to it'. So I think over time, consciously, I have bridged the gap quite a bit."*

Another woman placed importance on being herself at work in terms of the impact of being a role model to other women.

*"We [women] have, I believe, a different style of leadership...and you want to show other women that they can be true to themselves and true to their values and still get to MD without having to act like a man, or adopt the sort of behaviour which might have been traditional fifteen years ago." - Penny*

This woman had very much mimicked the male model in her early career but had, over time, through confidence and competence in her work style reversed these behaviours.

### **6.3.3 Characteristics and roles**

#### **6.3.3.1 Personal characteristics**

The concerns about toughness and self-confidence were the two big issues raised by a number of the women about which they were not clear. But, when asked to describe themselves, the individual at work, their personal identity, all the women were fairly clear and replied with a number of very similar answers of being, *driven, passionate, focused, determined*. This often reflected experiences in their early lives, e.g one had trained to be a classical pianist, one was a classical dancer, one played hockey for her country and trained with the men's rugby team. One told of a story of watching pole-vaulting at an Olympic games in the 1960's and declaring she wanted to be the first female pole-vaulter! These characteristics of determination, coupled with the hard work and discipline that obviously went with their earlier achievements are unlikely to be gender-specific to successful women in banking. And indeed some of the women described that in order for anyone (including men) to be that successful in their bank, they had to be highly driven and passionate about the work. Looking at individual traits or characteristics of the women's identities is interesting, and much of the literature on organizational behaviour does focus on the individual. However, it

is unlikely to help us find what we need to understand why the issue of lack of role models for senior women is still cited as so important.

As we can see from the two main issues described above of the 'toughness' and self-confidence, these are issues in relation to those others around them at work, those with whom they have relationships. In the descriptions of themselves as driven, passionate, determined, in the same breath they also illustrated how they were in relation to those they worked with, *tough, demanding, I have high expectations, but I'm fair*. This last point was reiterated time and again. The pictures they portrayed were consistent and a clear description of how they saw themselves enacting the role of the manager, in relation to others.

### **6.3.3.2 Playing different roles**

A number of the women were very aware of the different roles that they played, both in work and out of work.

Joanne talked about playing different roles with different people in the bank, in different divisions.

*"I am more conscious of the role I play...you have to play different roles...being a woman in Operations actually plays to...but when you're with business units you have to be a bit tougher...you have to be conscious how you move in an out of those things.*

So to some extent this is just dealing with different roles, but also meeting the expectation of the interaction. Sex is a factor in these roles, as Joanne says they *"associate me not just with what I am [Head of Operations], but also because I'm a woman"*. In other words her colleagues were expressing an awareness of both the role identity and the person identity. And she does the same, when she talks about being tougher and harder to be more like both the Heads of Business units and the men.

Outside of the workplace, Marion also talked about *playing* a role. This woman had earlier spoken about enacting the female at work, talking to younger women to show that she has a softer feminine side. In response to a question about the "real" you she said:

*“A lot of it is the real me. But there is also another side...so that comes out at home ...but I do also **play** the **maternal role**, and that gives me a lot of satisfaction as well. I often cook almost every weekend...actually, if you saw me at home, you would think that I **played** the classic **mother-at-home role** at weekends”.*

This woman appeared throughout the interview to be very concerned with proving her female credentials, as well as talking a lot about “*being a minority, you’re always feeling that I’ve got to try hard to prove myself*”. She focused a lot on the reputation she believed she had for being “*a tough cookie*”. She was an MD in a front office role, traditionally very male-dominated, although she had managed to build a team with a handful of women in it. She had had three children whilst working her way up the division, and they were all under ten years old, so within memory of many of those there. She seemed to focus on her children as proof, both to herself, and also to her colleagues of her femininity – rather like Heilman and Okimoto suggest in their 2007 paper.

*“I think they probably conclude in their own mind that she’s got to be, you know three children, she’s so determined in the job, you know, she produces, they probably in their own world kind of almost justify why I have to be [tough]. But I don’t think I’m any tougher than another male here”.*

The use of the description of *playing a role* calls into question how integrated the various aspects of her identity are. Does she identify more with her role relationships as a mother, a wife, or an MD in the capital markets division of an investment bank? Over-identification with particular aspects of ones identity is unhealthy because it suggests that other important aspects of identity can get subjugated (Sluss & Ashforth, 2006).

### **6.3.3.3 Identification with the work role**

In the interviews the women were asked about to what extent they felt their work role defined them and how they would feel if it was taken away. Through iterative reading and re-reading of the responses to these questions, the women were divided into three groups of over-identification, integral and under-identification. The latter group was



where the interviewee appeared relatively impartial to the job and believed they could walk away from it with relative ease.

*If I didn't enjoy it I would walk...life's too short...that probably defines my attitude to my role" - Julia*

Under-identification can be indicative of how important (or not) a role or role-relationship is to the individual (Ashforth, 2001). This was the smallest group of these interviewees. Relational indifference results in a lack of connection, which in situations get tough can negatively influence role performance (Ashforth & Sluss, 2006). In June 2008, six months after the interviews, I met with several of the interviewees. There had been almost a year of 'credit crunch' problems in the banking sector, although this was before the major collapses of the global investment banks. One interviewee who was in the under-identification group said she was preparing to leave the organization (after ten years). Her feeling was that it had been hard enough in the good years, and the credit crunch was "*the straw on the camel's back*".

The integral group implied that the job was an integral and important part of the individual's life, but was not the be-all and end-all. This was the largest group.

*"the job does give me a sense of my self-identity, as in if I was not working, I wouldn't be a totally different person, but my own measure of myself significantly includes my work" - Vicky*

The over-identification group, sub-titled "Hopelessly Devoted" included those for whom their role and who they are in it is all encompassing.

*"I think to a pretty large extent...Anyone who is asked what would be the most important to you would obviously reply their family, but when you spend thirteen hours in the office and one hour max with your children in the evening, that tends to show something different." - Carol*

Which group the women were in was not related to age, hierarchical level, marital status or motherhood. However, closer inspection revealed that those in the over-identification group had three attributes in common:

- They all struggled with self-confidence issues.

- They all struggled with the tough versus charming balance.
- None of them had ever had any female role models.

The women were all quite different and on the whole appeared reasonably content with how they managed their roles.

Amy is responsible for a budget of €1.5billion and a division of 1,000 people; she does a “*big job*”. She admits to working 12 hours a day, 6 days a week. She does not have a family or a partner. But, she says, this is her choice. She says she does not understand how others who do have family responsibilities manage to do their jobs. This is the woman who, being a first in everything that she has done, has never felt she has any external reference points and so has internalised her identity, against her own standards. She says she enjoys her job, for the most part, as the values of the role and the values of the organization are in alignment with her own. She could articulate all this with awareness. So none of this appears to be a problem for her at present, and is very much in line with Hewlett & Luce’s description of “Extreme Jobs” (2006). She was very aware of how the lack of female role models may have affected both her identity, her levels of self-confidence, her career progression and who she is at work.

Abigail appears to be completely subsumed by her role, and does not have the awareness that Amy does. She talks about others copying male styles but later admits she is perceived to have done so. As a manager, she talks about trying to respect other people’s non-work lives, but then talks about calling people back from holiday, although she sees that these are “*male*” ways of working. She says her job defines her to a great extent, and believes that that is normal. To illustrate this, she explains that she has very little else to talk about, in conversation, even though just minutes earlier she was telling me she has a husband and an 18 month old son. She lives in a flat 200 yards walk from the office in the week and her (non-working) husband brings her son up to stay one night a week. Most weekends she goes “*home*” to their house in Kent. Interestingly, she was the only interviewee to have admitted to doing “*the male thing*” of going on a canvassing tour in order to get her MD promotion. All other interviewees who mentioned it said that was against their values, was too disingenuous and was not something they would do, even though they knew that

generally that was how the system worked. She understood the need for female role models, but was relating it more to others rather than herself.

Louise recognises she is in an “Extreme Job” situation, which has thus far been okay for her, but she is not sure about the future. Her husband also has a similar job in the same bank. At present she cannot see how the future is going to pan out. She works very long days and travels extensively. Her job is incredibly important to her in terms of who she is, but she realises thus far it has been about a “*desperate need for external approval*”. She cannot see how she is going to get to a place of internal satisfaction. Motherhood is a substantial problematic issue “*out there*”. Her main concern appears to be the potential loss of identity that she believes would ensue, if she could not maintain her job, and about which she is very anxious. She has no positive exemplars of how to do her role and become a mother. She cites one woman who returned to work very quickly and who Louise knows is viewed very disparagingly by others, but as Louise says, she was doing it the only way she knew how. In addition she has no role models amongst her personal friends, as they have all stopped work after motherhood. She described how many of them had gone through an “*identity crisis*” after stopping. In addition she struggles with her husband’s perception of stay at home mothers, as women who are boring and have nothing to contribute to the dinner table. Louise, turning 40 was aware of the passage of time, was cognizant of the decisions she had made to “*make MD*” before trying to have a family, and that she was now struggling to make this (the family) happen. She was conscious of the impact of the lack of working mother role models and clearly wanted to be one to the younger women in her organization. However, she already felt like she had failed on that front, as she would not encourage them to wait until the MD promotion, due to additional biological challenges that such delay implies.

#### **6.3.4 True to self relational ways of working**

Previous research has considered women’s greater need for connectedness (Chodorow, 1978); relatedness (Gilligan, 1982), intimacy (Erikson, 1968), and relationships (Anderson & Chen, 2002) to name but a few. There were a number of examples where the women brought this need to relate into their work.

#### **6.3.4.1 Collaborative working**

One woman described how she has learned to work in ways which she described as being more true to herself. The key point about it is the collaborative nature of how she chooses to work, which she explained was not the norm in her organization, but as she grew more confident after business success, she felt brave enough to lead a project her way, even though she had no exemplars of success before her.

*“the sign of a truly committed banker was the way you talked about the competition...you were sort of blowing your own trumpet and that to me seemed a bit like a boy’s game. But I played it...I went along. But it wasn’t me. On the contrary, I was in favour of co-operation. One day in a meeting with my peers, I suggested we did things differently, i.e. that we bring in [different company name], because they had an angle that would make us a stronger bid.” - Penny*

This was practically unheard of, but she made it happen and a team from two different banks was formed to run a particular project. This is a good example of the diversity of approach and increased innovation that can result from having less homogenous top teams. Penny talks about how radical this was to them, but how natural it was to her.

*“[Bank name] had such a competitive environment internally. People were fighting instead of concentrating their competitive energies onto the outside world. There were a few guys like me, but mostly, there was this tight culture that was driven by the fact that everybody looked like each other. They all came from the same schools.”*

#### **6.3.4.2 Team Working**

Another aspect of who women are and how they prefer to work came out through discussion around their team-working. In four of the six organizations, women had been criticised for how they worked with their team, their relationships with them. They were criticised for spending too much time on their development, for nurturing and protecting them, and working with and through them. Although this might seem counterintuitive to good management, Fletcher (1998) also found that relational work

was not rewarded by many organizations, and that it was often seen as detrimental to one's career. From Company 1

*“My boss recently said that he believes that I’m over-protective towards my team... protecting my team too much, he thinks not necessarily for the benefit of the organisation. Um...so I have had to adapt my behaviour as a consequence.”*

This quote was from Company 6

*“I am an anomaly in that environment, for not competing with my team – I build my team, not climb on top of them. My manager described me like a lioness...I protect them too much.”*

And in Company 5, a small group of five female MDs had, on a development offsite been given 360 degree feedback together. They had received similar very positive feedback from their teams, but not so from their peers. From Company 5

*“Our direct reports thought we were fabulous. For the most part our peers didn’t like us very much...I’m very involved...on my team of 90, I pretty much know everybody pretty well...But my peers don’t know me so well and don’t respect me as much as I thought they should.”*

However, in one company, the feedback was very different. Unprompted by any questions on the interview schedule, four out of the five interviewees there talked about how the one thing that was highly valued explicitly in their organizational culture was team-work, that individual success will only happen through team success. As Diane points out below, many of the women feel very comfortable with this way of more relational working, much more than the every-man-for-himself type approach that they were suggesting exists in other organizations. From Company 3

*“One of the best things that I was ever told about this firm when I joined was, ‘Please understand to be successful here you will not achieve that by stabbing the people in front of you in the back. You will achieve because your team will push you up’. And what that’s saying is if you build a successful team and your team are successful then they will allow you to go and do other things, which will allow you to progress and they will come after you.” - Chloe*

For these women, their more natural style was that of the transformational leader. But this also plays to the stereotypes of women being more nurturing naturally. More typically, male bosses do not value this nurturing style, as it is foreign to them and is not what they have seen role modelled as successful behaviour – i.e. more traditional transactional style.

*“... you're all singing off the same song sheet pretty much. You're encouraged to say your opinion. But if there's a consensus, get behind it. And I like that too, you know. And I like that team stuff. I like the team approach here. **I think that helps women actually...Because I think women like being part of a team....So all of those things are me, you know, are me [name]...** I think I complement the firm and the firm definitely complements me and how I think and how I view things. The values here are very, very high and we are absolutely all, no matter whether you're black, white, male, female, whatever.... we are all doing the same thing and striving for the same thing.” - Diane*

Note how for this individual, she can relate the behaviours and approaches and values she sees enacted by those above and around her, to herself, to her identity, they “*are me*”. Rather surprisingly, this company had a reputation within the investment bank community of being the most ‘hard-nosed’ business, with the most exacting clients and its employees work the longest hours. Nothing in the five interviews conducted there would suggest that this was not the case, and indeed the personal circumstances of the women might confirm some of it, for example, only one of the five was a mother (recently so). And yet, the interviewees there appeared on the whole to be content with the culture there, and much was put down to the very team-oriented approach to work. If one accepts that women are more relational, and naturally more nurturing, could it be that the women at this particular company can satisfy their feminine instincts through relational team-working? Given that only one of the five had children (and that was recent), one could hypothesise they were not getting much of their ‘nurturing fix’ from their immediate families (although I do not know all of their extended family circumstances and therefore this is conjecture). But perhaps this is why the women appeared relatively satisfied with their work environment, notably more so than in other banks, despite their extreme circumstances. And to have had

these behaviours role modelled presumably by men more senior than themselves, throughout their career, would likely make them feel like they fit in.

#### **6.3.4.3 Relationships with Clients**

In a number of interviews, when they were describing who they were at work, I would ask the women whether they were different at home, and if so how. But in one interview Hannah pointed out that there was not just a contrast between work and home but work in different settings – for example, client-facing situations.

*“Oh I’m much nicer...my clients would say the same thing as one of my friends talking about me”.*

So, as Hannah confirmed, the clients get to see more of the real her. She explained this by saying that she does not have any expectations of her clients, in the same way that she does not of her friends. She then goes on to realise as we are talking...

*“Yes definitely. It’s interesting because the reason that I’ve been successful is because I’m very good with my clients. So that in itself says to me, actually had I allowed myself to be the way I am, would I have been more successful? I don’t know.”*

She went on to explain that the reason she did not feel it was okay to be herself at work is *“partly tied-up with being different, and therefore feeling the need to actually be better than everybody else”*. As mentioned earlier, Hannah was acutely aware not only of being a different sex, but also coming from a different background. In explanation of why she could be herself with her clients, she said

*“Clients don’t care where you went to university...you either know what you’re talking about or you don’t. Whereas your colleagues, you’re judged by where you went to school, to university, all that sort of thing”.*

Another woman from the same bank, when asked, also started off by saying that her clients were more accepting of who she was and it was easier being a woman around them – in fact there may even be some benefits.

*“You’re unique so you don’t get forgotten...if you can figure out the charm thing, sometimes you can deliver tough messages in a way that men can’t, you’re interesting, you’re different”. - Louise*

However, she also then said that the clients got the better side of her and it was more rehearsed, so in contrast to her colleague suggesting it was more genuine.

A third colleague, also from the same bank again suggested she was more herself in client meetings. She put it down to demography, and also down to the “*permission*”, which she has in client meetings.

*“Whereas people that see me with clients...so this is where the work identity comes in...would perceive me in a different way...In the internal...I am usually the only woman out of twenty guys...And I did think there’s a big thing around that...I do talk less...With the client meeting, I’m running it, I’m presenting or I’m trying make something happen. It’s my job to talk, to assert myself. So I have **permission**. And I think in meetings, this is an interesting insight, unless I am presenting, nobody’s given me permission.” - Mary*

Just to reiterate, this woman is a managing director of one of the largest global investment banks, is 48 years old, and had been at that bank for twenty-two years! These examples just show the impact of being dissimilar, and the effect it can have on the women’s appraisal of the situation. Only when they are outside of their organizational environment, that they find so constraining, can they behave differently. The characteristic of this environment is the demographic context – see chapter 7 below.

## **6.4 Future Me**

We have seen from the previous sections how the lack of role models has affected the women in terms of learned behaviours early in their banking careers and later developing role identities. These women had already been extremely successful in their careers, but what did they see for their future, what were their aspirations? And did they believe they could achieve their goals within their organization?



### 6.4.1 Moving on...

A few of the women were ready to move on to other things. Three of the women who were firsts in their field and all around aged 50 talked openly about it. Fay believed she was already too old (at 49) to be in her role and that people did not do what she did when they were 50. She still loved her job, but was beginning to get a little tired, and did not have quite so much fight in her. She had not had any female role models in her career and had done the same thing for 22 years. She was looking for something new, was definitely not ready to retire, and had recently become a non-executive director on a FTSE 250 company. She said she knew of a few women who were role-modelling careers out of non-executive portfolios and so she was looking into that.

Amy, aged 52, said she still loved her job, but was looking for something more meaningful. She had also been one of the first, and had had no female role models. She suggested something along the lines of corporate sustainability, or social responsibility. This is very much in line with Manierio & Sullivan's notion of the Kaleidoscope Career (2005) that women at the latter stages of their career are looking for authenticity.

Celia, aged 52, had not had any female role models, had been at the bank for 27 years and believed she had "*done it all*". She said she did not want to go any further than she had already gone because "*politically, it's too messy.*" She mentioned time and again throughout her interview her conscious decision to shy away from politics, that she could not do it and that that was one of the reasons why it had taken her 20 years to get to an MD position. She had not had any positive female role models.

One of the younger women who openly discussed thinking about moving on was Amanda. She was an MD, was only 35, but had really struggled with the culture of the organization. She had been at her current bank for only three years, but at another bank for 12 years prior to that. She had not had any positive female role models in either organization and really struggled between those men who she described as "*bullies*", and those men who she admired, used as role models and believed they understood how the leadership and culture needed to be guided more by what she described as integrity and "*human values*". She "*did not trust*" the organization to

allow her to grow, and so was looking either for a promotion to a bigger role (as evidence to counter her lack of faith) or she would leave.

*“I’m not sure how much longer I want to do this fight.”*

A recurring theme in this group of women was a dwindling will or energy for the fight or the politics with which they have had to deal all of their working lives. If the political aspect of organizational life is not something that one is comfortable with, then that requires a lot of emotional and cognitive energy to either manage it or stay disengaged from it. This is particularly a problem if there are no positive exemplars to demonstrate how this can successfully be done.

#### **6.4.2 Unsure – up or out?**

This was the largest group, with approximately half of the interviewees expressing reservations about what was possible, what they desired, and what they saw above them. For example, Penny a senior MD felt that whilst she would like to continue up the hierarchy, it was extremely unlikely to happen. The next level up would be to join the Executive Committee of this substantial global bank, on which there were currently no women. But with 95% male MDs, only 5% female MDs and two other female friends who would also be contenders, she did not believe she would get it, *“though I would love to”*. She expressed a hope that for those women coming up behind her, if they were part of a pool of 15-20% female MDs, then they could believe they would stand a better chance.

Julia aspired to another role within the organization, *“it doesn’t need to be bigger, just different.”* In fact she had recently turned down a new role with her *“most inspiring [male] boss”* who had latterly moved roles. She had decided not to take the role as it would have involved a lot of travel and she has teenage children, and she is *“aware that they are nearly gone”* as in growing up.

Another woman was really struggling with her growing teenage children. She had always worked and believed work to be a very important part of who she is. She was quite clear, however, that it was *work* as opposed to the role, as she had worked in a number of different industries. She felt that now, more than ever, her teenage children

needed her input, but she did not see the organization giving her more flexibility. She also talked about feeling “*burnt out*”, but not knowing how to manage that.

*Honestly, if someone said to me ‘you could do two days a week now for the next five years and then when your youngest kid goes to university, we’ll put you back in a full-time role, in the role you’re doing now, with all of the authority and everything that you have’, would I take it? Uh huh, tomorrow, I absolutely would. I’m so over-extended I cannot tell you. But if I stop now, and in five years time my kids are not there, then what do I do? Women at fifty wanting to get back in, I’m sorry, as equal as we say we are, it’s not there...and it’s not going to be as long as we still have the majority of people in this firm are men.”*

Anna was also part of the majority of this group of women who did not like what they saw when they looked above them. She was an ED, and though she aspired to be an MD, when she looked at the group of MDs above her, she described how she saw that they had all been very political in their behaviour and had adapted more masculine traits in order to be successful, so there were no positive female role models. This was confirmed by another interviewee, who was one of those MDs she described.

Zara from a different organization, also an ED described how she felt unsure that the company would allow her to do the types of roles she wanted to do, in the manner that she believed they should be done. In addition, she felt that the organization only looked at the current occupant of the role when seeking to make a replacement. This meant she felt certain roles would be closed to her because she did not fit the white male mould. She was recently married, and although not considering a family yet, would like to believe it was possible in the future. She is the higher earner of the couple and so would want to maintain a career. However, she felt “*unsafe*” in terms of career transition and was “*not encouraged*” by what she sees of motherhood from those women above her – there were no positive and several negative role models. She used the word “*trust*” frequently during the interview and explained that for her, it was just not there – she did not feel the organization trusted her and she did not trust “*them*”. She came to no conclusions about her future, but it sounded quite pessimistic.

The issue of no positive female role models as working mothers was also raised by a few other interviewees. Having “*left it too late*”, both Jackie and Louise were both

struggling to get pregnant, but also struggling to see how they could make it work, with no good exemplars above them. Jackie had almost come to the conclusion that it would not be possible to combine her role with being a mother, and I got the sense that the only reason she was still in her position was because she had not yet become pregnant. Louise seemed more determined to somehow make it work. In the section on Self-Confidence, above, she discussed how she was aware that her role provided much needed external affirmation for her identity, and this was set to continue for the future.

*“My aspirations include having my accomplishments properly recognised.”*

She went on to define recognition in terms of money, and *“having a seat at the table”*, in terms of being able to influence and make a difference. But the challenges that she foresaw were clearly very perplexing, and at present she could not see a way through them.

In section 5.4.2 above, Joanne described how she had recently interviewed for promotion. But she believed that she did not fit the prescribed person-based identity (the manner in which an individual enacts a role) that the organization was looking for. She saw the other prospective candidate and did not like what he represented.

*“What holds our team together is integrity. I will struggle with the value set if that changes with this new person.”*

Angela also struggled with the person identity of those above her. When asked about future roles, she described what turned out to be self-limiting beliefs about what she thought was possible. However, through discussion she realised it was because she did not like the way the two possible roles were currently being enacted by the individuals occupying them. When I asked her to imagine the roles had been occupied by women and whether that changed her perception regarding the possibility of her occupying either of them, she said:

*“Oh God, there’s a question...would I be saying the same thing to you? Probably not...So there’s an interesting truth...And isn’t that proof of the power of role models, from someone who doesn’t really believe they’re necessary.”*

She also described how she had “*fallen out of love with the organization*”, because she no longer believed it stood for anything. She was loyal to the people she worked with, but had “*no faith*” in the business.

Freda was another example who had lost faith in her organization. She had been an ED for seven years, in her words “*a very long time*”, and did not believe she would be promoted any further.

*“I’m lucky I made it up to where I was before I had my children, but in a way I think the peak of my career is behind me, which is sad when you have 20 years left. But in terms of progression, I have progressed, not as much as I could but...”*

She clearly aspired to be an MD, but did not believe it will happen. When asked why she said “*I’m not fitting the mould*”. And when asked if there was anyone she would emulate, she said “*No*”. As mentioned, this was the largest group, so this example and those above should send alarm bells ringing in these organizations, suggesting that half of their most senior women have serious reservations about what they see above them in the organization and what they believe is possible for their remaining careers.

### **6.4.3 Content where I am**

Only three of the women were content with where they had got to in the organization and did not actively aspire to go any further.

Jill who had had good role models throughout her time at her present company had described becoming an MD as “*about recognition*”. She said that it had been important to her to have her achievements recognised, and that that was how she felt the organization did that. Making MD was not something she had ever particularly aspired to, as she was not interested in the grade for reasons of status. She knew she had been doing an MD-level job for a couple of years before she got promoted, and had it been essential for her to do a campaign of self-promotion, she would have foregone the promotion.

*“My career is important, but it’s not more important than my personal life.”*

She had got married two years ago (aged 42), and was quite content with how things were. However, she did say that she would not tell anyone else that she was “*not ambitious, it’s not a done thing to say in this company.*” Interestingly, four out of the five interviewees from this organization, unprompted, emphasised exactly the same thing.

Hannah, from the same organization was also content with her current role and grade. Although she went on

*“Eighty percent of me is happy to stick to what I’m good at and enjoy, but 20% is still competitive. But it’s ‘I should want to’ rather than I actually want to.”*

She also went on to say it was not acceptable in that company not to aspire further and she recognised that this was where the “*should*” aspiration came from.

Kate was in a different situation. From a different organization, she was an ED. She had had three children under five years old, and worked four days a week. She saw that there were two factors limiting any further career progression for her and framed them as “*choices*” that she had made and therefore accepted. Firstly, she was not working full time because of her young family. She said she used to work really long hours and did not want to do that anymore. She gave several examples of negative female role models in terms of motherhood, which she clearly rejected. Secondly, she said that in order to be promoted to MD,

*“...there’s a perception you have to have more qualifications. I didn’t go to university and have no interest in an MBA. I don’t see that it makes a difference and have no interest in doing so.”*

So as well as being female, and a mother of young children, she was also different from the norm in terms of her human capital. She did not know of anyone else who had got to MD level without having the necessary qualifications (although as learned from other interviews, this is not likely to be something people advertise, so there may well have been others). She did say she could not get confirmation as to whether the qualifications really were required. However, it was a strongly held belief, and it seemed in some ways to suit her current situation in terms of lowering her own expectations (Sturges, 1999). So, as she went on to say

*“I don’t manage a career any more, I effectively manage my role.”*

#### **6.4.4 Only on my terms**

Some of the women were clear about managing their career, but only on terms which were acceptable to them. Some, like ED Vicky, said they were interested, but only within the limits of her work-life balance. Otherwise, she said, she would be perfectly happy to stay where she was. For others it was back to some core values regarding who they were and what they were prepared to do. For example, Jill said she would refuse to do any “*canvassing*” that appeared to be done by most of the men.

*“I won’t be that person, it goes against my whole being.”*

Diane, who was already an MD, and had been told she was on the ‘partner track’, was keen to get the promotion, but also referring to the campaigning recognised as important, said she tended to:

*“...concentrate on my job rather than spend time managing my career. If it happens great, but I’m not going to do things that I’m uncomfortable with.”*

These are brave decisions made by these women, as the only examples they have of how to win promotions are the men who they have seen doing the ‘campaign trail’. Another point made by several of the women was the importance of the role content, that they would not take on a promotion or new job for the grade. It had to be something that they wanted to do, believing they could make a contribution.

*“I wouldn’t be pushing for the next corporate job grade or title...I need to be passionate about the role...I want to do well, to get satisfaction from my job and I want to get recognition.” - Clare*

This is very much in line with Sturges’ (1999) findings on gender differences regarding the meaning of career success. She found that women described “the content of the job they did as being more important in determining how successful they felt than their grade”, to the extent that the women in her study “would not sacrifice a job they enjoyed for hierarchical advancement” (p.247).

One woman linked this very clearly with role models. Ellen said she was clear in her desire to get to MD level, but was only interested in promotion “*if I can find a role that matches me as a person.*” In her current role, as an ED, she was struggling to “*tell a true story*”. She wanted her role to reflect what she felt were her values, and really wanted to believe that the values of the organization could be aligned with some of her own. She specifically mentioned the lack of women above her with whose apparent values she could identify. She described how she was trying to find “*an anchor*”. Note that this metaphor of a role model as an anchor has been mentioned previously, by a different woman. She had succeeded in finding a female MD, although from a different division, that she thinks does share the values and leadership attributes that she can then transfer in her belief to the organization.

#### **6.4.5 Whatever is on offer**

Only five of the interviewees were unreservedly keen on further promotion, although they all seem to have different concerns or reasons. Only one woman fit what Sturges (1999, p. 245) described as a “Climber”, with an emphasis on external success criteria. Sarah felt she was in her “*prime earning years*”, that her husband was in the same position, and that they were endeavouring to maximise this limited period.

*“As long as they treat me well and I want to [progress], I think there will be more opportunities for me here. They need to pay me, and promote me.”*

Sarah’s colleague, Mary, was also very clear about wanting to go higher. When asked whether she sought a board position, she said “*Of course, doesn’t everyone?*” Her motivation, however, was much more that of an “Expert”, focusing on “internal accomplishment and intangible personal recognition criteria” (Sturges, 1999, p.245). However, she went on to explain how, at her current grade, she was finding the system very “*hard to work out, cos there’s no more clear cut boxes to tick.*” This refers to the fact that promotion past MD level becomes even more of a subjective affair, there are no set guidelines, and with no female role models, it is harder to work out what the “*soft rules*” are. Another interviewee who fitted the “Expert” category was Marion who said:



*“I’d love an opportunity to run a whole business. I’ve got to be challenged and keep growing.”*

The personal accomplishment was a very important part of her affirmation of self, and even at her very senior level, with an impressive lists of achievements behind her, this interviewee worried about being “*a token promotion*”, meaning that she was only being promoted for her sex, as some kind of company policy, rather than for her genuine ability and being truly deserving of the grade. She was not alone in this fear, other interviewees also expressed this concern, including in this group, Carol. Carol was still at ED grade and was one of the youngest interviewees at 32. She was also part of the group described above as *over-identified* with the organization and appeared to have an attitude of doing whatever was necessary to be regarded by her male peers as successful, and a desperate need to prove her worthiness.

Another interviewee described above as *over-identified* was Abigail, already an MD, who was overt about her keen desire to be made a partner. However, looking up she can see it would be “*incredibly hard work.*” This is someone who already works very long hours and only sees her 18 month old son once or twice during the week. There was no-one else in her environment in similar circumstances above her, no-one, therefore, with whom she could comfortably discuss this. There were almost no other female MDs with young families, let alone partners. After much discussion, she said she had been considering that if the organization were to have a “*slow track*”, that she would seriously consider taking that. She was a part of a committee who were considering various options to try to make the higher grades of the organization more attractive and/or accessible to women.

## **6.5 Summary**

In this chapter I have considered how having role models may have influenced women’s identity development at work. As mentioned at the start of the chapter, when an individual is different from the norm group, the group will be asking who that individual is, as (in this case) she looks different to them. And the individual, dealing with social conformity pressures, will also try to work out who she is in relation to these others. And this is why role models are relevant. Who these women are and become in the extremely male-dominated work environment is therefore informed by

the critical relationships that they have. As has been shown, there was a dearth of women with whom the individuals could and/or wanted to identify with. The vast majority, therefore, formed positive relationships with one or two inspirational men. But these men were noted to be exceptional, both in terms of their attributes and their atypicality from the norm. This helped the interviewees to find their way through the identity maze, and prompted some identification with the organization, through transference of affect. Men and women making role transitions in an organization have to take on new aspects of a *role identity*. This was highlighted in Ibarra's work (1999, 2007).

But for women the additional burden of the 'otherness' of the *person identity* is illustrated in this chapter. *Relational identity*, according to Ashforth and Sluss (2006, p.9) consists of "the goals, values, norms and so on of the respective roles as well as the more or less unique ways in which the individuals enact the roles". But if the woman cannot relate to the person enacting the role, this is very challenging. The concepts of relational identity and relational identification will be considered further in the Discussion chapter below. It should be remembered that the women in these interviews are the successful ones, they have made it and, for the most part, have longevity in these organizations. Future research might consider to what extent the lack of or demise of such critical relationships played a part in women being unsuccessful and/or leaving the organization.

The chapter looked at how the lack of female role models at the start of the interviewees' careers caused many of the women to take on behaviours and characteristics of their male colleagues, on the assumption that this was how they were going to be successful in their careers. It looked at how further into their careers many of them became cognizant of these adaptations they or others had made. It showed how many felt this challenged their integrity and core values and chose to accept the consequences of not adapting their identities in this way. Looking currently, the interviews showed many of the issues that these women still deal with on an almost daily basis in terms of who they are and who they should be. The women talked about their characteristics and the various roles they play and how they have realised they have different ways of working to some of their male colleagues, often

more collaborative and team-focused. Some also talked about how they had different identities depending on whether they were with clients or their male colleagues.

Whilst many were very positive about the relationships they had had with their male colleagues, it was apparent that there were some issues that having only male role models could not address. They included many women's lack of self-confidence, the constant struggle between socially and personally acceptable levels of "*toughness versus charm*", and considerable challenges surrounding motherhood and work. In their interviews these women, consciously or otherwise, have clearly shown the utility that only female role models can provide. These are three significant areas of identity struggle that could have been substantially influenced by having women more senior than themselves as role models. The lack of availability of senior women is due to the demographic context of the investment banks – i.e. very male-dominated. And the often further unattractiveness of the few senior women that are there is also affected by the demographic context, as will be shown in the next chapter.

We now know what and who role models are, how they are used and why they are important. We have seen just how they can influence identity development continuously over time. But obviously much of this is specific to the particular context in which these women find themselves – in other words the extreme demographic environment. This will be considered in the next chapter.



## **Chapter 7 - The Demographic Context**



## **Chapter 7 - The Demographic Context**

### **7.1 Introduction**

In the previous findings chapters I have looked at the concept of role models - illustrating who they are, how they are chosen and what they are used for – and also how individuals use attractive and similar role models to help develop their work identities. The premise of my thesis is that the demographic context in which these particular interviewees found themselves, in both the past and the present, fundamentally underlies the impact of these processes. Both the requirement for and the impact of the lack of attractive role models is entirely contextual. Therefore, in this, the last of the findings chapters, I will look at how the women perceived the demographic context in which they worked and how cognizant of its impact they were. Section 7.2 describes their demographic environment, and 7.3 describes some of the effects of the demography that surrounds them. Section 7.4 looks at some of the challenges of having so few similar individuals above them. Section 7.5 looks at the perspectives of some of the older women, who started working more than 20 years ago, and Section 7.6 looks at the women’s hypotheses of what their working world would be like with more women above and around them.

### **7.2 Extreme demographic environments**

The previous findings chapters have considered the concept of role models and shown the possible impact on identity development. Clearly, the availability of same-sex role models is going to be highly dependent on the demographic context in which these women are working – in other words, are there any senior women? As previously mentioned, the average tenure of these women in the current organization was over ten years and two thirds of them had been working considerably longer in the banking sector. So the demographics in terms of the numbers of women working in senior positions were even worse when most of these women started working in investment banking.

But what do we mean by extreme environments? Kanter (1977) described organizations as 'skewed' when they had up to 85:15 ratio, for example of men to women. And the group that was less than 15% would be described as 'token'. Between 15% and 35% a group was referred to as a 'minority'. It is particularly in the 'token' situation that group dynamics act strongly to influence the individual token's (in this case woman's) behaviours. In terms of conducting research, Pettigrew (1990) suggests that such extreme environments are desirable as dynamics have a tendency to be more obvious.

In Table 7-1 I have captured some of the illustrative statements from the women about their environment in terms of the numbers, and sometimes percentages of women that they work with. Bear in mind that these are very large global organizations, often with tens of thousands of employees.

What quickly became apparent in the interviews was the importance of the "local" demographics. When asked how many women there were above them, most of the women automatically replied regarding their own division or silo of the bank. From a research perspective this is important to recognise, as any statistics one may have about the organization as a whole quickly cease to be relevant.

The women talked about the impact of the extreme demographic context in a number of different ways, and these will form the structure of this chapter. Firstly, there appeared to be the impact of the immediate demography, in other words, who is around them on a daily level at work, and how that might affect their behaviour. Some of this has already been touched on in terms of the results of having behavioural role models available. Secondly, there is the greater demographic context in terms of looking above oneself in the organization and how this might affect beliefs about meritocracy and possibility within the organization. This also links back to the Symbolic value of role models, in Chapter 5. Thirdly, I will consider the paradox of those senior women who were the firsts, the pioneers. Clearly there were no female role models ahead of them. How did this impact them, in comparison to those women who joined the organization later, coming up behind them. The chapter will finish with a look at the hypothetical situation of how the women feel things may have been different had there been more women above them during their career.



**Table 7-1: The Demographics as Experienced by the Women**

Name	Rank	Age	
Susan	ED	34	There are no women above me who have client coverage responsibilities, which makes me slightly nervous that there's a good reason for that?
Lisa	ED	41	There are no women on the IT Management Council. There's one woman in the States, but she's in another part of the organization. At my level there are 12 of us across the organization. There's only one female MD in the whole of the IT organization. Twelve IT EDs out of at least a hundred. We're monitoring it, the number of Directors in on the increase, but Associate Directors is dropping year on year - it's like a double whammy, investment banking and IT, it's not really got a lot going for it. I've been in IT for twenty years and the only female on the team for a number of years (outside of banking).
Kate	ED	37	There are 3 female MDs above me. Now, there are maybe 10 EDs, when I was promoted to ED in 2002, there was one other ED and one MD. I'm the only one working four days.
Ellen	ED	41	In terms of people in the management sphere ahead of me, in London I don't think there's anyone. In EMEA there's one, and in Asia-Pac there are two female MDs in Finance...there maybe one in the States...
Marion	MD	43	In my division, there are no women above me. At my level, there's myself and my co-head.
Zara	ED	29	There's [name] above me who you've interviewed, and then at my level there's me plus one other, so that's two...out of 120.
Amanda	MD	35	In our area, I'm the only one [woman] - there are none above me.
Vicky	ED	38	There are no women more senior than me; at the same level maybe two
Clare	SEVP	41	There are no women more senior than me; in the organization as a whole, there are three or four women SEVPs Graduate training 3/25 women. On site trips to oil/gas, I'm the only woman. After 20 years, there are more women, but not at my level, my management team is all guys, the level below me (MD) is probably not 20%.
Fay	MD	49	There is one woman above me, three or four at my level - a sprinkling. It does still feel a bit lonely. When I started out, there were only two of us in this very, very male environment. Only the 3rd lady to do M&A in my bank, and first lady professional to have children, first lady director, and first lady MD
Amy	MD	50	No women above me, I'm the only one at this level in Equities I've never had any exposure to any women within this organization. I was the first female stock broker, so always the only woman
Carol	ED	32	No women above me. Eight years ago, I was the only female in the department. Now we've got 12, although the department is bigger, that is better.
Penny	MD	41	No women above me or at the same level as me.

Name	Rank	Age	
			When I joined it wasn't even 1% women. There was one female MD, but she left.
			Today we have 5% female MDs. But hardly any have children, about 2%, there are five women across Europe who have kids, and most of those only have one. From Associate to VP level there's a big loss, from 40% to 15%, then to 10% EDs. If we could show that it's possible and that you can actually have 15% MDs, many more VPs would stay.
			We hire graduates in EMEA at 40% females, which is not too bad...but then it shrinks from 40% to 15% at VP. The next level is SVP or ED, that's 10%, then 5% MDs.
Freda	ED	40	There are two women more senior than me in my division. No other women at my level...although they have made some more recently in terms of title, but no-one in terms of seniority and role.
Anna	ED	45	My global head is a woman. My local report is a man, he's the Vice-Chairman of the company. In my team of eight only two are men. I'm new to banking, and came from media, so I'm used to working with completely mixed teams.
Jackie	MD	41	In our division in Europe, no, there are no women more senior. In terms of front office like me, in Europe there are four of us female MDs.
Kathy	ED	37	There's three MDs above me - one was recently promoted from ED and we hired two MDs this year. So we went from zero to three in one year.
			My first job was in European Space Agency, it was 1% women, and I did a maths degree where there were six women in my entire class.
Julia	MD	45	My global boss is female. There's a handful of women at my level. I manage a team of about 1300 people, and this division is unusual as its services and it 70/30 women/men at lower levels. At my management team level it's 50/50, so that's still pretty good.
Alicia	MD	45	I'm one of three female MDs in a population of eighty in EMEA Equities Business. Two of us in frankly support roles and one marginalised saleswoman.
			There's 5% MDs and about 20% Directors. But we should be measuring these trends and we should be asked why the stats aren't improving.
Angela	MD	46	Two men above me. Started out as a secretary, so early career lots of women around.
Faith	MD	43	There's a handful of women above me - Credit Risk is quite well populated. At my level there's a smattering but I'm usually the only woman in a meeting
Sarah	MD	44	Above, there was one, but she has left now. At the same level, there are 20 globally, and six in Europe.
Mary	MD	48	Above me - there was one, but she's just gone. At the same level as me, there are 20 globally, and six in Europe. So in internal meetings, I'm the only woman with twenty guys.

Name	Rank	Age	
Louise	MD	39	There's one woman more senior than me. At my level within IB department, if you pick Group Heads, there's myself and one other who runs a country team. If you pick MDs, across Europe there's five. So a very very small number.
Celia	MD	52	No women more senior than me. At my level there are 5 or 6 of us in Europe...out of 120. When I joined this department, I was the most senior woman by a long shot...they'd never had a woman on the management team before. When I started on Wall Street, there weren't any women. On my training class of 100, there were maybe five, and no senior women. Maybe there were one or two VPs, so I've never had any female role models at all.
Joanne	MD	52	The Global Head of IT and Ops was a woman but she left 5 months ago, so my boss is male. When I first joined the top of division was a woman, but she left in '97 and it's been men ever since. Actually in Ops we're pretty good, globally seven of the 18 MDs are women. Actually we have a sort of bulge at MD level, it's not so good below. At ED and VP level it goes down to 20-25%.
Hannah	MD	41	No women more senior than me in my part of the business. There are two other women at my level. When I wanted to make associate and nobody [female] had ever done it, I pushed and pushed and pushed. And I really exposed myself.
Chloe	MD	45	I'm global Head of Fundamental Equity, in Asset Management, there are no female partners in London, there are three globally. (Global stats - 30,000 employees, 1200 MDs, 200 partners. When I first started work in the city I was the only female trader on a floor of in excess of 200 people.
Jill	MD	44	My boss in the States is a woman, but in Europe in technology, I'm the most senior woman. In this division it's about 30% female analysts, down to 20% associates. The we really struggle at VP and MD level. We have some really good VPs coming through but we just keep losing them.
Abigail	MD	35	
Mel	MD	41	In my division globally, there are two female partners...but no-one in Europe.
Diane	MD	43	I sit on the Operating Committee which runs operations globally...that's a division of 5,000 people. It's my boss and four other senior MDs and me - I'm the only woman. I am the most senior woman in the division, in my part of the bank. We've about 35% female associates, and 20-25% VPs. In our division of 5,000, there are 30 MDs and six of these are women, so in Operations, actually we're pretty good.

## 7.3 Immediate Demography

If demographically a woman finds herself not even sufficient enough in numbers to be called a minority (Kanter, 1977), how do the culture and individuals around her impact on identity development? What difference does it make having individuals who inspire or with whom one can identify? Kanter talked about how the demography of 'skewed' groups affects the dynamics between the individuals and describes in particular three phenomena experienced by 'token' women: polarization, visibility and assimilation. During the interviews there were many instances of each of these, sometimes from past, but also still very keenly felt in their current working environment, and often occurring concurrently.

### 7.3.1 Polarization, visibility and assimilation

Kanter describes how, as a 'token', the different one, a woman ends up being representative of her entire category. Whatever she says or does is interpreted as such, and the dominant (in this case male) group exaggerate the differences between the two social types. Interestingly, this polarization of differences can lead to the 'token' strengthening the majority culture, rather than weakening it. The lone woman may be forced into a few stereotypical roles (for example, the mother, the bitch, the geisha), as the quote below illustrates.

*“in a group of 10, if you have at least three people that are the same, then you actually have a platform to speak from and be heard... for most of us, literally we're the only woman in a group of 40 (men). ...So if you agitate you're being an emotional female, if you're angry you're being a bitch, if you cry you're being weak. But if there were three or four of you,, then you actually get heard.” Sarah*

This was one of the earlier interviews and I was quite shocked to hear this degree of stereotyping of a very senior female MD, aged 44. And she went onto explain, this is something that she and her colleagues deal with all the time. This echoes Simpson and Lewis' (2005, p.1257) description of 'voice' "to encompass not only the physicality of expression, but also the more political process of listening and giving attention." Faced with these sorts of reactions it is little wonder that women come to the

conclusion that the easiest thing to do is to assimilate and adopt the male models of behaviour (see below). Kathy is on the Executive Committee of her division, as the Chief Administrative Officer, where she sits with seven men. She explained how she resents having her gender continually highlighted and her contributions attributed to her sex as opposed to her as just another individual. Despite being a CAO, this woman is still an ED and hoping for an MD promotion soon. However, like several of the ED-level interviewees, she was also concerned to get her promotion “on merit”, and not because she is a female.

*Our head of division often says ‘oh as a woman, you bring that special female touch, where you put it in a different way and people will listen to you’...I don’t particularly appreciate him identifying that it’s a female way, it’s just a trait of me. That can be very annoying. It can make you feel even more kind of isolated...you want to get promoted on your own contribution, not just because you’re a woman, that’s the last thing you want to hear....He’s trying to be positive, he doesn’t realise the negative effect it can have on you...stop identifying the gender as an issue.*

This polarization of stereotypes can lead to a desire for invisibility that Simpson (1997, 2000) suggests can lead to a fear of success or avoidance of conflict, which can heighten career barriers. Alternatively, it can increase pressure to ‘fit in’, minimize the female element, so that people just see ‘the worker’, as opposed to ‘the woman’. However, Kathy was heavily pregnant at the time, making minimizing the female an obvious additional challenge.

In another bank one of the women also talked about the experience of being highly visible, and, again, how her actions are generalised to represent the whole of her sex.

*“I’m the token female in the group. It does mean I’m listened to, because they’re very concerned whether I’m seeing something differently, and that’s really valuable. But at the same time, if you do something they expect, I don’t know, like get pregnant, then ‘that’s why it’s difficult to hire women’. Or want to do a four day week ‘that’s why it’s difficult for us to put you [all women] in these kind of positions’. And you think, ‘well if I were a guy would you have as many ‘that’s whys?’” - Amanda*

According to Kanter, women have two main responses to dealing with the discomfort of high visibility, either by over-achieving, or by trying to limit their visibility. There were plenty of examples of the former in the interviews, to the extent that some of the women had been criticised in the past for being perfectionists, or for being “*too much in the detail*”, as they felt they had to ensure every single aspect of their job was performed to the highest standard. Over-achievement is also a way of ensuring that they are taken more seriously by their management. Marion raised the issue of proving herself throughout her interview. The other issue she focused on was whether she was perceived as “*too tough*”, and whether she was perceived as too confrontational? She explained it as follows:

*So I think there's three things: Firstly, we [women] just say what we believe without kind of mincing our words and thinking I should be a little bit more clever. Whereas men are much better at that. Two, I think being a minority, you're always feeling that I've got to try hard to prove myself. That might sometimes come across as being taking it a bit too far or being confrontational or expressing your view too strongly and maybe not going with the consensus. And third...because you're a minority, you stand out more and, therefore, whatever you say gets picked up a bit more and, therefore, you do stand out. I mean, I go into a meeting and I'm usually the only female. - Marion*

In the previous chapter, I highlighted examples of where the women had consciously realised that the route to success was through male behaviours and that being deviant from the norm was not a positive thing: “*I didn't want to be seen as a woman.*” According to Simpson and Lewis (2005, p. 1259), “*visibility is associate with difference and a state of exclusion*” (original emphases). One woman only noticed how highly visible she had been when in fact she was joined by two other women.

*When there were more women it's easier as suddenly you're not the focus of attention...you share it with two or three others.*

But as discussed in Chapter 5, whether cognizant of the pressures to assimilate or not, many of the women ended up doing so in terms of assuming more male behaviours and even more masculine, less feminine identities.

### **7.3.2 Isolation from others**

One outcome of these three intertwined processes is a sense of isolation. This is something that has been frequently reported in previous research (Kanter, 1977; Marshall, 1984; Simpson, 1997, 2000) and was repeated in this study, regardless of whether the woman assimilated or not. Only too aware of their difference, the women either accept that they are isolated and learn to rely entirely on themselves (e.g. Amy), or they try to become insiders by assimilating and adopting male behaviours. If they feel they have got tentative acceptance by the insider group (i.e. men), then they may feel they would jeopardize their own situation if they are linked to other outsiders. This has been called the *queen bee syndrome* (Abramson, 1975). This will be discussed further in section 7.4.1 below.

Feelings of isolation and loneliness were expressed by a number of the most senior women. However, one organization had recently instigated a development programme for their MD level women, including four of the interviewees. They all spoke very positively about the experience, and whilst they valued the content of the programme, they all commented on the enormous value of simply meeting and spending time with other senior women in their organization.

*“The problems we were going through, you start to realise you are not alone, you’re not the only one who feels this way or who has had this happen to you or...So it’s actually very empowering and I think it would make it more fun. I think I would find it easier to be myself in all contexts...usually I find it easier to be myself outside of the normal working of the firm than inside it. Which is kind of an unfortunate and scary thing.” - Mary*

How ironic it is that all four of the women had been at this bank for more than ten years, in the same London office but had never found the opportunity, consciously or otherwise, to make contact and had therefore missed out on this mutual support.

*“Being a lone voice is okay and you have to be very strong to continue to remain yourself and not become what everyone else around the table is... With one or two you are relying on the woman’s strength...Anything less than a third doesn’t carry the weight...And also just two in a group of ten*

*will not make a difference either. The perception will be that all the women are just sticking together, which is a very strong perception sometimes, it happens. So you have to have enough numbers to be able to not be seen to be cliquish, but still be able to say your own without problem” - Vicky*

This quote speaks of the strength of character required to remain isolated, but also raises the issue of what happens with increasing numbers, when one woman becomes two or three. Erkut, Kramer and Konrad (2008), considering increasing numbers of women on a board of directors, describe how when a single woman is joined by another, the men in the situation assume ‘a conspiracy’. In other words, they assume that the women will gang up against the men. In actual fact, as mentioned above, in order to preserve their relative acceptability to the men, the women may purposefully not sit together, and consciously disagree with each other. There was only one example of this given by the interviewees:

*“...don’t make a beeline for me per se because it’s another woman.” - Clare*

Erkut, Kramer and Konrad (p.231) believe that, in boardroom situations, once there are three women, then this normalises their presence and their contributions and thus relieves the tensions between the women to interact with each other more naturally, allowing them to get on with their jobs. They comment that “while individual women directors’ expertise and skills play a role in how much leadership they exert on boards, they are more likely to be effective leaders on boards that have reached a critical mass or tipping point of three women.”

## **7.4 Looking upwards**

When faced with the impact of such demographic extremes, it is only natural for individuals to look upwards in their organization to gain information on how to deal with their challenging situation. As Liff and Ward (2001, p.20) note “organizations are the site within which women come to understand the requirements of senior jobs and their own career options”. If, above them, they could see a number of successful women, with whom they could identify, perhaps the response to a current challenge would be to view it as an aberration, or as something that had to be survived, a



temporary phase. However, if within their silo, and their potential career ladder they do not see any female role models, any senior women they would aspire to be, then that, as Ely (1994) describes, is likely to affect their behaviour. As already mentioned, with varying degrees of consciousness they can respond to the polarization they are experiencing in one of two ways – either by accepting isolation, or by assimilating and trying to become an insider.

#### **7.4.1 Queen Bees**

Whilst assimilation may work initially for women in order to become more acceptable and accepted, it is a short-term gain. As explained by social identity theory, one of the effects of becoming an insider is an enormous pressure to adopt the prevailing attitude to other outsiders (Haslam, 2004) and thus adopt what are perceived to be hostile patterns of behaviour towards other women, as previously referred to, '*the queen bee syndrome*'. As Marshall (1984, p. 102) says, such behaviours are “typically interpreted as a sign of women’s hostility towards each other, and used to confirm negative aspects of sex-role stereotypes.” However, what the work of Kanter, Ely, Mavin and others does is elaborate how understanding the ‘skewed’ group dynamics gives a very different explanation.

As discussed in Chapter 5, under the symbolic importance of senior female role models, the absence of women from the top of the organization can be construed as a message from the organization as to its intentions for its women’s careers.

*“We had a female co-President and I do think that says it is possible and if you never see it you might think ‘I’m not gonna apply because they’re never gonna give it to me, because I have to be the first’ and I don’t want to.” - Hannah*

Whereas if there are women above,

*“ you can look at them and think ‘I can see myself doing that.’” – Ellen*

But if there are only a very few women and they are perceived to be *queen bees* and judged very negatively by both men and women, then this is likely to be viewed as “a statement about women’s learnt devaluation of the whole category of “women” (Starr, 2001, P.10). This is likely to effect the self-efficacy beliefs regarding leadership

expectations and cause individual women to adjust their expectations accordingly, in line with what they believe is possible within the organization, rather than set themselves up for failure (Nicholson and West, 1988; Vroom, 1964).

But what Kanter, Ely, and Mavin all seem to suggest is inevitable (i.e. the presence of a *queen bee*), given the demographically extreme environments in which these women work, did not appear to be the case for the majority of the interviewees. Whilst there were many examples of negative female role models – all the interviewees had at least one – they were not generally described as queen bees. Either these women did not start from the assumption of solidarity behaviour among women (Mavin, 2006), or perhaps from their own experiences, they know how hard it is to be the token, understand some of the effects of the environment and therefore do not blame the individual for the prevailing culture. This is seen in the following quote:

*“there aren’t that many women around but we all know each other quite well, and the good news is that we get on very well. We don’t have the kind of queen-bee bitchiness, which I’m so pleased about... which was there when I first joined the business. But I think that the thing which we’ve all come to the realisation of is that the more senior you get the harder and harder and harder it gets. So if you had asked me when I was junior is there sexism, is there a different judgement standard for women and men I would have said absolutely not. Totally fair, the world is fair!”*  
*Louise*

But the realisation is there that as a junior, the role is about producing good work, accurately, and on time with a good attitude. These are all things within the woman’s control.

*“But the more senior I’ve got... and I think because the things that you’re judged upon – there’s a lot of subjectivity, it’s harder and harder to prove you can play with the big boys. You can check all the objective boxes, all the factual boxes, but there’s still all this subjective stuff that is just harder and harder to prove that you really check all those boxes.”*

Another woman, the joint oldest of the sample (aged 52) described the *queen bee* as a thing of the past.

*I used to think this, women were their own worst enemies because there were a couple of women up ahead of me, in slightly different divisions... and one of them was just such a bitch, basically to anyone, but was especially tough, the 'you're my competition' kind of woman, you know, and I always used to say women are their own worst enemies and they were worse to each other than they are to anyone else. - Celia*

But she described how, being “*repulsed by it*”, she determined that she would not be like that. She got together with the few other women to agree that they would not be the same. She and two other interviewees from the same company told of an MD conference two years ago where the speaker had been warning about women being their own worst enemies

*“and one of my colleagues piped up from the back and she said, “Well I have to say you’re so off base. You know, we’re not like that here.” And there was a big cheer and, you know, hand clapping from all the women in the audience because it’s so true.” - Celia*

Perhaps it is not a coincidence that this is the organization which has recently set up a development programme specifically aimed at the 20 female MDs globally, six of whom work in Europe and four of whom I interviewed. As mentioned above, they all mentioned the enormous benefit of just spending time with similar women.

*“We’re extremely supportive of each other and that’s nice because there aren’t very many of us and if we were nasty and bitchy to each other, it would be very isolating. I mean it’s isolating enough when you’re only, what is it, 8%? ... and if you don’t make allies of your fellow women... I think it can be very lonely. I mean it is lonely.”*

In terms of coping strategies, a couple of the women talked about how as very senior women they have peers or juniors coming to chat to them just for “*a sanity check*”, and Celia mentioned she called a colleague in the US on a regular basis for the same reason. It reflects the sentiment of always being the foreigner, and sometimes just needing to speak in your own language to someone who understands where you are coming from. Louise, a younger MD interviewee (39) had mentioned that at the start

of her career, in a different organization she had been all too aware of unpleasantness between women, but in her current organization, she did not see it.

*“So I don’t know what’s changed it – I don’t know if it’s our generation, we’ve all decided, “Guys we’re not competing with each other, we’re all competing with a much bigger group so let’s help each other”, or if it is just luck. I’m not sure, but that is one thing I’m very grateful to. I feel that I really have a huge amount of respect and support from the women around, both in Europe and New York.”*

In the analysis, I checked to see if there were differences according to hierarchical grade, as in the discussions around toughness a couple of the interviewees had suggested that it was related to stage and that once making the MD grade, they felt some women relaxed a little. However, this did not appear to be the case.

*In [company name] I find the majority of women I meet extremely supportive of each other. In consulting it was much more competitive with women...here, the majority, you know it’s a supportive culture. ED*

However, note the use of the words *the majority*, which may imply that there are a minority of women who are not supportive. It is conceivable that the desire not to highlight this as an issue may have something to do with an endeavour to minimise sex differences and move away from any stereotypes of women.

#### **7.4.2 The trouble with so few**

As can be seen from Table 7-1, the numbers of women above the interviewees are usually less than a handful and there’s a sense that every woman counts. In one of the divisions discussed – e.g. operations – at least two of the banks appeared to have reached a critical mass of female divisional MDs, of more than 30%, although there were still very small numbers of women any higher. But generally, the MD figures ranged from 3-15%. And as one of the interviewees pointed out, with such small numbers *“it only takes one or two people to leave and then all of a sudden you’ve got nobody.”* This was clearly seen in the bank which lost their most senior female during the period of my interviews.

One very senior MD, talked about the “*double-edged sword*” of having just one or two women above. She does not currently have any women above her, on the management board or one level down, and realises the challenges, rather than benefits that may come from having a single woman.

*“...without a minimum of 25%, you’re not going to be able to impact or influence change...one or two people won’t make it a nice accolade...they will be very isolated in terms of trying to change behaviours or attitudes towards, say, the appointment or promotion of women.” - Amy*

Again, this goes back to Erkut, Kramer and Konrad’s point about a critical mass and culture change. And it also highlights the awareness that many of the women had about the impact of their demographic environment.

## **7.5 Demography and the pioneers**

Many of those women who were the ‘firsts’ talked about their individual personalities as being very driven, determined and passionate, and of the sort that were going to “*do it anyway*”.

*“There have never been any female role models. I kind of succeeded in spite of that.” - Abigail*

At the start of this study, I was faced with the obvious paradox of if female role models were so important for women’s career success, then how did the pioneers, those first women, get to where they are today? As well as their driven and determined personalities, one idea that has emerged from the analysis concerns something they did *not* talk about. As there were no women before them, they had no evidence to suggest that they would *not* be able to succeed. Granted they also had no women to show that it could be done and how, but they were on a sort of neutral territory. And they were all fairly robust personalities, who were clearly strong enough to believe that just because no-one like them had climbed that mountain before was not evidence to suggest they could not do so. Many of them accepted that perhaps they had had to work harder than their male colleagues, that there was this continued need to prove themselves more, because of being ‘the different one’. However, today, the situation has changed and women have much more of an

expectation of equality. What was clear from the interviews was that, with a lack of attractive role models, there are plenty of years of evidence to suggest that women like them *cannot* succeed.

One woman spoke of working in a previous bank, with a different national culture, where she had not felt the need to look after her own career:

*“I had so much support from the business that I didn’t really look for any role model. And if you feel the organisation is supporting you, this [career progression] is part of a natural path, or a natural process.”*

She then explained how when she had moved to her current organization, the *“how do you get to the next level?”* was not clear. And only then did she start looking for exemplars, role models, similar to her, for the answer. She did not find them and she has not been promoted for seven years.

*“if you don’t feel that the company is supporting you that much, you need to do it all by yourself, and in order to do it all by yourself you have to look at someone who is already there. It’s very much based on a feeling...But this is, yeah, this is something I believe.” Freda*

This is in line with Simpson’s (1998) suggestion that the flattening of organizational structures mean that promotions and key tasks tend to be allocated more on a ‘who you know’ basis, than formal transparent procedures. This can be a severe disadvantage for women, who tend not to be networked so well with key decision makers.

Celia, in the pioneer group told how, in 1990, she *“was the first person on the trading floor to have a baby, except for the secretary”*. She explained how she was due to be induced on a given day and her (*“very supportive”*) boss said he would like to take her out for dinner the night before. She explained to him that this was not really how she wanted to spend the evening prior to giving birth and he said *“Well this is my first experience, I just didn’t know what to do”*. Celia used this to illustrate just how *“foreign”* women were often perceived to be by these men. In today’s more egalitarian society, it is easy to forget how just one generation ago men and women’s lives were so much more segregated. This woman also talked about having nightmares the week before she returned to work, after only a few weeks off, as there was no-one to talk to about it. This was more than 15 years ago, and one of the things

a number of the interviewees from different companies talked about, was that today their organizations have tried to address this particular anxiety for women. One of the organizations talked about arranging ‘maternity buddies’.

One woman commenting on the pioneering women ahead of her in the organization, said:

*“...most of the women in front of me were real warriors, they needed to be. I think I would have fallen off if I had to identify with that because I’m not inherently like that...I didn’t want to come up that way, I didn’t want to have the same kind of fight, I want sponsorship...I didn’t want to become cynical in the process” - Amanda*

This is a good illustration of how, whilst women admire those that have gone before them, the pioneers, the warrior women, they are not something that those below necessarily aspire to. As can be seen from this quote, the interviewees were on the whole very aware of the impact of the demography in which they worked, and the histories that the older women would have had. Whilst they may not aspire to be like the pioneers, those coming up behind did not appear to blame the women for the current situation. This is in contrast to previous research where women have expressed disappointment at their senior females for not doing more to help the ‘cause’ of women in management (Rindfleish, 2000; Mavin, 2006; Bryans and Mavin, 2003; Gini, 2001), and will be discussed further in the Discussion section, Chapter 8, and below.

## **7.6 If there were more women**

Towards the end of each interview, the women were asked to consider a hypothetical situation and imagine what difference having more women above them may have made to them and their careers. As seen above, they were for the most part very aware of the impact of the demographic environment, so the majority had some quite clear ideas about how it would have affected their working lives and/or their careers.

### 7.6.1 Understanding styles and behaviours

On a surface level, most of the interviewees believed that having more women would bring a change to the working styles and behaviours in women and men.

*“Men behave better when there are women around, there are definitely some things that women do better than men and vice versa, but the combination is fantastic.” - Fay*

Some felt they would no longer need to adapt to a male style.

*“If you had more women we would communicate differently over time, there wouldn't be a need for what happens now, which is women need to adjust to the male style. Well we talked about communication style and the ability to sort of be more who you are, rather than having to conform to someone else's norm.” - Anna*

If there were more women, more difference, there was a belief that this would dissipate some of the isolation discussed above *“you feel isolated because the concept of different styles and ways of working is just not there”* – Angela. And that a change in the demography would *“allow women to be more genuine if there were more of us, because we would know that we wouldn't stand out so much.”* – Penny.

There was a general belief that changing the proportion of women would alter the group dynamics and start to address some of the surface level aspects of voice and visibility, as described by Simpson & Lewis (2005). In the quote below, there is also clearly a sense of a business benefit as well.

*“When you sit in a room and you are the only female in a bunch of grey suits, there's a dynamic that goes on in a room. But the dynamic in a room full of women focused on business issues is very different... We don't have to compete to have our voice heard or to be the dominant voice so we...are better at listening and hearing...I think it's enriching in terms of getting...getting business done. It's just another viewpoint, another way of working, but working together that women can bring to the business environment.” - Alicia*



This point about women encouraging different ways of working together was mentioned above in Chapter 6. In addition, how the frames of reference that are distorted with skewed demography would also change with more women, in terms of how the others react, and how the individual feels.

*“If you levelled the playing fields in terms of numbers, the frames kind of go away...so they either like what you say or they don’t but it has nothing to do whether you, the woman are saying it...it actually takes the whole stigmatism away.” - Amanda*

One woman talked about the difference it would make more generally to women’s careers in terms of how the differences of behaviour between men and women would be recognised and understood *“because I’m a woman, I recognise in other women the things that they do that are different behaviours than men...It’s not substance that’s different, it’s style.”* She talks about how often the quieter less self-promoting behaviours of women are misconstrued, and how women sometimes have to be encouraged a little more to go for it. *“If I look back on my career, I wish I had been more confident in my ability and taken more risks...we know that women are like this, and I think men don’t...As really advanced women, we need to be doing more with men.” - Celia*

### **7.6.2 Diversity of thought**

*“If we had an environment that was a lot more balanced in terms of numbers...it counterbalances one extreme way of doing things, a different way of looking at problems or solutions...No question, men and women do have different approaches...different strengths...both are very important to a balanced point of view, a balanced environment, a balanced business.” - Marion*

This was certainly the argument for more diverse boards put forward by the Higgs Review of 2003 and being raised again today in 2008 after the recent catastrophic collapse of the banking sector.

### 7.6.3 Advocacy

It is known that in professional service firms promotion at the higher grades is heavily reliant on advocacy or sponsorship from those above (Kumra & Vinncombe, 2008), and in investment banks the system is similar (Sealy, 2007). The natural tendency and desire to hire in one's own image is also well-accepted (Ibarra, 1992) and these two phenomena together conspire as additional barriers to women's promotion. Many of the women highlighted this as a significant area for change if there had been more senior women.

*“And I think, in this business, in order to get ahead you have to have somebody who supports and promotes you and I think men are more likely to support and promote and relate to men and I think having women there supporting other women is key. Is it critical? No. But it is helpful and important? Very much so...So someone to really promote the other women in the firm. And I think it's also useful to demonstrate to the men around that it is possible for a women to be equally successful to a man, maybe just in a different way.” - Louise*

Another woman explained that whilst she had not felt it had been that important thus far, now it was becoming increasingly so. She was an ED looking for an MD promotion, the point at which having sponsorship really becomes critical, and she just about to go off on maternity leave for the second time in three years.

*“I suppose I'm at that point in my career, on the cusp of MD. It's probably more important now than it's ever been to have women around, supportive of you up there.”*

She was concerned about the impact of her flexible working – she worked 4.5 days in the office and Friday afternoons at home. She originally had come back on a “*point nine*” contract, but found that she was making up the extra day in the evenings and at weekends, so changed back to a full-time contract. She felt that having senior women above her, supportive of her family role (even though she did have a house-husband), was going to make a big difference to her promotion chances.

*“It's a club, you know, they have to endorse new people to the club, and whatever we like to say, it is pretty much still a kind of men's club.”*

*There's not lots of women at my level trying to balance a family...there's not lots of role models working slightly flexibly."*

She also clearly felt that she was going to get hard done by in terms of bonuses, as her maternity leave was over two financial years and bonuses are always based on the previous years' amount. Bonuses are also decided on by one's seniors. Again she felt that if she had more senior female advocates, they would not allow her to lose out. However, ultimately, she accepted that *"it stings a bit...that's a consequence, but having a baby to me is more important."* - Kathy

#### **7.6.4 Camaraderie**

I have already mentioned the development programme that one bank had organised for its female MDs globally. This was spoken about very positively for each of the interviewees involved and, for some, had clearly been revelatory in the opportunity to spend intense continuous time with other similar women.

*"Camaraderie, yeah. ... I've started to realise how powerful that really can be. You're not encouraged, in fact one discourages oneself for most of one's career - perhaps because of the assimilation piece and not wanting to appear like one is being militant or feminist or ganging up on... but in reality it's hugely empowering...and safe... The problems we were going through, you start to realise you're not alone, you're not the only one who feels this way or who has had this happen to you or... So it's actually very empowering and I think it would make it more fun, I think I would find it easier to be myself in all contexts."* - Mary

The empowering experience of realising that one is not alone and that others go through same feelings, fears, and doubts as oneself, is apparent.

*"You feel more comfortable talking about silly things, you feel more comfortable crying, women cry a lot, men can't deal with that. You feel more comfortable about saying, 'you know what, it's just not fair,' and we've learned how to assimilate. We've learned how to basically make men who manage us feel more comfortable with us. But when you have people around you that are like you, I think there's just a strength in numbers kind of thing."* - Sarah

This woman speaks of how with more similar women, she could be herself and realised how much for the most part she is not herself.

*“It does still feel a little bit lonely, if you are senior in an organisation and there aren’t other women. One of the lovely things about the Woman’s Network is that ...I talk to some senior ladies on the committee and it’s been fantastic sort of being able to talk about their experiences and what they’re doing. And...the more women there are, the less lonely it feels.” - Fay*

This woman was one of the pioneers, and the loneliness of her position as a female came up a number of times throughout the interview. It is true that in many organizations, there is a sense that ‘it’s lonely at the top’, regardless of one’s sex. However, as a male at their grade, they would still have an obvious pool of colleagues, and secondly, for the women, it has been a lonely career throughout, not just now that they are in a senior position.

*“Also if I had a female role model... I know it would help me from a sense of feeling I was in it with someone... as I definitely was not in it with anyone. So the camaraderie and the encouragement would have helped but at the same time there were so few of them [senior women] and they were all fighting their own battles and they really, really were tired, we would probably drag each other down. I think that’s kind of where this generation would have come to, we really had to pioneer it on our own somehow.” - Amanda*

This quote again highlights the experienced loneliness and the potential camaraderie of having more senior women around. However, she also shows awareness of the individual challenges that those few isolated senior women were facing, but not understanding how much of their response to the status quo was potentially structural – in other words in response to their ‘token’ status.

### **7.6.5 The right to be there**

One of the pioneers struggled emotionally with her right to be where she was within her organization. Intellectually, she knew she was very good at her job, and she enjoyed it. But even after all these years of success, she was still lacking in self-

confidence. She talked about how she felt the lack of female role models had had an important negative effect on her working life. She described how at each turn she had viewed a promotion as a privilege, she had never believed she would get as far as she had. She compared this to what she saw as men's attitude to promotion as one of "by rights", not a privilege.

*"...if there were more women doing this at this level, one would get to feel that it was yours as a right, which is what I think a lot of men feel...whereas at the moment I feel you don't want to stick your head above the parapet in case someone realises that you are there!" - Fay*

This links back to the symbolic values of role models discussed in Chapter 5 in terms of symbols of hope and possibility and messages received from the organization about developmental and promotional support, and echoes the thoughts given by Freda above about only needing role models when the organizational career support or structure is not there. But Fay felt that even if the women were not considered role models, just the sheer presence of them in greater numbers would have helped her in her confidence.

*"Whereas if there are other women doing the same thing you think, 'Well, actually I'm just as good as her. You know, why shouldn't I be doing it?' Whereas when you're the first or one of the very few you think, 'Why am I...why am I the only one, or why am I different from the other women and, you know, why am I still here?' And I suppose you're giving yourself back the answer that you're the last woman standing rather than you're here because you're very good at what you do. I think it would make a big difference"*

This woman had described what can only be called an incident of sexual harassment, but even now, in her interview, had taken on responsibility for it, by explaining that it "probably was not intended". She described how humiliated she had felt and, importantly in terms of self-worth, she took onboard the objectification of her sex, and concluded that "they just think of me as someone who's not even worthy of giving a job to." From the limited time that I spent with this individual, I would hypothesise that the personal lack of self-confidence is at least partially a result of devaluation that she experienced of the category of 'woman'. I do not doubt her when she says that a

simple change in the demographics of her environment would have made her quite a different individual in terms of confidence levels.

### **7.6.6 More than icing on the cake?**

Almost all of the interviewees, with only three exceptions, said their work would be “nicer” and a “more pleasant environment” if there were more women, or if there had been more women. In response to this, in some of the later interviews, I asked whether that was all it would have been. Was it just about making it a nicer place to work, was it really any more than icing on the cake?

Clearly these women are very successful, the majority having reached MD positions. However, this next quote clearly shows what the perceived benefits of more women both to the individual and also the organization could have been.

*“I think if there had been more women when I was going through tough work times I would have felt a) I think I would have been more able to find constructive people to help me deal with them differently, so I think it would have helped me be better professionally and I think it would have relieved a lot of the stress. So I think it’s a double benefit of 1) having a support network is just nice, it takes the strain off you – you know you feel you have someone to go to, and then 2) I think if you can find the right network it helps you brainstorm about how to do a better job. - Louise*

On a more personal level, in the identity section above, Hannah described how she saw it as more than icing on the cake because she believed she would have turned out “a bit softer” and it would not have taken her quite so long to realise that it was okay to be herself (softer, warmer, a bit more emotional) at work. Given that she had realised that she was more herself with her clients, and this was where she was really successful, she realised perhaps she may have been even more successful in her corporate environment if she had allowed herself to be more natural.

Marion was also clear that having more women was more than icing on the cake. She is one of the few female MDs in a production or front office role (both in terms of my interviewees and the more generally the demographics of such roles) and later went on to describe how she endeavoured to “collect” women in her department in order to make them feel more normalised. She also fretted considerably about being a good

role model. She was conscious of a continued need to prove herself, and was still working out how to balance the “*tough versus charming*” aspect. But she had three young children and maintained her front office job, and was determined to show other women that it was possible. She said she used to “*go and talk to the secretaries, just to hear another female voice*”, so for her it was really important to endeavour to make the working environment more workable for women.

## 7.7 Summary

In this chapter I have considered the possible impact of the demographic context in which the interviewees are working. Table 7-1 gave a snapshot of what the demographics look like from the women’s perspective. At most there were usually only one or two women above them globally, and most had only a handful of other females around them. According to Kanter’s definition, the vast majority of the women interviewed were working in extreme environments where they were ‘tokens’. As well as the obvious lack of senior female role models above them, the processes of social identity and norm group dynamics account for the polarization, visibility and assimilation problems the women encountered in their immediate work environments. Isolation was an outcome experienced by most.

Looking upwards for possible explanations or support, the interviewees were rarely encouraged. The numbers above were significantly worse than at their own level, and with women present in only ones or twos, the availability of role models was very precarious – as evidenced by the loss of the most senior woman in one bank half way through my interviews there.

One of the more positive findings though, when looking upwards, was the lack of description of the *Queen Bee*, or hostile patterns of behaviour between women. This is something which is often mentioned in the popular press and sometimes assumed to be the norm amongst successful high-level women in male-dominated work environments. From the literature one could assume that the dynamics of the demographics in which these women work, would be likely to cause it. The dynamics referred to are the polarization, high visibility, high isolation and pressures to assimilate either to stereotype or to the majority (masculine) form. The dynamics were there, but not, it would seem, the Queen Bees. This may be because the women

may be cognizant of both the dynamics of being a 'token' and the Queen Bee syndrome. A number of the interviewees were relatively well-read in popular literature concerning women's progress to the upper echelons of corporate life. Most of the women interviewed, even if they could not name the dynamics of the demography, could certainly describe incidents where they had experienced them, and therefore, were able to understand that what happened was not entirely their fault. An example was given of one of the older Pioneers, having experienced a Queen Bee. Recognising the Queen Bee was not a role model for her, she consciously decided not to become like that, and discussed this with her few other female peers. Having experienced the challenges of the demographic dynamics, but more importantly being aware of and knowledgeable about them, most of the women in the sample endeavoured to be supportive to other women, and did take on the mantle of being role models themselves. There was a hint that possible Queen Bees of the past, may have retired now, or moved on, but still there appeared very little experience of them, from women who had been in the business for many years.

This is a very encouraging sign if the women are as supportive of each other as they say. This is in contrast to findings of Mavin (2006), where she suggests that the women in her sample blame each other for the lack of progression of women's careers generally. I do recognise the fact that most of the sample were provided by the Heads of Diversity of their organization, and so may have been nominated for displaying more positive views about the organization. However, with the exception of one or two, this sample of more than thirty senior female banking directors understood that it was social and cultural norms of the organization, including expected patterns of working and non-transparent promotion processes that were initially to blame for the dearth of same-sex senior colleagues, who could act as role models for them.

One may feel encouraged, therefore, by the good news about the intra-female dynamics. However, on an individual level, the women as 'tokens' were still facing all the challenges of working with the male majority. The extreme demographics impacted them on a daily basis in their immediate work environment, and with few or no female role models above them, they were not encouraged by what they saw as their own career prospects.



## **Chapter 8 - Discussion of Findings**



## Chapter 8 - Discussion of Findings

### 8.1 Introduction

Over the past decade, a number of surveys have cited the lack of senior female role models as a major barrier to women's career success. Whilst role models are recognised as an important developmental relationship, a comprehensive literature review, detailed in Chapter 2 above, showed that the extant literature on role models is limited. The initial review of that small body of role model literature led to the inclusion of two further related areas – work identity formation as a key explanatory factor behind the link between the lack of senior female role models and the lack of career progression, and organizational demographics as the contextual factor affecting the availability of attractive role models. The behavioural value of role models has been well documented with Gibson's work on the cognitive and structural aspects of role modelling, and Ibarra's work on how behavioural role models guide the development of provisional selves. Despite these excellent studies, the conceptualization of the value of role models was still found to be lacking. The symbolic value of role models needed much deeper level research. In addition, having established that role models are used in identity formation, one of the biggest challenges facing researchers trying to establish why role models are important for senior women is the paucity of literature that links or integrates the various findings and levels of identity work.

Building on the review of literature above, a research gap was identified to ascertain further the value of female role models for senior female managers. As well as the behavioural value, the symbolic value requires further understanding. We need to understand whether the availability, proximity and successful use of role models are key antecedents to the identity formation and career success of senior female managers. This thesis sought to address these gaps in knowledge by asking *why* role models are important for senior women? In order to address this issue, the question of *how* the process of work identity formation is influenced by the presence or absence of role models was examined, with the research question ***How do role models influence the formation of senior women's work identity in male-dominated firms?***

In findings chapter 4, I outlined the demographics and descriptions of the women interviewed, including four case studies to give the reader a better understanding of who some of the women are.

In chapter 5, I clarified in detail what the senior women interviewed in this research saw as core elements of their role models – what the traits were that made them choose individuals to be role models, who the role models were in relation to the women, how the women used the role models and why they were important to them.

In chapter 6 I considered how having role models may have influenced the women's identity at work. As the individuals forged their identities in an environment where they have been different from the norm (i.e. the men in the very male-dominated context of global investment banks), what became apparent was that who they are and have become was informed by the critical relationships they have had. What was also clear was that there were some identity issues – e.g. self-confidence; the struggle of *“toughness versus charm”*; and the considerable challenges surrounding motherhood and work – that could not be addressed by having male role models, thus demonstrating the utility of female role models.

Chapter 7 considered the contextual element of organizational demographics which clearly affects the availability of female role models. It was found that most of the sample worked in the extreme demographic situation where they were ‘tokens’, and most had experienced the well-documented effects of this – e.g. polarization, high visibility and high isolation. Looking at the demographics and those very few women above them, most of the interviewees were not optimistic about their future careers. However, what was encouraging was the lack of hostility, in fact, the very positive attitude, being supportive and helpful towards other women. There was an understanding of the severe challenges those before them faced and little evidence of blame for a lack of change.

In this chapter I will consider the findings from the study and relate them to the theoretical starting point of the literature outlined in Chapter 2. I will consider what supports, extends or contradicts previous findings and what new issues this study has raised. The contributions this research has made to the field of role models will be outlined. In particular, in identifying further dimensions of the concept of role models,

this discussion will clarify the value of role models in an extreme gender demographic context, and how and why they are important to senior women's professional identity development, thereby adding to the theory of role modelling.

Section 8.1 will once more look at the concept of the role models, and what has been learned from this study. Section 8.2 considers the findings on demographic difference, the importance of the impact of 'local demographics' on group dynamics and perceived career prospects, and also at an organizational level, how meanings and cultures are interpreted and assimilated. Section 8.3 considers the findings on work identity development and proposes that relational identification may be the link between the role models and work identity. The paradox of the very senior women interviewed is addressed, in terms of their identity development and the lack of female role models, and the contribution to identity work of this study is suggested. Finally section 8.4 considers the theoretical contribution to literature made by this study.

## **8.2 The concept of role models**

At the beginning of the Literature Review, I considered how the term 'role model' had previously been defined. As very little research had been conducted into the concept over the past 10-15 years, I focused on the excellent theoretical and empirical contributions of Gibson who, in 2004, defined role models as "*a cognitive construction based on the attributes of people in social roles an individual perceives to be similar to himself or herself to some extent and desires to increase perceived similarity by emulating those attributes.* (p. 137). The findings from this study validate that definition and all but one or two of the interviewees seemed very cognizant of the thought processes they engaged to decide who they chose as an 'inspirational' other. In addition, they all seemed to adhere to the "*cognitive process in which individuals actively observe, adapt and reject attributes of multiple role models*" (p. 136). However, Gibson's focus was really the cognitive construction, and whilst he also made clear the importance of the element of similarity, he did not define that element. This study goes some way towards doing that, building on the earlier study (Sealy, 2008), showing that the similarity can be actual, perceived or desired, and can cover a number of attributes.

### **8.2.1 Extending the definition of a 'role model'**

In defining *what* a role model is, this study has produced the following key findings.

Two elements were mandatory for an individual to qualify for role model status:

- They had greater knowledge, expertise or experience than the observing individual; and
- They conducted their work with values that the observer deemed similar to her own, and/or with integrity (defined as consistency, authenticity, and honesty).

The role model had to display both of these elements. In addition there was a third optional element:

- The role model may have had to overcome some adversity.

This element was not mandatory, and for some women it was simply that the potential role model was female and therefore the requirement of having overcome adversity was assumed. The fourth point of defining a role model was:

- The attributes of the role model being considered could be positive and/or negative.

### **8.2.2 The observer/role model relationship**

Fundamentally, in deciding *who* the role model is, this study has confirmed previous findings (Sealy, 2008) that the role model is someone with whom the observer has had some direct or indirect type of relationship or connectivity. This has to happen before the individual can be selected as a role model, so this is one differentiating factor between role models and mentors, which previous research has not been made explicit. (Mentors are often allocated or matched by others and the relationship has to be two-way, with awareness and action on both sides whereas the role model relationship is always a personal choice but the role model may be unaware of the relationship.) However, it should be noted that this requirement of a relationship before being chosen as a role model may be a preference for this sample (i.e. women) given women's propensity towards relatedness (Gilligan, 1982). In addition, the women were asked about people within their organization, so I acknowledge this may

bias their responses. In the case of the women from this study, the relationships were of two main types:

- Long-term continuous in nature – in this study very often the woman’s immediate boss; or
- Short interactions, intense and with impact

What was critical, was that it was a positive relationship, defined as a High Quality Connection (HQC) (Dutton and Heaphy, 2003). High Quality Connections can be a long-term relationship or a short interaction but are “marked by vitality, mutuality and positive regard” (Ragins & Dutton, 2007, p. 10).

Previous mentoring literature has proposed that the successful mentoring relationship should not be with an immediate boss, preferring an individual from another division, or indeed sometimes a different organization (Chao et al, 1992). This is in contrast with the continuous relationships with role models. In addition, there is also an assumption that the more mentoring contact the more effective the relationship (Ragins, Cotton and Miller, 2000). Again, this is in contrast to the findings of this study. The women here who talked about having intermittent contact with their role models were quite clear that this did not affect the quality or perceived value of the relationship; it was just a different type of relationship.

Whereas Gibson focused on the *cognitive* processes of choosing a role model, this study has, in addition, considered the *affective* processes, when looking at who the senior women choose as role models. Much previous research has considered women’s greater need for connectedness (Chodorow, 1978); relatedness (Gilligan, 1982), intimacy (Erikson, 1968), and relationships (Anderson & Chen, 2002) to name but a few. The key quality when choosing a role model, was someone to whom the individual woman could **relate**. This is clearly an affective, emotional process, rather than simply the more transactional, utilitarian processes described by other authors (e.g. Ibarra, 1999). From the findings there were two precursors to being able to relate to another individual. Firstly, there was the more obvious and tangible precursor of being the same sex. However, given the demographic context in which these women worked, many of them either did not have more senior females available to them, or for reasons elaborated in Chapter 5, sections 5.1 and 5.3, those that there were, had

been rejected as role models. So a second precursor for being able to relate to an individual was the more intangible aspect of relating to the individual's values – e.g. approaches to work and other people, being authentic and apolitical, approaches to work/non-work balance.

### **8.2.3 Extending Gibson's dimensions of RM**

Earlier this decade, Gibson's work really progressed the understanding of the concept and use of role models with his identification of important dimensions of role models. The findings from this study were considered in the light of Gibson's work on the conceptualization of role models to see where his work might be confirmed, extended or contradicted, in a study in a different geographic location, with a different and tightly defined population of senior women.

#### **8.2.3.1 Cognitive dimensions**

The cognitive dimensions described by Gibson were Positive/Negative and Global/Composite. Confirming Gibson's studies, all of the interviewees were able to describe both positive and negative facets of individuals, from which they wanted to learn. With the positive facets these were traits or behaviours they wanted to or had already emulated. With the negative facets there was an interesting distinction, adding to Gibson's conceptualization. When the women remarked on negative *behaviours*, these were described as behaviours they could learn from, in how *not* to conduct themselves. In addition the role models with these negative behaviours may also have been described as having positive behaviours the women had also learned from. However, when the women perceived individuals having made negative *choices*, this led to the individual being rejected outright as a role model – for example, the women described as “*superwomen*”.

With the exception of the individual (Marion) who admired Baroness Sarah Hogg, there were no other examples of women talking about *Global* role models. This should be viewed as a positive finding, as the desire for a global role model, in an environment with such imbalanced demographics, would restrict the availability and therefore successful use of role models (Ibarra, 1999). In addition, focus on global role models tends to imply a less sophisticated form of mimicry. In terms of creating a



*Composite*, there was only one woman (Faith) who specifically described taking aspects from different individuals and compiling them into a whole. However, this was not something that I enquired about in detail in the interviews. The vast majority of interviewees talked about the process of ‘cherry-picking’, but I did not then pursue this to ascertain whether they then used appropriate aspects for particular occasions (as in Singh, Vinnicombe & James, 2006), or whether they integrated different aspects into a composite whole.

### **8.2.3.2 Structural dimensions**

Across the interviews there was a mixture of what Gibson defined as *Close* and *Distant* role models. Close role models were those in close and regular proximity to the interviewee and in this study were often the woman’s immediate boss. On some occasions the immediate boss had moved on, within the organization and may now be distant, but, because of the prior positive relationship, the woman still used them as a sounding board. *Distant* role models included the Chief Executive Officers of three of the banks, with whom the interviewees had had some contact. There were also ‘Global Heads’ of the women’s particular divisions, maybe two levels up. Those individuals were often based in New York and so there was an obvious geographic as well as hierarchical distance. As noted above, the relationships with the role models predominantly fell into two types – either long and continuous, or short intermittent interactions. The former tended to be close and the latter tended to be distant, but this is probably due to circumstance. It is important to note that the women did not appear to value one over the other, they were just different. Interestingly, what became apparent was that new technology does make even those individuals who are globally distant much more accessible – for example with the use of global teleconferencing. In the majority of the banks in my sample, the Headquarters were in New York, and therefore such technology allows for more contacts between hierarchically distant individuals which previously would not have occurred. However, this raised an interesting question about transferability of role models across contexts. The example was described where Mel, an American, had clearly identified a more senior female compatriot as a role model and was excited to ‘host’ a lunch for her role model and some more junior female colleagues in London. However, the event was not the success she had hoped it would be as the London colleagues, who were all of

European nationalities, did not warm to the role model. Mel put this down to issues of style, which she admired and emulated, but realised was not the natural style of the Europeans. It is clear, therefore, that role models can have limited transferability across contexts internationally. This could possibly be an issue between London and regional contexts as well, and also across time – for example styles of leadership that perhaps were revered a decade or two ago may not be so today. Further research into this transferability aspect of role models could be very interesting in this time of globalisation as well as volatility in a new economic and employment context, where previous assumptions about the benefits of globalised business are coming into question.

#### ***8.2.4 Role models and career stages***

Gibson made comparisons between early, mid and late career individuals. In this study, the sample did not include any individuals from early career, so no comparisons with his data can be made there. Gibson found that those in mid and late career did pick out useful attributes from role models, and this was confirmed in this study. However, he found that those in late career were particularly noted for construing negative role models – in order to differentiate themselves from others. In contrast, this study found that the mid-stage EDs were more likely to cite both positive and negative female role models, than MDs. There may simply have been more women available to be role models for those at ED level, than those ahead at MD level, and they may be more aware of using them as such.

#### ***8.2.5 Gender differences***

Obviously, unlike Gibson's work, this study cannot comment on gender differences in the use of role models, as there were no men in the sample. This is clearly an area for further research, and something I expressed an interest to conduct with one of the investment banks here. Two of my sample from that bank believed they would get backing for that. Unfortunately, the bank has since collapsed.

## **8.2.6 The values of role models**

### **8.2.6.1 Behavioural values**

The behavioural aspects of role models have previously been well-documented (Bandura, 1977; Gibson, 2003) and we know from studies by Ibarra (1999; 2007) that having opportunities for relevant and appropriate behavioural modeling is important in making upward career transitions. This study confirmed those above and the earlier study with Heads of Diversity, that role models provide crucial information on acceptable and successful ways of working and progressing one's career. The behavioural modelling fell into two categories: one regarding specifics of **how to** successfully deal with various situations; and the second regarding the bigger picture or **visioning** of what a career in that context might look like. As previously mentioned, many of the benefits of such modeling were not gendered. However, some benefits were, for example, what juggling motherhood and career looked like, and specific career tips relating to things women were perceived as not being good at – e.g. the value of networking.

### **8.2.6.2 Symbolic values**

Gibson's and Ibarra's studies focused mainly on the cognitive processes and behavioural outcomes of the availability of role models. Building on the earlier study by Sealy (2008), this research highlighted not only the behavioural value of role models, but also the symbolic importance of the role model representing:

- someone they could identify with on some level of similarity;
- individuals from whom they could take messages of hope and possibility; and
- organizational messages of meritocracy and support.

These are affective processes, as opposed to cognitive ones, with less tangible outcomes.

#### **8.2.6.2.1 Symbols of similarity**

Confirming Gibson's 2003 finding that a basis of construing role models was the degree of similarity the observer believed s/he shared with the role model, this study

extends and elaborates previous work, in giving the perspective of a particular population – individual senior females – to whom this concept has been linked as important by previous surveys. Gibson did not define similarity, which this study goes some way to doing. As well as tangible likenesses, such as sex, there were also more intangible ones such as values and approaches to work. ‘Similarity’ was defined by each individual on each separate occasion and could include sometimes quite small and specific things like having had the experience of the same university, major things like motherhood, or as be broad as simply being dissimilar from the norm. But there needed to be some ‘bridge’ or ‘connection’, that allowed the individual to compare themselves to the role model, to believe that if the role model could succeed, so could they.

#### **8.2.6.2.2 *Symbols of possibility and hope***

This emphasis on the notion of “possibility”, more commonly defined as “hope” was so prevalent in the findings that I felt it warranted further investigation. Investigation into recent literature on the subject reveals an area of exciting growth in the field of personal psychology, linked to identity and positive psychology and in organizational psychology, linked to motivation, identity development and change, which may help interpret some of the findings from this study.

As mentioned in the findings chapter 5, in a forthcoming book chapter, Carlsen and Pitsis analyse the impact of experiencing hope in organizational lives, and suggest hope is a motive for positive identity construction in work. Hope is primarily directed towards progression in personal or work life. Hope implies an openness, with possibilities for the future that “precedes and anticipates a coherent image of the future” (Ludema et al, 1997), much needed in organizations, particularly by individuals, such as the senior women in this study, who can otherwise feel isolated. Carlsen and Pitsis relate this hope to Ibarra’s work (1999; 2003) and her subject’s experiments with ‘provisional selves’, how they tried out new things, from singular acts of doing something new to small projects, to highlight the ‘possibilities’ hope-function in identity construction. In other words, who might I possibly become? “Telling stories of one’s professional experiences in ways that open up and qualify several future possible selves and development paths” (Carlsen & Pitsis, p. 13) is a similar strategy. And being able to relate their own stories to those that they heard

from the few women above them, meant the interviewees in this study were more likely to use those women successfully as role models.

The current psychology literature tends to see hope as cognitive in nature. However, in their 2006 paper, Boyatzis and Akrivou consider it an emotional, experienced state, which generates cognitions to assess the feasibility of the aspiration. They also refer to the work of Ludema (1996). He describes two of the main results of hope are that:

- Hope brings people together, and builds relationships
- Hope assumes an open-mindedness for the future

If this is the case then this helps to explain the importance for women in this study of role models who embody a sense of hope for them. All too often they are feeling isolated, and I have already touched on the body of literature that suggest women thrive on being more related. In addition, the hope allows them to continue to think of a future career in their current organization, where otherwise the lack of senior women may be perceived as evidence of its impossibility. Much research on hope as a psychological construct been done by Snyder, and one of his concepts is ‘pathways thinking’, which is the belief that a path to a hoped future is possible (Snyder, 2002). This is similar in concept to Bandura’s self-efficacy, in that it is a realistic, feasible hope. Snyder also says that people with high hope, when they face obstructions to their goals, can find alternative routes. Given the amount of literature on women in management that lists career barriers to women, having high hope may clearly be important to find the alternative routes and navigate the “labyrinth of leadership” (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

An individual’s understanding about what is possible will determine what goals they chose, how much effort and persistence they will invest in the face of adversity (Bandura, 1997). This explains the value of the symbols of possibility and hope, gained from the role model. The stronger the perceived efficacy, the more the individual will persist until they succeed (Bandura, 1982). Bandura’s work originally focused on very behavioural tasks and was specifically goal oriented. More recent research has focused on ‘general self-efficacy’, as a more stable dimension or motivational trait (Chen, Gully & Eden, 2001) and is developed “through the aggregation of life experiences and role successes and failures in an individual’s life

history” (Boyatzis & Akrivou, 2006, p. 631). Again, the messages received from the organization via role models, and also their own experiences of what they see is possible, are likely to affect general self-efficacy. This notion was believed to be particularly relevant to long-term influences, and the longevity of tenure here within their organizations is relevant for these women.

As Boyatzis and Akrivou say, the hope input is the affective driver of the ‘Ideal Self’ – the person that the individual aspires to be. Hope can be the push factor into a fantasized future role, without which the individual may feel compelled to repeat and recreate the past and not experiment with new behaviours, essential for role transitions, as discussed above (Carlsen & Pitsis, forthcoming; Ibarra, 1999).

#### ***8.2.6.2.3 Symbols of organizational meritocracy and support***

When women look at the organization, the presence or lack of senior female role models has a symbolic value in illustrating concepts such as *meritocracy* and *support* for their development. Some talked about the organization needing to prove that women can succeed. In the earlier study the point was made that this is particularly pertinent to the more senior women. Junior women, having grown up in a more egalitarian society, expect the organization to actively support their career development, and thus far have no reason to believe this will not happen. However, for senior women this cannot be assumed. The development and promotion of women within corporate organizations, sometimes called ‘the Gender Agenda’, is often regarded by those in charge of it as a cultural change programme. Singh, Bains and Vinnicombe (2002) said “mentoring can be the behavioural expression of the values communicated in cultural change programmes” (p.401). If there is no such formal expression, women might pick this same message up from individual role models when they *project* the ways of working from the inspirational individual onto the organization as a whole. However, as illustrated in the previous study (Sealy, 2008), and Ibarra’s 2007 paper, organizations need to be cognizant of the role models or organizational success models they are putting forward, because the women do take messages from them about what being successful looks like in that company. In the previous study, arguably some of the Heads of Diversity were getting it wrong in terms of the types of women they thought should be sponsored as role models,

showing many of the negative role model traits described in this study, including some *superwomen*.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that junior women in these organizations are very optimistic about their careers and assume ‘a level playing field’. Some of the younger participants in this study confirmed this had been their belief. The Pioneer women in these organizations knew they were the firsts and, if they did not from the start, most realized pretty quickly that they would have to fight the fights and make the rules. But the majority of the women in this study look up in their organizations and see the ‘evidence’ that success for them as females may not be possible. And on whatever level of consciousness, they may question why in the 21<sup>st</sup> century they should have to take on this battle. What is apparent from these findings is the deep level understanding most of these women have that it is not currently the case that women can make it to the top, and that men and women in these companies do not believe that women are as capable, as authentic, and as able as men. The crucial role that positive female role models have in these organizations is to combat these negative messages.

### **8.2.7 Conceptualization of role models**

So on the conceptualization of role models, this study has extended knowledge on role models firstly in terms of the definition of a role model – what is mandated by observers seeking role models and what is optional. Secondly, the thesis identifies that the process of choosing a role model is relational and affective as well as cognitive and structural, and suggests the basis upon which to relate, and the nature of the relationship. Thirdly, it adds to the literature on Gibson’s findings, particularly confirming and adding some clarity around negative role models, that mid-career women use them rather than just late career individuals. And fourthly, it confirms and extends my earlier study (Sealy, 2008) on the values of role models. This includes two aspects of the behavioural value – visioning and specific behavioural guidance – and also three aspects of the symbolic value – messages on an individual level about similarity, hope and possibility; and messages on an organizational level about meritocracy and support. Figure 8.1 below shows Gibson’s findings (in green), which

of his findings this study has confirmed (pink on green) and what is new from this study (pink).

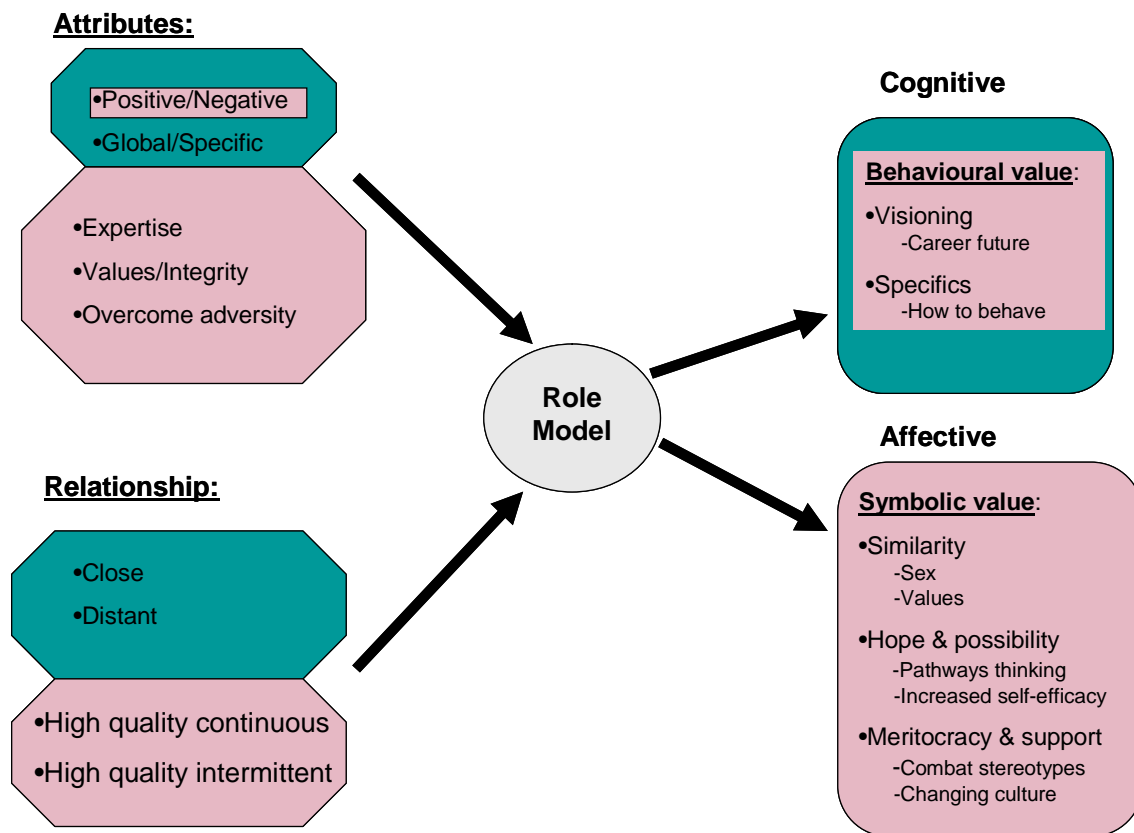


Figure 8-1 Conceptualization of role models

### 8.3 Demographic difference

So far, this study has established what role models are, who they are and how they are used. But why is any of this of any importance in the working environment, and in particular those working environments which have very unbalanced demographics? The findings suggest for these women this is about learning how to behave and who to be(come) within their organization. Even at the levels of maturity and seniority that this group of women have achieved, for many of them this was still an ongoing issue. Role models were seen to be useful for being able to benchmark norms and work out whether the behavioural norms are acceptable or whether to challenge them and behave differently, according to one's own values and beliefs. Values and beliefs play a significant role in our sense of identity, how we behave and who we become.



According to Kanter's definition, the majority of the women interviewed for this study were working in demographic contexts where they were 'tokens'. The effects on the women emerged very strongly in the interviews, both in terms of the immediate dynamics of their work environments often causing polarization, visibility and isolation, as well as the significance of the obvious lack of senior female role models above them. The numbers above were worse even than at their own level, and the availability of any female role models was very precarious.

The women gave clear representation of their awareness of their demographic difference at the start of their careers, and whether the situation was any different today. For some of the older women, their careers had started more than 20 years ago, when the demography of the working population was very different to that which we see today. Clearly these are all highly intelligent women and some of them were well-read on the state of women's progress in business careers and the issues they face. So they had both intellectual and experiential knowledge of the importance of the gender imbalance which they face within their organization.

### ***8.3.1 The 'local demographics'***

When asked about the numbers of women in their organization more senior than themselves, all the women spoke initially of who was directly above them, within their own division. Thus it became apparent that what was important to these women was the state of the 'local demographics', as opposed to any organization-wide statistics.

Rather than looking up the hierarchy, Kanter (1977) originally suggested that the minority group (women) would need to be grouped together in clusters, rather than thinly spread across the organization, in order for there to be any change in dynamics with work groups. The work groups individually could alter their composition to 'tilted' or 'balanced' rather than 'skewed', and that would bring about the acceptance of a broader range of acceptable behaviours for women, within that group. This was confirmed by the Kossek et al study (2003), who spoke of 'tipping points' at a work group level.

But Ely (1995), emphasizing gender as an ongoing social construction said only when women were present in positions of power would the social construction be affected and women's gender identity at work begin to change. However, whilst Kanter (1983) also makes this point about the need for women to be seen to have equal access to power, the Elvira & Cohen (2001) study showed that the effect of having women above can depend on the proximity to the researched individual. Having executive level women had a positive impact on the senior and mid-level women, but not the juniors, as it was perceived the distance between executives and juniors was too great. This research did not look at junior women, and for most of the sample, there were only one or two hierarchical levels above them to the global corporate board. This requirement for proximity is interesting when applied to the importance of role models and both Gibson and Singh et al have called for further research to establish the relative impact of close and distant role models. As mentioned previously, in this study the women did not distinguish between the benefits of the closer or more distant role models, they were just different. However, given the seniority of this sample, even the more distant role models were not that remote.

The demographics of the six organizations in this study had three areas of impact:

- The negative impact for women of the 'local demographics' on the dynamics of the working group was very clearly described. Different dynamics were experienced by the one or two women who worked in more 'female-friendly' divisions such as Operations. But for most of the women, they were in divisions where they had always been the 'token'.
- The impact of the 'local demographics' on career prospects were also illustrated, where 'local' refers to the silo or division in which a woman works. When looking hierarchically up above, for most of the women, there were not sufficient numbers of more senior women for the provision of adequate role models.
- The impact of demographics at an organization-wide level in terms of access to the positions of power, regardless of division, was also demonstrated. In order to alter the socialized construction of gender, there was a clear need for

evidence that men and women were regarded as equally capable, competent and deserving.

These differences should be noted for any future research where demography is an issue. Researchers should avoid making assumptions based only on organization-wide demographics.

### **8.3.2 Hostile behaviour between women**

One of the more positive findings, when talking about women above them, was the lack of description of the *Queen Bee*, or hostile patterns of behaviour between women. This is a very encouraging sign if the women are as supportive of each other as they say. This is in contrast to findings of Mavin (2006), where she suggests that women in her sample blame each other for the lack of progression of women's careers generally. Korabik & Abbondaza (2004) describe female solidarity behaviours as making changes for women at the social level. But as the behaviours are enacted by the women, as instruments of social change, then the responsibility for this change is placed on the women themselves. Mavin also discusses the assumption of solidarity behaviour, presuming that this puts the onus of change onto the women. But she cites other studies that have not found this solidarity behaviour (e.g. Rindfleish, 2000) and where the women are not supportive and blame each other for not changing the status quo. This echoes Ely's findings (1994, 1995). However, moving away from the liberal feminist stance of holding the women responsible, Mavin identifies the demographic context as the culprit, saying the women do not have the power to make the changes and suggesting that it would be to their detriment to be identified with 'the mantle of women in management'.

In contrast, this study suggested that for the most part what was remarkable was the clear evidence of solidarity behaviour. All but two interviewees believed that women had a harder time and even those that were concerned about promotion on meritocracy, still felt there was nothing wrong with women supporting each other. There was a lot of concern around supporting those women below them in whatever way they could. This is in contrast to Ely's findings where, in male-dominated organizations there was competition with and little perceived support between female peers. Ely also found that gender was not a positive basis for identification. In this

study the results vary according to career stage. For the MDs significantly more negative female role models (70%) were discussed than positive (44%). Whereas, for the EDs and the Pioneers, equal numbers of positive and negative female role models were discussed. Also, there was a sense that the interviewees did want to identify with other women. For the most part, the examples given where interviewees did not identify with the more senior women were when the women were denying their gender. This would indicate, therefore, that the female is considered a positive basis for identification. Ely's study also found that in organizations with very few women at the top, those women were not perceived to be role models with legitimate authority. There were one or two instances where the interviewee implied there was a woman in a senior position when she should not be, in other words that she was not competent. The interviewee automatically assumed that the woman in question had been placed there "*as a token*" – in other words in order to tick a box. However, in a few of the interviews it also came out that the women believed a proportion of men probably should not be in their MD positions either. So the misplacing of a woman in a senior role could just be due to a poor system of selection/promotion, rather than necessarily a gender issue. One caveat to note in the comparison with Ely's study is that her sample was of younger associates, focused on the nature of women's relationships comparing organizations with relatively lower or higher proportions of women in 'positions of power'. In this study, the sample included in several cases women who are in those positions of power, given the size of their budgets and the numbers of people for which they were responsible.

Another issue raised by Mavin (2006) was concern from her interviewees about being identified as 'the token feminist'. This did not appear to be the case with the women from this study. They were all involved with their women's networks, most were regular speakers, some were on the gender committee, and some were also the Gender Champions for their divisions. Also in contrast to Mavin's study, whilst there were plenty of examples of negative female role models, there was almost no evidence of blame towards them. There was no suggestion that those pioneer women should have changed the system for the betterment of those women behind them. On the contrary, there was recognition of the enormity of the battles these women had been fighting for so many years, and how hard it had been for them. And whilst the younger women did not want to have to do it like their elders, they appeared to understand that they had

got there the only way they could. The interviewees did not put the responsibility for changing the situation onto the women, but recognised it as an organizational and/or cultural issue.

There are no obvious explanations for these contradictions. Possibly the women in this study are older and/or higher hierarchically than previous studies, which might make them a little more aware of the causes of some of the issues, and a little more confident in their own positions, in terms of getting involved. Perhaps the banks, as an industry are further forward in support of diversity, in terms of networks, etc., and in comparison to many other organizations, their formal structural support of these issues is apparent. Whether or not they actually believe it, they all espouse an understanding of the 'business case' for the gender agenda, with Diversity departments, or at least a relatively senior role of a Head of Diversity. Alternatively, and very optimistically, perhaps it is simply now a few years further on than the studies I am quoting and the situation for women is improving.

### **8.3.3 Meanings and culture**

Towards the end of each interview, I asked the interviewees to hypothesise in what ways they believed their working lives would be different if there were more women in their environment. Their responses gave a sense of the possibility of a very different culture to that which they found themselves in. The demographic context in which we work affects how individuals construct their sense of self through the prevalent discourses. Foucault (1983) says that discourses constitute the parameters of identity and inform interpretation of the environment, influencing behaviour. Investment banks are well-known for their very masculine and aggressive cultures, and so these women take their meanings on the social construction of gender and their role within the organization from that culture. Following on from work by Nonaka (1994) and Lam (2000), Singh et al (2002, p.399) talked about the 'micro-level knowledge' exchange that occurs between mentors and mentees. "The knowledge may be encoded (collective knowledge which is signalled), embedded (collective knowledge which is complex and unwritten), embrained (individual knowledge which is formal and recorded) and embodied (individual knowledge which is learned by

doing)”. Some of these types of knowledge might be gleaned through the culture, but more specifically could be role modelled by mentors or role models.

As Simpson (1997) found “the way that culture was experienced by women depended largely on the gender mix and this in turn influenced how comfortable they felt in their working environment” (p. S126). In her study she asked women about the cultures of their organizations with different demographics. Those from female dominated environments described their working cultures as supportive, co-operative, with a high pressure to perform, yet in a relaxed working atmosphere. Conversely, those women working in male-dominated environments described the culture as aggressive and political, not supportive, and unsafe. However, as in this study, there were divides within organizational cultures, where there were divisions which had a better gender balance, and the culture was more supportive – as seen in the example of women working in Operations. This shows that the culture is not only affected by the organizational culture but also is highly influenced by the ‘local demography’ of those in the immediate work environment. As Simpson says “...where the gender mix is evenly balanced, the organizational culture can change. However, this is only likely to be the case if women move into the higher echelons of the organization” (p.S129).

#### **8.4 Work identity development**

From the maturity and seniority of the women studied in this research, one might make assumptions about their levels of confidence and clarity in themselves and their identities. The majority of these women had “*very big*” jobs in six of the largest global investment banks, and yet struggled with some clear identity threats and self-esteem issues, often on a daily basis. For the most part, and particularly those identified as ‘the Pioneers’, they had worked in extremely male-dominated environments, where often they were the only female, for most of their working lives. During the interview process, and throughout the analysis it became very clear that who these women are and had become in their demographically imbalanced work environment had been informed by the critical relationships that they had (or had not had) with role models, male and female, positive and negative, and with other women in their firms.

### **8.4.1 Role models and work identity**

The research question for this PhD asked why role models are important for women's work identity. What this study has shown is that, in the imbalanced demographic environment in which they work, the identity of these women is informed by the critical relationships they have had. By asking who had been inspirational for them, some of those relationships were identified as role models.

In order to answer the research question, it is necessary to look at the utility of role models in work identity. Work identity is understood not to be a fixed concept and Ibarra (1999) showed how career transitions present an opportunity to renegotiate one's work identity. From Markus & Nurius' (1986) notion of 'possible selves', Ibarra's work showed how role models could be used to develop the notion of 'Provisional Selves'. Gibson and Ibarra look at the cognitive and behavioural processes of role modelling, but as Ibarra said, work identity development is not an individual concept, but a socially constructed one.

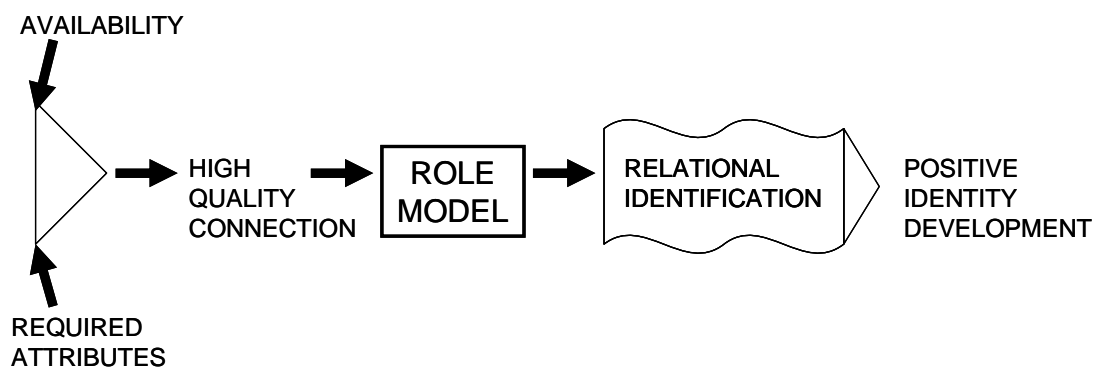
In the theoretical background of the Literature Review, I considered social identity theory, looking at the categorisation of in/out-groups and how individuals seek out role models by comparison, leading to a desire to join the higher status group by emulating its group characteristics. This is one explanation for how and why many highly successful women have in the past been seen to use masculine-typed behaviours. Social and gender role theory prescribe attributes to roles and describe the double bind of incongruity, as women often find themselves with supposedly conflicting roles of woman and leader, which often leads to a rejection of the masculine-style women as role models. But it is the relatively recent concepts of relational identity and relational identification that seem most promising in seeking to address the research question of why role models are important to women's work identity development. Relational identity highlights the interpersonal elements, as the individual seeks to emulate the higher status individual (role model).

Having established that role models are used in identity formation, one of the biggest challenges in trying to consider why role models are important to senior women is the paucity of literature that links or integrates various findings on the levels of identity at work. This is something that is highlighted in a special edition of the British Journal

of Management in 2007 (Cornelissen, Haslam & Balmer) and a paper by Sluss and Ashforth (2008). Research tends to consider in isolation, individual identity, social identity, organisational identity or corporate identity, and the interpersonal or dyadic level for the most part has been largely ignored in the work identity literature. It has received more attention in the personal identity literature (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003; and see Chen, Boucher & Tapias, 2006, for an excellent review) but in the organizational context, the different levels still tend to be quite segregated. There have been recent studies in relational identity and relational identification in the past two to three years which have started to focus on this, but the role of role models does not appear to been addressed. As Sluss and Ashforth said in their 2008 paper, by understanding more about relational identity and relational identification, the closer we will move towards building “a more dynamic and holistic understanding of the self at work” (p. 2).

#### **8.4.2 Relational identification as the mechanism**

Relational Identity is the interaction of both person-based and role-based identities of two people within a relationship, and therefore draws on the interpersonal level. Relational identification (RI) is defined as the extent to which an individual includes a specific role-relationship into their own self construct. From the findings of this study, I am proposing that RI is part of the link between the micro-level processes of the individual and the macro-level characteristics of the organisation. So in terms of the research question of ‘why?’ and ‘how?’ role models impact the work identity of the senior women, RI is the mechanism that explains how having role models is a key influence on women’s work identity development (see figure 8.2 below).



**Figure 8-2 Relational identification as the mechanism**



As previously mentioned, role-based identity is the goals, values, beliefs and behaviours typically associated with that role (Ashforth, 2001), regardless of who is enacting the role. The person-based identity is the traits that define *how* that individual is enacting that role (e.g. with passion, fairness, consideration,). The relational identity is the interaction of both person-based and role-based identities of two people within a relationship, and therefore draws on the interpersonal level. There has been substantial evidence of this in the findings of this study, as individuals made choices about *who* they did or did not want to be in a specific role, based on who was currently occupying it. Examples detailing two such interactions can be seen in the descriptions of Clare in section 5.2.1, and of Zara in section 5.2.2, above. The role-based identities focused on the behaviours and requirements of the role, but what was so often rejected by the women in this study was the way in which people conduct themselves in these roles, for example, exhibiting values they did not share, the politics they did not agree with, the lack of authenticity in style – in other words, the person identity. So if the observing woman cannot relate to and identify with the relational identity, the potential role model is rejected. In addition, unfortunately, sometimes the woman may not realise it was the occupant not the role which was unattractive, and so would restrict her career intentions based on that. The converse is also true, if the observing woman is comfortable with the person-based and role-based identities between her and her role model, then she is likely to include that relational identity in her concept of self, and she can successfully use the role model to identify with both the role and the person. A consequence of this will be a more integrated sense of self at work, thus explaining that *relational identification* is the mechanism that explains *how* role models are so important for women's work identity development.

If a consequence of relational identification might be a clearer sense of self, what might be an antecedent? In a conference paper, Sluss, Morrell & Ashforth (2008) suggest that relationality and similarity may be required antecedents. Based on Andersen and Chen's (2002) findings that implicated women as being more relationally focused than men, Sluss et al, in their unpublished study, tested for gender as an antecedent in RI. They did not find any significant correlation between relationship self construal, i.e., how relational an individual they think they are, and RI. They did not, however, report on similarity. In this research from the start, the

importance of similarity, however defined, has been a key element of the symbolic value of role models. Every woman interviewed, in describing what made someone inspirational mentioned the necessity for some degree of similarity, in order to be able to relate to the role model in some way. However, the presence or absence of similar others reported here has been affected by the demographic environment.

### **8.4.3 Addressing the Paradox**

From the start of this study, I have been aware of the apparent paradox of the senior women in the study – if having senior female role models is so important for career progression, how did these women get to be where they are? If role relationships are so integral to one’s experience of work, the more salient the relationship, the more influence it will exert. Interestingly, many of the women talked about having had an inspirational boss at some point, a salient, close, and influential relationship. If we assume that these women experienced relational identification with the boss, then Sluss and Ashforth argue that this type of salient relational identification can have a significant influence on the level of organizational identification, through convergence processes. These mechanisms of convergence may be affective, cognitive or behavioural. For example, an affective mechanism may be transference – examples were seen in the study where an affect or emotion, such as trust, generated in a role relationship was transferred from the individual to the organisation. Examples of cognitive mechanisms such as anthropomorphization were also seen, where a woman would project the qualities of the relationship onto the organisation - so if she felt that her manager had been very nurturing and developing of her, then she believed that the organisation would also continue to develop and support her. And an example of a behavioural mechanism would be retrospective sense making. Weick (1995, p.18) has a good quote which says ‘How can I know what I think until I see what I say?’ which Sluss and Ashforth have extended to identity work to say, ‘How can I know who I am until I see what I do?’ (p.9). Here is a very clear link to Ibarra’s (2003) work about the enactment of new identities using provisional selves to make mid-career transitions. So the use of mimicry in a career move helps to make sense of the new identity. This convergence from relational identification to organizational identification could explain and build on Gibson and Barron’s 2003 study, looking at how when older employees have more role models, they show more loyalty and

commitment to the organisation, by creating attachment. This may mean that (female) employees would have increased resilience and will to stay, despite otherwise unpleasant circumstances and perhaps perceived poor career prospects. As Simon (1999) explains about the importance of meaning and identity, in terms of a need to posit oneself in relation to others, to understand one's 'place': "people may strive for good, well-respected places and try to avoid bad, less-respected places...just as the homeless are likely to prefer a bad house to no house at all, a less good place in the social world may still be better than no place at all" (p.66). As mentioned before, the women in the study were the successful ones, in terms of their banking careers, the ones who had stayed. In line with one of Sluss and Ashforth's propositions, an explanation for the apparent paradox of the senior women in the study (given the apparent lack of more senior female role models) is that if they have had positive role models (male or female) – which they all had – with whom they had good relational identification, then that converges to good organizational identification and they would stay. Differences between those who had had only male positive role models as opposed to those who also had positive female role models could account for challenges those women still face around the 'toughness/charm' issue, self-confidence and any issues they might have regarding motherhood, if appropriate. One woman (Fay) described herself as "*the last woman standing*". Future research might also consider to what extent the lack of or demise of such critical relationships played a part in women being unsuccessful and/or leaving the organization.

Sluss and Ashforth went on to make another proposition that suggested that the "prototypicality of one's relational partner strengthens the convergence process" (p.10). This was very clearly not the case in this study, as many of the women described male bosses as role models, describing them as exceptional - not only in their character but also in their atypicality. How, then did they reconcile that with organizational identification and the intention to stay? The role of 'hope' and 'possibility' of change, symbolised by and ascribed to that atypical role model may be the answer here.

In Gersick et al's (2000) study into the importance of relationships in academic life, comparing men and women, they noted differences between men and women's network ties (Ibarra, 1997) and that men were less likely to have women in their

relational worlds. However, for both sexes, more importance was given to mutual bonds of collegueship than pure instrumentality, and negative relational experiences had powerful effects. Perhaps unsurprisingly, “the relational worlds described by women included significantly less career help and significantly more harm than the relational worlds of men.” (p.1038). What was different was the way the sexes reportedly talked about their careers. The men, as insiders, described it as a “game”, according to the women, with many references to “playing” and “winning”. They reportedly spoke strategically of managing their reputations. However, the women, with very few of their kind at the senior levels of their organizations, with whom they could form positive relationships, struggled to prove their fitness to “join the game” and so saw the working environment as a constant “test of skill” to see if they were good enough to join. As Louise in this study said “*The more senior I’ve got...the things you’re judged on, there’s a lot of subjectivity, and it’s harder and harder to prove you can play with the big boys*”. Approaching a career as a constant test would cause considerably more stress and anxiety than believing it to be a game. As Gersick et al said: “Women’s stories portray struggles with exclusion from the club”, and without the relationships, they did not get as much career help as did the men. “The quest for inclusion, noted as typical of women’s professional identity formation” (p.1040), was also clear in the data from this study. Sluss and Ashforth (2006) said that individuals learn about their workplace through the relationships they have which are ‘nested’ in the organization. Likewise, Gersick et al said that the relationships of individuals send “powerful messages about who we are and how we are valued”. (p. 1026).

#### **8.4.4 Relational health**

So, Sluss and Ashforth (2006) contend that “RI is a sensemaking device that encourages and enables consistency across levels of self” (p.11). If this is the case, having the attractive role models available with whom to have these relationships could help reduce the level of internal conflict and perhaps feelings of a lack of authenticity commonly experienced by senior women, and previously well documented. It reduces uncertainty and facilitates self enhancement (Aron & Aron, 2000). Ashforth and Sluss also consider the notion of relational health within organizations in terms of appropriate levels of identification (2006). They were not

referring to the impact of negative relationships, which adult attachment theory mentioned can have often severe negative impacts, nor were they discussing negative role models, who as has been seen, can be used to learn from, or simply rejected. They are talking about whether the levels of identification are healthy. They propose that a role-relationship is healthy (or unhealthy) “when it engenders positive (or negative) relationship qualities and positive (or negative) in-role performance” (p. 10). So, under-identification can occur when the individual defines themselves only a very little or not at all in terms of a role-relationship, and that they appear indifferent too it. There were one or two examples of this in this study, where the women did not have significant relationships, struggled to talk about current role models and did not seem very attached to the organization. An outcome of under-identification may be seen in a lack of resilience to organizational shocks and/or a propensity to leave. The example was given of one of the interviewees (Faith), described as under-identified (see chapter 6, section 6.3.3) talking about the ‘credit crunch’ as being the “*straw on the camel’s back*”, causing her to think about leaving.

In contrast, over-identification can occur when important levels of self are continually subjugated by a particular role-relationship. This may happen more frequently in relationships with significant power differences, when one is too reliant on another’s approval for a sense of safety, self-worth and identity. This is also described in the clinical psychology literature as ‘co-dependency’. One of the problem outcomes is that the individual is so reliant on the role-relationship that any change will feel like a threat to their identity. Therefore, consistency will become more important than self-enhancement (Swann, 1987). From an organizational perspective, where people do move roles relatively frequently, this will obviously cause a challenge. In addition, if a woman is the reliant individual, this can reduce ambitions and behaviours towards career progression if that would entail a ‘break-up’ of the working relationship, and relational identity.

#### **8.4.5 Dealing with identity threats**

Without attractive role models, relational identification will not occur, and nor then will the sensemaking that helps individuals integrate the various levels of self, in a work environment where the woman is the ‘odd-man out’. As Ibarra’s (2007) paper

showed, the demographics prevented role modelling and the identity threat caused women to take a protective stance.

In section 8.2 above, I discussed how women have previously been seen to deal with identity threats by becoming very defensive, behaving in a hostile manner towards other women. This did not appear to be the case in this study. In social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1985) terms, therefore, the women could be said to have moved away from Individual Mobility Beliefs and more towards Social Change Beliefs, which has a positive evolutionary feel. Most of the women spoke about how the organization needed to make changes so that the whole category of women, not just them as an individual, could progress to the desired ingroup of people at the top of the organization. Perhaps there, then, lies a change, in terms of social identity theory, that the ingroup to which women now aspire is not that of 'white males', but of 'those who lead this organization', for example. They are choosing to stay "locked into their [outgroup] group membership" (Haslam, 2004, p.25), in other words, **not** letting go of their femininity. According to the more recent studies on gender roles, this would appear to be a constructive move (Heilman & Okimoto, 2007).

In terms of dealing with identity threats, a tactic being used is that of social creativity, where the women are consciously retaining what are perceived to be female characteristics, in terms of work styles. The abundance of discussion around disavowing "*political behaviours*", and favouring "*integrity*", "*values*" and "*authenticity*", is testament to this, even though many of the women were aware that their chosen stance may well have a detrimental effect on their careers. A popular phrase used frequently by those charged with managing diversity in corporations today is that of "celebrating difference". Whilst these women may not have been celebrating, they were certainly valuing the difference for themselves, even though they may not have believed the differences were valued by those around them.

In her 2007 paper, Ibarra said there were several examples of social creativity, where again the women in her study demonstrated pride in their gender characteristics, even though they did not get adequate recognition. Ibarra said: "We interpret the presence of these strong views held by so many of the women in our sample as evidence for a self-esteem protection mechanism activated in response to the exacerbated identity threat" (p.27).

In a forthcoming book chapter, Kreiner and Sheep talk about different tactics of identity work processes required to create, sustain and progress positive individual identities. They view the fundamental question of “who should I become?” as the motivation behind one of their tactics, that of experimenting with provisional selves (Ibarra, 1999). They recognise that Markus and Nurius (1986, p.954) see ‘possible selves’ as “cognitive components of hopes, fears, goals and threats”, that are future oriented and will change the individual’s behaviours in pursuit of a future identity. Possible selves “provide the essential link between the self-concept and motivation” (p.7). The concept of the ‘possible self’ is used to minimize the gap between the actual self-concept and Boyatzis & Akrivou’s Ideal Self, discussed above (section 8.1.6). However, just thinking about the ‘possible self’ is not enough, the individual needs to act out the process, “carried out in a dialectic tension of imitating exemplary role models while yet remaining true to one’s self” (p. 7). In order to actualize an authentic self, the individual has to know what that might look like first. Herein lies a value for role models – it is very difficult to know what that looks like, if one cannot see any exemplars, or more precisely, any that look like oneself. Attitudinally, there are also positive impacts of experimenting with possible selves, as the “mental schemata of future selves arouse attitudes of *optimism* and *hope* for future desired states of a more positive identity, increasing two dimensions of psychological capital that an individual is able to contribute to the organization” (Boyatzis & Akrivou, 2006, p.8).

#### **8.4.6 Contribution to identity work**

In this section I have proposed that relational identification (RI) is the mechanism that explains how the presence of positive role models is a key influence on women’s work identity development. The impact of the demographic environment on the availability of such role models, and the conceptualization of the role models have already been discussed above. Together these three interlinked areas explicate both *how* and *why* the lack of senior female role models has been postured as a significant barrier to women’s career success by popular press and research surveys. If the consequence of RI might be a clearer and more integrated sense of self, an antecedent proposed here is the importance of similarity. This was also a key antecedent to an individual being chosen as a role model. Relational Identification might also be key to

explaining the apparent paradox previously highlighted, in that if senior female role models are so key to women's career success, then how is it that the 33 interviewees in this study have managed to be so successful, in a very male-dominated working environment? I am suggesting that if women were able to achieve relational identification with one of a very few exceptional men described in the study, then those men were able to fulfil most of the functions sought from a role model, with the exception of those specific to the female sex.

I have introduced the concept of role models into the small amount of literature that integrates or links findings on identity at personal, social, organizational and now interpersonal levels. It is hoped this proposition will further work on identity dynamics. Most previous work on relationships within organizations has focused on those of a transactional nature, often from a social networks perspective. But dyadic relationships within organizations can have much deeper personal impacts, which can then affect how the individual both perceives, relates to, and behaves with other individuals within the organization, and the organization itself.

## **8.5 Integrating the literature**

In addition to the individual contributions to each of the three areas of literature already discussed – role models, demographic context, and work identity development – another significant contribution that this study makes is in combining them in a way not previously seen.

When starting to look at the subject of role models for older women, it quickly became apparent that there is not a great deal of recent academic literature on the subject. Much of what there is has been carried out on student samples and in experimental settings. There is very little research conducted in situ in organisational settings. In the UK, Singh et al looked at younger women and their role model sets. But the only author looking at older individuals and their need or use of role models has been Gibson, in the USA. His focus has very clearly been on the cognitive side: how individuals actually construct role models in their own minds. He proposed some cognitive and structural dimensions of the construct, and looked at career stage differences in these. Gibson did briefly consider some gender differences and wondered how might the cognitive construction process vary according to



organisational context? But he left these mainly as recommendations for future research.

The literature on the impact of demographic context on the dynamics between, and behaviours of those in minority/majority groups in organizations goes back to Kanter's work on tokenism in 1977. This is a more substantive area of literature, and I highlighted the work of Ely because her important papers in 1994 and 1995 looked specifically at how the numbers of women at the top of an organisation can impact on how women relate to each other throughout the whole organisation. Whereas Kanter had suggested that all that was required was a balance of demography at peer level, Ely maintained that in terms of gender, it was only once women were in positions of power in significant numbers that how women were perceived, and how they behaved would change. She compared companies with very few women at the top, with companies with relatively more women at the top. She found differences between how women in each type of organization viewed those women at the top (whether they were considered role models or not), and also differences in how they related to each other. So Ely's work takes the demographic context and looks at how women relate to each other, but at a junior level, and without consideration of individuals' work identity.

There is a huge amount of literature on identity, although that which focuses on work identity tends to be very separate and segregated – there is little overlap between the areas of organizational, corporate, social and individual identity. Ibarra's work in the late 1990s on identity transition, looked at how work identities change with role transitions and career progressions, and her sample was middle and senior managers, male and female. She considers the behavioural aspect of role modelling and, though not looking for them, did find some gender differences. She did comment that the male dominated context left the women in her study too few female role models, but she did not take into account the non-behavioural aspects of role modelling.

In seeking an answer to the question of why female role models are deemed by women in so many surveys as so important for women's career progression to the highest levels, clearly each of these three literature areas is relevant and highly important. However, whilst the studies just mentioned have touch-points on one or two of the three areas, no studies to my knowledge have considered and linked all

three. This study takes a new lens in suggesting that the areas of role models, organizational demographics and work identity development are related, they explain each other, and these three bodies of knowledge need to be considered together when looking at the career progress of senior women.

## **Chapter 9 - Conclusion**



## **Chapter 9 - Conclusion**

In this, the final chapter, I present the conclusions and implications of this doctoral project. In section 9.1 I will consider the thesis' substantial contributions to the academic body of knowledge. This will cover the journey from my initial interest, to the identification of a knowledge gap, to the pilot study, and the main study, summary of findings and then outline the main contributions as:

- Extending the conceptualization of role models, highlighting the role of affectivity
- Identifying the role and importance of Relational Identification as the mechanism linking role models and work identity, and adding to the emergent field of work identity dynamics
- In relation to previous research, bringing together empirically the areas of role models, work identity and the demographic context to address the initial question as to why positive female role models are important to senior women in male-dominated organizations.

In section 9.2 I briefly outline two further areas of contribution that this study makes. Limitations of the study are acknowledged in section 9.3 and practical applications are suggested in section 9.4. In section 9.5 some future research ideas are proposed. I end with section 9.6, a brief postscript on the conclusion of the PhD journey.

### **9.1 The Contribution of this thesis**

#### ***9.1.1 Outline of the project***

The original motivation behind conducting this research was triggered by a number of practitioner surveys which had cited the lack of senior female role models as a barrier to women's career progression. A perceived consequence of this was that women were leaving senior corporate positions (Hewlett, 2007) possibly denying themselves the opportunities of the most senior jobs, and certainly withdrawing many years of experience and intellectual capital from the organization. Academically, there was

little and incomplete explanation for this need of role models at senior levels. Initial review of the small body of role model literature (Gibson, 2003; 2004; Singh et al, 2006) led to the inclusion in this research of two related areas of enquiry:

- Work identity development (Ibarra, 1999; 2007) - as a possible explanatory factor behind the link between the lack of senior female role models and the lack of career progression; and
- Organizational demographics (Ely, 1994; 1995) - as the contextual factor explaining the lack of availability of attractive female role models.

This appeared to be a complex area with considerable knowledge gaps.

I therefore conducted a pilot study where I interviewed Heads of Diversity (HoDs) in the finance sector. I chose the finance sector as it has extreme gender demographic imbalances, particularly at more senior levels. I interviewed twelve HoDs as individuals charged with dealing with the lack of female role models, within their remit of ensuring equality of career opportunity for 'minority' groups such as women. In addition, if I were to take the research further, then the HoDs would be a good point of access to senior women. Findings confirmed that positive female role models are regarded as important by the HoDs, but that little is known about how they operate and therefore further research was warranted.

As I took a realist approach to this study, I was keen to explore the role model process described by senior women, to identify any underlying mechanisms that would yield a better understanding of this phenomenon and the way in which it manifested itself. I wanted to understand senior women's perceptions of the importance of role models for their future careers and their experiences of role models to date. In addition, I wanted to understand the processes behind the requirement for and utility of role models. Therefore, this study involved conducting semi-structured interviews with 33 senior female directors of six global investment banks – renowned for being very male-dominated environments. Drawing on a research gap identified in the literature, my main research question was *How do role models influence the formation of senior women's work identity in male-dominated firms?* In addition, I sought answers to the questions of: *What are role models?*, *Who are role models?*, and *How are role models used?*, in order to answer my original issue, which was to establish why they were important at senior levels.

The analysis of the interview data considered all three areas of role models, work identity development and demographic context. The findings showed what the interviewees believed to be the core elements of role models – what were the traits that made them choose an individual as a role model and who they were in relation to the individual. The interviewees also described how having, or not having role models may have influenced the women’s identity at work. What became apparent was that who they are and have become was informed by the critical relationships that they had had with their role models. The contextual element of organizational demographics clearly affected the availability of female role models with whom to have such relationships. I found that the ‘local’ demographics affected the dynamics of work groups, with women experiencing the well-documented “tokenism” effects of polarization, high visibility and high isolation. The women described how the ‘local’ demography above them demonstrated the lack of career prospects and most were not optimistic about their future career. However, in contrast to previous studies (Ely, 1994; Liff & Ward, 2001; Mavin, 2006) the women did not appear to be hostile towards each other, or to blame those women above them for not having created a better environment for women. The seniority and size of this sample of women is quite unusual, and highlighted some interesting socio-demographic differences and similarities, such as the longevity of tenure and the high proportion of those without children, and how many of them still struggled with issues such as self confidence and the balancing of “tough versus charming” aspects of their work styles.

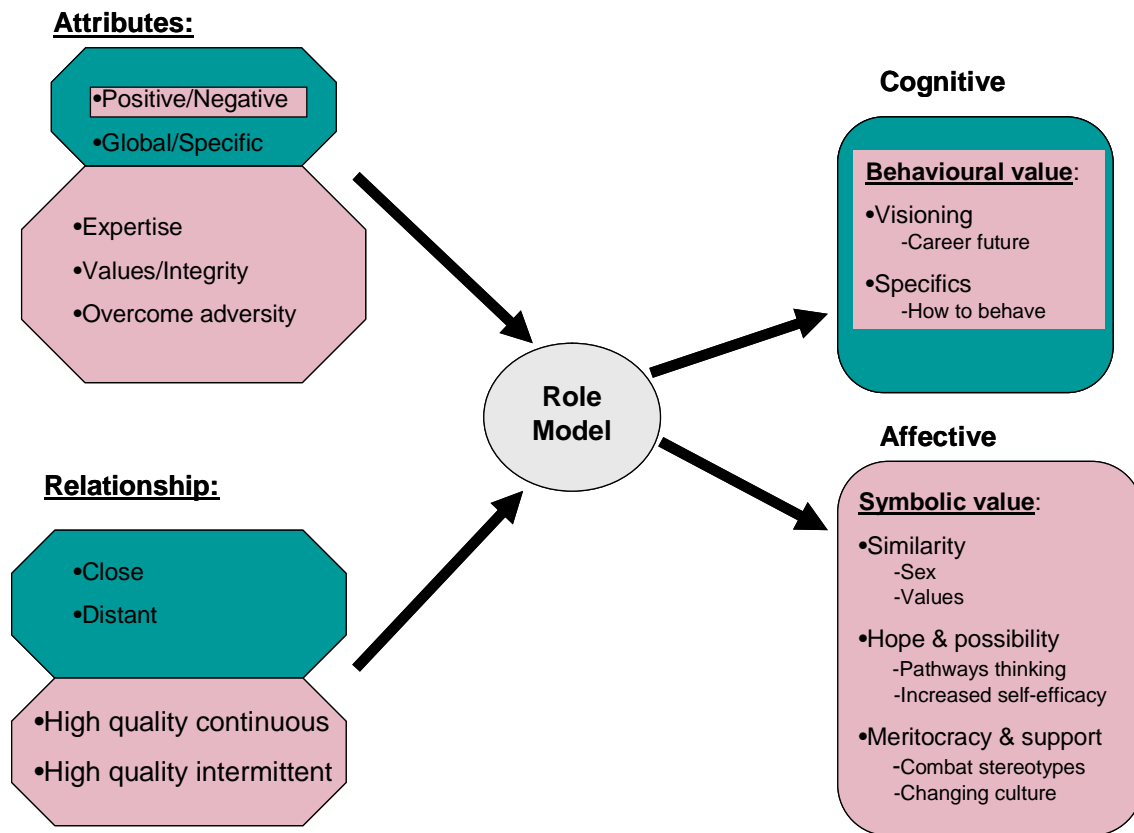
The findings empirically demonstrated how the three literature areas are interlinked: that the demographic context affects the lack of availability of positive senior female role models, whose utility is as a key antecedent to successful work identity development.

The conclusions and contributions of the thesis are emergent and complex, with recommendations for further investigation.

### **1.1.1 Conceptualization of Role Models**

The conceptualization of role models is the most theoretically discrete contribution that this study makes, substantially developing the previously limited understanding of the concept (see figure 9.1). The figure shows Gibson’s findings (in green), which

of his findings this study has confirmed (pink on green) and what is new from this study (pink).



**Figure 9:1 Contribution to the Conceptualization of Role Models**

This study extends the small amount of role model literature, from previous work taking a sociological perspective (Singh et al) or a cognitive psychological perspective (Gibson) to take a more management-oriented, organizational psychology perspective. It is empirical research, showing the importance of role models, conducted in real work environments with a senior management population.

This study used Gibson’s conceptualization of role models, defined in his 2003 and 2004 papers, as its starting point, and significantly extends his findings. In this study, the findings added the dimension of *what* are required attributes for an individual to be chosen as a role model. They also added some depth to the use of negative role models, in distinguishing between how the perception of negative acts or behaviours, as opposed to negative choices, affects whether the individual is used or rejected outright as a role model. The findings showed that women at all stages utilise negative role models. Interestingly, in terms of *who* the role model is in relation to the individual, what was significant in this study was not the geographical or



organizational distance suggested by Gibson, but that there had to be a relationship of some sort, before the woman could define the other individual as a role model. It did not appear to matter whether this was a continuous long relationship with regular contact, or an intermittent one with irregular brief periods of contact. Those women who had both types did not seem to value one over the other.

### **9.1.2 Affective Utility of Role Models**

In terms of outcome, utility or values of role models, Gibson focused entirely on the behavioural values of role modelling, as did Ibarra. In the pilot study the behavioural value was articulated on two levels, which were confirmed in this study:

- visions – e.g. what being in that role looks like, and
- specifics – e.g. vicariously learning how to respond to a particular situation.

Whilst the addition of the dimensions of *what* and *who* role models are, is interesting, and confirmation of the behavioural utility of role models is useful, this additional new knowledge does not answer the research question in full. However, what this study has particularly highlighted are the affective/symbolic outcomes of role models that may lead to change. It appears that these affective/symbolic outcomes are more pertinent to explaining *how* role models are useful. These new empirical findings are potentially of significant theoretical interest, and clearly warrant further future research. These affective values occur at both an organizational and individual level.

At an organizational level, positive senior female role models convey messages of **Meritocracy and Support** from the organization of the individual's development. Women looking above them make judgements about what they see is possible for themselves, which is likely to affect general self-efficacy (Chen, Gully & Eden, 2001). As illustrated in the pilot study and Ibarra's 2007 unpublished paper, organizations need to be cognizant of the role models or organizational success models they are putting forward, because the women do take messages from them about what being successful looks like in that company.

At an individual level, the second symbolic value of role models is that they represent **Hope and Possibility**. As is implicit in Ibarra's (1999) work on "provisional selves", and as is detailed by Carlsen and Pitsis (forthcoming) above, hope is a motive for positive identity construction in work. The importance for women in this study of role

models is as someone who embodies a sense of hope for them. This study confirms a large body of previous work on how women, particularly at the more senior levels feel isolated, and I have also discussed the body of literature that suggests women thrive on being more related. Therefore, when these women find themselves unable to relate to those above them, they may languish. In addition, the hope allows them to aspire to their Ideal Self (Boyatzis and Akrivou, 2006) and to continue to think of a future career in their current organization, where otherwise the lack of senior women was perceived in this study as evidence of its impossibility. Snyder talks about 'pathways thinking', which is the belief that a path to a hoped future is possible (Snyder, 2002). This relates to Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy, in that it is a realistic, feasible hope. Snyder also says that people with high hope, when they face obstructions to their goals, can find alternative routes. Given the amount of literature on women in management that lists career barriers to women, having high hope may clearly be important to find the alternative routes and navigate the "labyrinth of leadership" (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

It is the affective/symbolic value of **Similarity**, so prevalent in these findings, that allows individuals to conceive the notions of Hope and Possibility. Gibson suggested the importance of similarity, but did not define it, nor specify whether it was real, perceived or aspirational similarity. The women in this study defined Similarity on a case by case basis. It could include explicit and basic attributes such as being the same sex; specific things such as having gone to the same university; major things like motherhood; or as broad as being dissimilar from the norm (white male). Neither the concepts of reciprocity nor complementarity were mentioned. But it always included the implicit attribute of having similar "values". Analysis of the data showed some shared meanings as they deconstructed these values to consist of behaviours described as "apolitical", "authentic", "with integrity", "honest". These adjectives were consistently used when describing the actions of those defined as inspirational and many examples of this are given in findings chapters.

### **9.1.3 Role models and relational identification**

This study confirms the importance of Similarity as a utility of as well as a precursor to role models. The importance of Similarity for identification has been previously documented (O'Reilly & Chapman, 1986; Aron & Aron, 2000), and this broadens the

focus of the contribution. Recently Sluss and Ashforth (2008) have suggested the importance of Similarity as a precursor to the nascent concept of Relational Identification, but have not explored it. Empirical findings from this study confirm that Similarity is a key antecedent to the development of Relational Identification (RI) in the context of role modelling. Future research should investigate this in more depth.

Another important contribution this study makes is the proposition of the role and importance of RI as a mechanism that explains *how* the presence of role models is a key influence on women's work identity. In answering the research question of how role models affect women's work identity development, RI is proposed as a linking mechanism between the macro, structural level processes of the organization and the micro-level processes of the individual. Research on work identity dynamics is still in its infancy, is messy and emergent, "*an underdeveloped but high-potential concept*" (Gioia, 1998, pp.24). There is a need to integrate the levels of self (Prentice, 2001), and by linking role models and RI at an interpersonal, dyadic level, within the organizational context, this study contributes to the small empirical body of work answering that call (Cornelissen, Haslam and Balmer, 2007). From my realist perspective, it is the role and importance of the underlying mechanism of relational identification, explaining how the presence of positive female role models affects women's work identity development that is of key interest. These encouraging conclusions warrant further investigation.

Overall, the research suggests that, in relation to previous studies, role models and work identity development need to be considered together in order to answer the question of how role models influence the formation of senior women's work identity in male-dominated firms. Demographic context, i.e. the gender imbalance which is so striking in the male dominated firms studied here, highlights the salience of female role models.

## **9.2 Additional areas of contribution**

### *9.2.1 Women in management literature*

This empirical study adds to the Women in Management literature, suggesting more realistic, dynamic and relational processes to describe how women are experiencing

identity development at work. In addition, the seniority and size of this sample of women is quite unusual, and so adds to the small pool of research, giving detailed information about senior director-level women and their careers in substantial global organizations.

### *9.2.2 Demographics*

The study adds to existing knowledge on imbalanced demographics and highlights the importance of the “local”. The negative impact of the “local demographics” on the dynamics of the working group was clearly described. Different dynamics were experienced by one or two women who worked in more ‘female-friendly’ divisions such as Operations, building on Kanter’s (1977) notion of “clusters”. In addition, the impact of “local demographics” on career prospects was also illustrated, where “local” refers to the silo or division in which the woman works. For most of the women, looking hierarchically above them, there were insufficient numbers of more senior women for the provision of adequate role models. However, in contrast to previous studies, this study did not find evidence of womens’ hostility towards each other (Liff & Ward, 2001; Ely, 1994), or the presence of the ‘Queen Bee syndrome’ (Mavin, 2006).

## **9.3 Limitations of the study**

I acknowledge the limitations of this study. Some of the limitations are due to the biases inherent in the nature of this type of qualitative research. Semi-structured interviews can allow for researcher bias in leading the direction of the questions, and for social desirability bias in the selectivity of answers supplied by the interviewees (Bryman and Bell, 2007). The interviews were semi-structured, with six main questions, which were asked at every interview and a number of possible sub-questions, used intermittently. Whilst the semi-structured nature allows for some deviation, the majority of the interview is consistently the same across all 33 conducted.

The interviews were digitally recorded. This meant that as the interviewer I was able to pay full attention and actively listen to what the interviewee was saying (rather than my efforts being split between listening and capturing on paper what was being said).

This helped to reduce some researcher bias in the interpretation of what was being said, with the use of probing questions (e.g. “Can you explain exactly what you mean by that”, “That can mean different things to different people, what does it mean to you?”), asking for specific examples of incidences and behaviours, in order to clarify their meaning.

Also, as the interviews were recorded and transcribed, repetitive re-reading of the transcripts also helps address issues of researcher bias. Revisiting the transcripts multiple times displaces bias around my natural inclination to focus recollections on issues of particular interest to me, and helps mitigate recency effects (focusing on what was said towards the end of the interview, or the later interviews).

The sample was small and not randomly selected. However, with this size of sample, one is able to investigate a richness of information at a depth of analysis not conceivable for this type of project with a substantially larger number of interviews. The interviewees were purposively selected to represent women in mid- and upper-level careers in a male-dominated environment. Given how few women in those positions there are, it was a sample of convenience. I am aware of how ironic it is that given that most of the women battled with the issue of being the ‘token’ representative of their sex, the content of their interviews is to some extent being analysed as such – i.e. I cannot comment on what men in their position would say. However, as mentioned previously, this methodology looks at the collective experiences of the individuals, who in this case were all women.

Whilst undoubtedly the study reports on many similarities of experience between the women, I do acknowledge there were, of course, also individual differences between them. Table 4.1 in chapter 4 highlights the socio-demographic differences of the women in terms of age, nationality, marital status, family status, tenure in the organization and in the sector, as well as their organizational role in terms of hierarchical rank and whether they were ‘front’ or ‘back’ office. The different ways in which the 33 women experienced role models throughout their careers and the different issues they have struggled with are highlighted throughout the findings chapters 4-7. In addition, in chapter 4, table 4.3 summarises differences between the hierarchical levels of Executive Director (ED) and Managing Director (MD), and a sub-group of MDs, which I have called “Pioneers”, in terms of these experiences.

What this study does not do, however, is consider individual differences at a personality level. For example, I did not ask them to complete personality questionnaires, or try to measure such aspects as introversion/extraversion or “need for achievement” (McClelland, 1961), although some such differences were apparent and described in the findings chapters. Some aspects of personality were brought up in the interviews by some of the women – for example describing themselves and/or those around them as “very driven”, and some examples were given of how such traits were evident prior to entering banking. However, often such traits were described as requirements of either sex to be successful in the banking sector, not solely of women. The other area that the women did touch upon frequently was around differences in leadership style, but that was more concerned with work behaviours. Whilst I acknowledge with a sample that size there must obviously be individual differences, the research was looking for patterns to emerge in order to understand the work identity processes. However, one possible explanation for what might appear to be considerable homogeneity of the individuals may lie in the longevity of tenure. In order to survive in what appeared to be quite a hostile environment for such a long time, there may well be elements of the women having been ‘socialised in’ or alternatively others being ‘selected out’. Previous research has found that female CEOs need to adapt and fit the prevailing male culture (Nelson, 2004). Future research may wish to consider such individual personality differences – perhaps comparing men and women within the same sample, and/or personality differences between banking and other sectors.

The findings from this study are being reported as just that, the findings of this study. It would certainly be of interest in the future for me to utilise a sample that included others, in order to ascertain how much of what these women say is because they are women, as opposed to being ‘different’ from the norm, or a mid/late-career individual in an investment bank during uncertain times.

Bryman and Bell (2007; p.234) suggest that there is evidence that the characteristics of the interviewer can influence the responses of the interviewee, but that there is insufficient literature on this notion to make definitive generalizations. One of the challenges of this is in “disentangling the effects of interviewers’ different attributes from each other (race, gender, socio-economic status)”. In this study I am aware that I

had unrivalled access to an elite sample of senior women. I therefore felt that it was an advantage being the same sex (given the gendered nature of some of the interview topics), and of not too dissimilar age to many of my sample. It is possible that the sense of “homophily” (Ibarra, 1992) may have helped the women feel more comfortable during the interview, allowing them to open up and adding to the richness and honesty of the data collected. At least three of the sample described the interview as “*very therapeutic*” or “*like a therapy session*”! However, as Bryman and Bell (2007; p.235) conclude, whilst there probably was some influence of my characteristics, “the extent and nature of the impact are not clear and are likely to vary from context to context”.

I acknowledge that I approached the research with an assumption that the processes that were occurring around the importance of role models to these women were not entirely down to individual processes. I expected there to be some organizational responsibility in terms of both the current situation and the potential for change. I also recognise that the definition of role model used in this research may be construed as restrictive. I asked the women to describe anyone at work who had been inspirational. This obviously rules out other popular categories of people, such as public figures, celebrities, and family members (Singh et al, 2006). However, my endeavour was to understand the concept of role models, for women, in the work environment, so whilst perhaps important, these other categories were not relevant for this study.

## **9.4 Practical Implications**

Based on the findings from this study, alarm bells should be ringing for these organizations when they see that around half of their most senior women have serious reservations about what they see above themselves and what they believe is possible for their own careers. The implications for this in terms of self-efficacy and motivation are significant. The interviews were conducted between November 2007 and January 2008. I met a number of the interviewees again at the end of June 2008, at a breakfast meeting hosted by one of the women, to present to them some initial findings. At that point in time, just six months later, eight of the 33 (24%) women had already left their positions – some voluntarily, some as a result of the initial downturn in the banks. Two present at the breakfast were also talking about leaving – as one of

the women said, the downturn was like “*the straw on the camel’s back – it was hard enough in the good times*”. At that point, the collective number of ‘banking years’ of experience lost was already over 200! This was prior to the collapse of one of the banks, with the loss of jobs for a further five of my interviewees. A report in McKinsey Quarterly in July 2008 showed that despite the economic downturn, European banks face a major talent shortage in their more senior and critical positions. Suggesting that the 13 banks investigated were not making progress in managing talent effectively, the report warned that within three years there was expected to be a talent gap of 25-40% of senior executive positions (Putzer, Sermpetis, and Tsopelas, 2008).

In the light of the relevance of the ‘critical relationship’, and the link suggested by Sluss & Ashforth (2008) between relational identification and organizational identification, the role of the positive role models appears to be significant in the retention and commitment (Gibson and Barron, 2003) of high value individuals.

In addition, from some of these findings and some of the work on relational identification, one of the implications for organizations to consider is how they spend their resources in terms of developing the individual. One thing that was clear from the MDs who were sent on a course at an American business school was that whilst it was considered very interesting, the biggest perceived benefit came from the relationships that these women made with each other. This will benefit them through the ways that they can conduct business, and also encourage organizational commitment (Sluss & Ashforth, 2008). Rather than sending valued employees to open programmes, perhaps businesses should think about reverting more resources to internal development, with managers playing a more active role. As well as the benefits of transfer of learning, there could be a focus placed on the building of more positive relationships within the work environment.

One organization stood out in this study in terms of being different in its promotion of relational ways of working – e.g. the focus on teams at one of the banks. This was not just a cliché espoused by the bank, but a real and different way of working, that was clearly embedded within the organization’s culture. A number of women at other banks had been overtly criticised for taking too developmental an attitude towards their teams – criticism which they viewed as nonsensical, bad for business and



personally inauthentic. The women I interviewed at the ‘team-focused’ bank were much more comfortable with this way of working, in comparison to ways of working experienced in previous organizations or heard about from others. And this was not about the organization being “soft and fluffy”, as this bank has a reputation for being the most “hard-nosed”. Interestingly, in the current banking crisis, this bank is being discussed as having suffered the least.

As illustrated in the pilot study (Sealy, 2008), and Ibarra’s unpublished 2007 paper, organizations need to be cognizant of the role models or organizational success models they are putting forward, because women do take messages from them about what being successful looks like in that company. The impact of promoting the ‘wrong’ role models was hinted at in the HoD study and clearly confirmed in this one. Arguably some of the Heads of Diversity were getting it wrong in terms of the types of women they thought should be sponsored as role models, showing many of the negative role model traits described in this study, including some *Superwomen*. What was clear from these findings was how those women were rejected outright as role models, and the negative impact in terms of messages, parading them can have.

For the individual women, one implication from the findings may be just to reiterate the utility of having high quality relationships with at least one woman. Whilst there were some women in the sample who were undoubtedly successful in their careers without having had a female role model, there were many questions around the holistic “success” of them as an individual – from their own perspective. Additionally, without wishing to place any onus on women that they *must* be role models for other women, if they feel they are, then they should endeavour to be mindful of the honesty and whole picture that most women want and need to see in other women in order to benefit from full utilisation of a role model. There was at least one woman who on the one hand felt she had to deliver an “everything’s-under-control-and-its-all-fine” image to those below her, whilst later being very clear that those role models in her career from whom she had gained most benefit had been those of whom she had seen “warts-and-all”. Women neither believe in nor aspire to be the ‘perfect woman’, or the Superwoman.

## 9.5 Future Research

This study used a small and highly-specialised sample, and therefore, the findings are not generalisable on the importance of role models, outside of the particular context of this research. In general discussion about this subject, people often ask the question “men don’t need role models, so why should women?” Speculatively, one could say that men do have a breadth of role models to choose from in most working environments, and, indeed, much is made in the popular press about the importance of similar role models for young black men, which would suggest it is an issue for minorities.

Another important context is the culture – although it has been argued that the culture is affected by the demographic context (Sheppard, 1989). Investment banks are widely regarded as having very macho, aggressive cultures. In which case, future research could ask the same questions in organizations which are still male-dominated but perhaps not so macho in culture. And if the important contextual factor is the demographics, in terms of being a ‘token’, how much of that is gendered and how much is about ‘otherness’? In order to answer this question similar research would need to be conducted with individuals from “out-groups” – e.g. disabled, non-European, non-white, whatever is considered ‘different’ in a given environment.

This study has highlighted the importance of a specific type of developmental relationship in women’s careers. Future research might also consider to what extent the lack of or demise of such critical relationships played a part in women being unsuccessful and/or leaving the organization (given that this research focused on the successful women, who have stayed). This would again provide more useful information on retention issues.

Analysis of the findings from this study, has led me, as a researcher, into the relatively under-developed theoretical areas of relational identification, positive work relationships and the role of hope in organizational lives. These are all areas which I find incredibly exciting and all have a clear need for more empirical research within the reality of organizational settings.

## 9.6 Post script

Researching and writing a PhD is a long and arduous task, and given the longevity of the whole process (in my case four and a quarter years), the individual at the end of the journey is likely to be somewhat different from that at the start. I have undoubtedly undergone my own transitions in work identity, from a former entrepreneur and consultant, to an ignorant student, a researcher, an 'expert', and hopefully soon to be a member of academic faculty. In addition and simultaneously I have also become a mother during the PhD process, twice over, and moved from the 'New Mum' identity, with all its excitement and affirmation, to the rather more mundane ongoing challenges of mixing parenthood and working.

Academically, I have obviously learned enormous amounts. At the start I was not convinced of the validity of the concept of role model as an important part of organizational life, and more than once questioned the purpose of this research. Fortunately, as my knowledge grew, I began fully to understand the intricacies of how so many aspects are woven together in the experience of organizational life. The process has taken me from my business perspective of the organization back to that of the psychologist of my original training. And in learning about ontological and epistemological philosophies, I have thoroughly enjoyed questioning and understanding my own standpoint.

As this journey draws to a close, I am fortunate in that it has sparked off a number of other areas of research interest for me, which I hope I will now be able to take forward. I am also fortunate to have formed some academic connections with others whose work I have found inspiring. But possibly the most powerful impactful feature of this journey has been the opportunity of having 33 highly intelligent, successful women share their personal experiences of life and work - each remarkable in both her ordinariness and her extraordinary achievements. For that I am sincerely grateful.

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## **APPENDICES**

### **1.1 Pilot study paper – presented at American Academy of Management Annual Meeting, Anaheim, August 2008.**

#### **THE IMPORTANCE OF FEMALE ROLE MODELS FOR SENIOR WOMEN IN INVESTMENT BANKS**

**Ruth Sealy**

##### **ABSTRACT**

The lack of senior female role models continues to be cited as a key barrier to women's career success (Catalyst, 2007). As part of a larger project looking at the experience of senior women in banking organizations, Diversity Directors were interviewed to gain their perspective on why female role models are important to women. The behavioural value of role models has been well-documented by others, but is often not gender-specific. Building on contemporary literature on the construction of role models, organisational demography and work identity formation, this paper seeks to understand the additional "symbolic" value of female role models in a male-dominated workforce.

**Keywords:** Role models, Identity Formation, Women's Career Progression

##### **INTRODUCTION**

Role models are reported as vital for the success of young managers, and yet there is little research into the gendered aspects of this phenomenon in business settings. Only recently has evidence shown the importance of role models in mid- and late career (Gibson, 2003, 2004), and a number of articles have begun to progress the understanding of the process and the relevance of role models work identity. With very few women holding top positions, women (and men) do not see women's managerial capital being valued, and the masculine stereotype is likely to remain as a significant barrier for women.

In this paper I will review some of the pertinent literature in the fields of role models, organizational demography and work identity formation, and give a brief outline of the method used for this part of the project. Building on previous knowledge on the use of role models at a behavioural level, the findings section will focus on the specific area of the symbolic value of role models. A discussion then ensues of these findings in the context of organizational demographics and work identity formation, before final conclusions are drawn. Appropriate role models are important for career progression (Ibarra, 1999) and increase organisational commitment and job satisfaction in older employees (Gibson & Barron, 2003). Work identities are socially constructed and career progressions create a necessity for renegotiating one's professional identity through the mechanism of "possible selves" (Ibarra, 1999). Identification with role models infuses behaviours with meaning and purpose, providing more motivation to change. Ibarra's study highlighted the value of role models, but there was a scarcity of senior females and Ibarra found this constrained the attractive identity matches for women, making it harder for them to learn.

Without women at the top, there is no evidence for women that it is possible for them to succeed within that work environment. Gibson & Cordova (1999) showed that visible role models of women in authority could be associated with an increase in women's ambitions, not because the exemplars prompt the individual women to increase their career aspirations, but because, by their presence, they start to change the old gender schematic vision of status and power (Ragins & Sundstrom, 1989).

Organisations are social environments and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner 1975) is the knowledge of the sense of who one is, defined in terms of *we* rather than *I*, as part of a social group or clustering. It explains how social and psychological factors combine to determine the action individuals take in order to achieve a positive social identity, or to

assimilate the evaluation of selves as inferior and less-deserving. Eagly's (1987) social role theory and Eagly & Karau's (2002) gender role theory explain how both sexes are expected to behave in manners consistent with societal gender roles. And, because leadership is still construed in masculine agentic terms, this presents a substantial barrier to women aspiring to such positions, as this requires violation of prescribed roles. Social identity theory defines and explicates the processes of gender identity formation. Research on organisational demography and power addresses the context of the working environment that influences those processes.

In her 1994 seminal work, Ely looked at the impact of women's proportional representation at the top of organisations and the effect it had on the relationships among other women in that firm. In 1977, Kanter observed the asymmetric power within an organisation, part of a culture where the majority dominated and marginalised the minority, and where structures emerged to preserve this situation. The concepts of "homophily" and "tokenism" were based on the premise that people prefer to work with similar others. Women became "tokens" when in a numerical minority of less than 15%. Through processes including assimilation, stereotyping, polarisation and exaggeration, women became both highly visible and isolated. Kanter suggested that balanced representation at peer level would reduce sex-role stereotyping. But Ely purported this was not the case unless there were women in positions of authority, as "*sex may persist as a salient category with negative consequences for women lower down in the organisation*" (1995).

In a recent theoretical article by Sluss & Ashforth (Sluss and Ashforth, 2007) the concepts of relational identity and identification are used to explain how employees define themselves and construct identity through work relationships. This builds on models of role theory and social identity theory by focusing on the interpersonal level, in an attempt to integrate the personal and collective levels of identity. They propose that interpersonal relationships are

simultaneously informed and influenced by both person-based and role-based identities, giving a more holistic understanding of a worker's experience. An article by Kreiner, Hollensbe & Sheep (2006b) looks at how individuals in demanding occupations actively negotiate the construction of their identities. Similar to the Sluss & Ashforth paper, they discuss the processes used to achieve an optimal balance between overidentification and individuation or under-identification, by differentiating or integrating individual and social identities. This interesting paper creates a conceptual model using Lewin's Field Theory to describe the processes of identity construction. In essence the paper explicates what the authors see as the various forces that interact to create a "field" or context in which individuals and groups operate. By identifying these forces, Lewin believed we could understand *why* individuals behave and react as they do. As will be seen later, this is relevant to the Behavioural and Symbolic elements of role models described in this study – these are the forces that help us understand better why individuals behave/react as they do and what the implications of strengthening or weakening these forces would be in terms of changed behaviour.

Pratt, Rockman & Kaufmann (2006) conducted a six-year qualitative study of medical residents in the US to build a theory of identity construction. Like that of Kreiner et al, this paper explains processes of identity construction, triggered by work-identity integrity violation: a mismatch between what they did and who they were – the importance of the relationship between "doing" and "being" among professionals, and the impact of the organization context. Like Ibarra they found that role models were critical to learning. However, unlike Ibarra they did not find that the junior doctors tried on "possible selves" based on multiple role models. Rather they found that "*role model choice was based more on a justification or validation of an existing or emerging identity*" (p.255). As Kahn noted

(1990), work becomes meaningful when one's "preferred self" can be expressed through one's work and one's membership in an organization. Pratt et al (2006) argue that "*achieving alignment between identity and work is a fundamental motivator in identity construction*" (p.255). This issue of being "true to oneself" and the necessity of role models to have "integrity" was one reported frequently in this study.

A further recent and relevant paper, by Lockwood (2006) looks at whether or not women and men are more inspired by same-sex role models, than gender mismatched ones. The study showed that women are inspired by outstanding women in their field, although not by outstanding men. Lockwood suggests that female role models are particularly inspiring in situations where they are in the minority, as in this research, as they both provide evidence the barriers can be overcome, and may be an important means of undermining negative gender stereotypes. However, from previous literature and this study, the efficacy of the role models would presumably depend on how "similar" they are perceived to be. Lockwood's results also suggested that men do not need role models as they do not face the same career barriers, and do not have the same need for exemplars of success. Whilst an interesting study there are limitations of generalisability as the subjects were undergraduates and it was experimental in design. Lockwood suggests that future research should look at the long-term effects of role models on women's career performance, and to assess whether same-sex role models are important in non-traditional careers, such as investment banking studied here.

A further recent study looking directly at role models is that by (Murrell and Zagenczyk, 2006). As previously mentioned, research on organisational demography and power suggests that the demographic context of the working environment influences women's identification processes as managers. In addition, as in this study, the perceived availability of female role models may itself be influenced by the gendered nature of the organizational context affecting

how role models are defined. The perceived attractiveness of these role models would clearly affect relational identification. The stated findings of Murrell & Zagenczyk's study were that in order to be considered as a role model, women needed to give (but not ask for) advice, have earned organizational rewards (i.e. pay and status), hold leadership positions, and maintain strong ties with other employees. In contrast, in order to be seen as a role model, men only needed to have a number of friendship or advice ties. Whilst these findings appear interesting, the definition of "role model" used in this study is questionable. However, the authors' claim that women have to do more than men to establish their legitimacy is in line with findings of other studies (see below). Interestingly, the issue of whether or not someone who asks for advice (as opposed to just gives advice) can be seen as a role model also came up in the descriptions of senior women in this study.

That women have to do more than men to establish legitimacy is not new, but what Heilman and Okimoto's (2007) study looks at are the reasons underlying this. Their study replicates previous work showing that when performance levels are ambiguous, women are perceived to be less competent than men in male gender-typed work, thus leading to discriminatory practices. And when performance is unambiguous, women are then disliked and seen as undesirable bosses. Women who are successful in traditionally male domains violate gender stereotypes, and their perceived lack of feminine attributes causes negative reactions.

However, if there is clear evidence of that woman's communal traits, which need not be displayed, but can be inferred by roles such as motherhood, Heilman and Okimoto found these negative reactions can be abated. This study shows that it is possible for successful women to be seen as both agentic and communal, previously considered mutually exclusive, and that it is "*the women's perceived violation of feminine "shoulds", not their taking on of masculine "should nots" that underlies and fuels the penalties these women incur for their*



*success*” (p.91). Twenty years ago, the women in management roles would try hard not to accentuate their differences from men, their femininity. There is substantial literature (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Cuddy, Fiske & Glick, 2004; Carli, LaFleur & Loeber, 1995) suggesting that women perceived as communal were also presumed incompetent at supposedly male tasks. Yet this study shows the double-edge sword, that women in the workplace have felt in more recent years that without showing those feminine qualities they are disliked by their colleagues (male and female), and rejected as possible role models by women below them (Singh, Vinnicombe & James, 2006; Heilman, 2001). Evidence of both of these examples can be seen in the present research study, set in a very male domain, as women search for exemplars of how to demonstrate both agentic and communal traits.

### **METHOD**

This study consisted of semi-structured interviews with Heads of Diversity (HoDs) from 11 banks – 2 retail banks, 2 fund management firms, and 7 investment banks - to ascertain some of their opinions regarding the importance of role models in their organizational context and the career progression of their senior women. In establishing the HoDs’ views on why senior female role models are important, questions asked included:

- What is the HoDs' perception of the senior women in their organization?
- In what, if any, way does their organization promote particular women as role models?
- In what ways would women’s experience at work change if there were more senior women in this organization?
- Do the HoDs think that women in their organization believe they can be promoted to the top level of their organization?

All but one of the interviews was face-to-face, the one being by telephone. One interview involved both the Group Head of Diversity UK ,and the Non-UK Head. Of the twelve people interviewed, four were men. Permission was gained from all of the interviewees to record and transcribe the interview. The 11 interviews had an average length in time of exactly 60 minutes, which when transcribed gave an average of 17 pages of transcript. Nvivo 7.0 was used to aid the coding process.

### **FINDINGS - THE IMPORTANCE OF ROLE MODELS**

Most of the HoDs were aware of industry and other surveys citing the significance of the lack of role models, and at least two had had similar findings within their own organizational surveys. So why do the HoDs think that role models are perceived by women to be so important?

#### **Behavioural Values**

We know from studies by Ibarra, Bandura and others that the possibility of behavioural modeling is important in making upward career transitions. From the coding it emerged that HoDs perceive there to be two elements of behavioural modeling. The first was about **visioning**, or the bigger picture – what does being a senior woman look like, *demytifying the career path*, and what does juggling career and life look like. The other element was about **how to**, specific examples of real problems encountered, how individuals coped (or not) with particular challenges, and specific developmental tips. These elements together were described as *professional role modeling* and the point was made that many of the benefits of such modeling were not gendered. Some benefits were though, for example, what juggling motherhood and career looked like, and specific career tips relating to things women were perceived as not being good at – e.g. the value of networking. This professional role modeling was also referred to as *practical support* (HoD1).

Gibson distinguished between the differing values of **close** and **distant** role models. These two elements of behavioural modeling could be related to distant (visioning) and close (how to). The example below illustrates one HoD's belief in the necessity of close role models, in terms of organizational silo.

HoD11: ... *we work in little fiefdoms. And a woman wants somebody who's in her bit of the business, who she can see how they handled that bit with those clients...*

### **Symbolic Values**

The behavioural value of role models and vicarious learning is well-documented and confirmed in the analysis of this study. However, in addition to the **behavioural** values of role models, the HoDs talked in great depth, producing substantial rich data about the **symbolic** value of role models. From the iterative coding process, it emerged that role models provide symbolic value on four levels:

- firstly for the individuals looking at other individuals, illustrating concepts such as *possibility* and *similarity*;
- secondly for the individuals looking at the organization, illustrating concepts such as *meritocracy*;
- thirdly at the external organizational level, in terms of messages given to outside stakeholders; and
- fourthly at the internal organizational level, in terms of communicating messages about, and perpetuating internal change.

**Individual to individual.** For example, at the individual symbolic level, role models signify possibility and similarity. Work on self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) demonstrates that

when people believe in the possibility of their success, they are more likely firstly to try, and secondly to succeed.

**Possibility:** HoDs talked about *hope, that it's not an impossible dream*, and motivation.

HOD5a: *it's a hugely positive sign, a clear line of sight, a symbol of possibility.*

HoD1: *I guess if you've had some of those negative messages, you probably need to see someone proving that it's not true.*

**Similarity:** Previous research has proposed that personalization of role models is important, increased perceived similarity and/or attraction increases the influence of the person-based identity on the role relationship. The more similar or attractive (at person or role level) the role model appears, the more likely the individual is to identify with them (Aron & Aron, 2000). Much of what the HoDs were saying would appear to support these ideas.

HoD2: *So the more of you there are at that level, the more likely it is that someone will find, or a senior woman will find something to aim for that they can have some kind of understanding with... oh I could be like that person...*

Perceived similarity leads to identification. This is more complex than copying someone else's behaviour or trying on someone else's shoes, because it encompasses the concepts of *authenticity* or *being true to oneself*.

HoD10: *...it's proof that those unique characteristics, unique strengths can get to the top of the tree... looking at a female means that hopefully those differences have been recognized, and that gives more hope for us to be true to our selves, rather than to try and emulate male characteristics, in order to climb the ladder*

HoD2: *So there is a reluctance on a lot of women. They don't want to be what they are not...*

This is why the demographics are important:

HoD11: *You've only got the one or two people there so if you don't happen to be exactly the same as them or that's not really your cup of tea because actually for example the woman up there is really glamorous, dressed always in a Chanel suite and you're a tomboy, you're not going to find that particularly easy to imagine that you know... whereas with a guy he's got a range to choose from.*

So similarity provides an *emotional* support (as opposed to the *practical* support of behavioural modeling):

The issue of similarity is a complex one, as it can be defined on so many levels. For some the “like me” was very tangible, and as basic as biological sex:

HoD1: *another woman kind of instinctively has more resonance for me than a senior male role model because I feel like I'm more connected with them and I've got more in common with them, just because they're a women, sometimes... Even though, of course, some women are nothing like me at all.*

For others, it was more about having similar values and approaches to work and life, or having similar life-circumstances. One HoD had been told by other women that she was a role model for them:

HoD11: *...one person did say there aren't very many women around like you. You're a mother but at the same time I'm a single mother because I got divorced so I'd proved I suppose that that kind of thing can be done but at the same time I don't have a live-in nanny... so I'm not like the women they see who have got*

*children but have got several house helps... No, it's me who has to do the washing at midnight when I'm exhausted. So I think they feel that there's somebody real who they can associate more with in terms of their own lives...*

HoD8 talked about how the importance of having similar life experiences served the purpose of building

*HoD8: ...a bridge of connection to you... the powerful things about role models is the connection of experiences, can you connect in some way with their experience to be effective.*

This linkage, this connection is another element that helps motivate individuals to believe they can be like that individual.

There were also a number of examples illustrating the negative effects of women who were perceived to be too *dissimilar* or *unattractive*, that negated the value of *possibility*. A number of organizations gave examples of there being some senior women who took the attitude of *well I've had four children and worked all the hours so I don't understand why someone else can't do it*"(Case1), suggesting a rationalist argument. However, the majority of the HoDs did not buy into this attitude, as often these women were considered *unreal*, in as much as they may have a stay-at-home husband, an entourage of home-help, or no family of their own, and so had just *copied the male model*. Most HoDs recognized that whilst this may have been something women of the older generation were prepared to do, this was either not something that younger women would now accept, or could relate to as a role model of how to succeed.

One HoD discussed the possibility of senior roles being *unattractive* to women:

*HoD7: some of the behaviours that it was perceived were required to be successful in those roles, weren't necessarily behaviours that some people could identify with.*

These behaviours were things like being *directive*, and *autocratic*, and *that work-life balance went out the window*. By putting the onus on the individuals as their choice whether to *play the game*, or *accept the model*, there is a sense of the HoD liberally stepping away from the responsibility of that choice. However, HoD7 did talk about changing the model, but still left the onus of that to the individual:

HoD7: ... *it's not the role itself, it's just the way that it's being currently done by the majority of people...and, therefore, not to put too fine a point on it, you know, you probably don't need to change the role, you just need to move some of the people and show how it can be done in a different way.*

As Sluss & Ashforth said “*the valence of the person-based identity may color the valence of the role-based identity*” (2007, p.23) and HoD7 is suggesting that it is the individuals inhabiting the roles that were unattractive. Whilst these HoDs are saying the women can *choose* not to accept the current model, they are not suggesting an alternative one. This then leaves the option of the status quo or *off-ramping* (Hewlett, 2007) or down-sizing their career. Two of the HoDs in the study described how they had downsized their careers after having children. One of them stated that since then she has seen senior women manage to maintain their roles through flexi-time or 4-day weeks. Had she had those role models, she said she would not have made the same choices today, thus underlining the very real impact of senior female role models.

**Organization to individual.** When women look at the organization, the presence or lack of senior female role models has a symbolic value in illustrating concepts such as *meritocracy* and support for their development. Some HoDs talked about the organization needing to prove that women can succeed:

HoD10: *If there are more women, then this is evidence that the organization is serious about diversity... I think for the senior women it's different, because they're already there, so they don't need to see the same things, but it's about **the business keeping up the pace...that the company will continue to support them**...And for the junior women they can see the more senior women will be looking after our interest... But for the senior women, there aren't any executive board members... We have two non-executive women, but I don't know if they are role models, they're not really involved...*

HoD10 makes a very important point about the more senior women needing to see that there is still further for them to go, and then realizing that that evidence is not currently available in her own organization. HoD9 used the word *Meritocracy*, which is a powerful, values-based word:

HoD9: *it's linked to the idea of meritocracy and it's almost linked to an unconscious ideal. If you don't see people who are similar to you in some way, and gender's a very powerful form of identity, if you don't see people similar to you in positions of power ...I'd be thinking why... this is the place for females at the lower end, why are there no females on the senior end? **That would influence my thinking, my identity in terms of my role within this company.***

*So for me, the importance of female role models is saying that it's linked to the idea of meritocracy. If you don't have a clear female pipeline, and a clear succession and clear females within leadership, one questions is there a fair meritocratic process and why is it not occurring that females are rising within the organization? **So the lack of role models, it's a lack of meritocracy.***



Women pick-up messages about the viability of their career success from the organization. These will have an impact on the woman's belief about potential career achievements. It is likely that this in turn will affect her choices about how to respond at critical career decision points. An interesting result of talking to the HoDs was that they have a privileged viewpoint on the organizations' recruitment and promotion processes. A number of them are, themselves, female mid/senior managers and so this information is likely to affect their own perceptions of likelihood of career success within their organization. Whilst most of the HoDs believed there was no direct discrimination within their organizations, most admitted to some indirect discrimination within their recruitment and promotion processes. HoD1 gave an example of asking colleagues for suggestions of who should fill a particular role. Her colleagues all came back with male names. When she suggested a certain female, they all agreed that was the right choice.

HoD1: *...they all agreed but just none of them had thought of her.*

She put this down to *assumptions* and thinking of others similar to themselves.

*Whereas actually, somebody could do it a bit differently, might be a woman and they might not have thought of them... It's not that they deliberately cut them out of it, it's that they don't think of it sometimes.*

This illustrates how male dominated senior ranks may be perpetuated. This HoD recognizes that a fundamental change is required in terms of the understanding of what a senior hire looks like.

**External organizational level.** There is an intrinsic value for the organization of being able to present senior female role models to the external world. A variety of stakeholders, for example clients, shareholders and potential employees were mentioned. The way that one of

the banks spoke about the value of role models was very much as being part of the marketing machine, both internally and externally:

*HoD5b: ...an external brand proposition...we're building our brand in the belief that different cultures and different walks of life are valued... some organisations see the whole diversity issue as a bolt-on, and we're differentiated in that we're putting it right at the heart of the brand.*

HoD 5a and 5b saw themselves as *internal brand managers*. Unfortunately, to some extent it felt like their approach was a little too concerned with “spin” and throughout the whole interview very little was said concerning what they were actually doing to change the current situation as opposed to just the perception of the situation. However, given the powerful nature of the symbolic value of role models, who is to say that this in itself does not have a positive effect for the women in that organization?

**Internal organizational level.** Many of the HoDs also recognized the value of senior female role models in both making change and signaling (to both men and women in the organization) that changes are being made. Interestingly, two of the HoDs appeared to take a “seen to be doing something is better than nothing” approach, having admitted:

*HoD1: that we don't why we can't get women at the top level, actually. And that [role models] kind of seems like one of the things to pick on*

To some extent this could be seen as a rationalization of their role, or *institutionalized behaviour* of just doing things because this is what other similar organizations are doing (six of the organizations were part of an inter-bank diversity forum, which met regularly). However, other HoDs were clearer about the messages they wanted to portray. One HoD spoke of wanting to counteract some negative beliefs regarding

diversity, and make a statement of meritocracy, to the whole of the organization. Other HoDs were quite clear about needing more senior women to *influence decision-making*, for example in the recruitment processes already mentioned, changing *the definition of talent, the definition of success*; or to make real changes to team dynamics and ways of working. Two of them talked about a cascade effect when senior women are appointed.

*HoD3: there are pockets of very senior women who have pockets of senior women underneath them, it just seems to go like that... I think there is something significant in senior women allowing... Now who knows, is it the fact that they're more empathetic and they are more constructive when they recruit and interview and can see the value of women, so are providing opportunities for women? Is it that women apply for a role to work for a senior woman? ...X has a great reputation and I have worked with many women who ...want to be under her leadership, and men actually as well. So good leadership I think creates magnetism.*

*HoD11: If you have more senior female managers I would anticipate that they would be more likely to pick mixed teams because it's not strange to them to imagine a woman in a position working with them. Whereas, I think men might not chose the women. The sort of top down and bottom up bit.*

So having more senior females is considered symbolic at the organizational level of changing the culture:

*HoD3: I guess the influence with the peer group at the role model level. So...it's the woman in the room of 40 [men], she's breaking the mould... changing the mind set of the male peers...who are potentially managing other women coming*

*up through...so, it's a bit like in the early days of us trying to progress life balance and flexible working, we just said, "look we just need some great examples of flexible working where it works, then we'll celebrate those and gradually it will break the mould". It's not dissimilar, to, in my time, I've worked in environments where everybody smoked...and you just can't imagine that now.*

## **DISCUSSION**

### **The Organizational Demographics**

Based on the work of Ely, Ibarra & Gibson over the past decade, an initial idea behind the study was that the conception and construction of role models is affected by the demographic context in which the women work. From the literature, the suggestion was that in contexts with few senior women, the role models that exist are predominantly used for their behavioural value. This only partially fulfils the benefits of a role model, that of the *how to*, or practical elements. It is proposed here that there is also a symbolic value of role models, manifested in perceived similarity or attractiveness of the model to the individual, which aids identification and identity development. This more emotional element of role models is equally important, but not so readily available in organizational contexts with very few senior women. The idea behind using different types of banking organization was that anecdotal evidence suggests that they have different demographics – in Investment Banks (IB) the numbers of senior women are notoriously small; in Retail Banking there is traditionally an overall majority of women, and although still a minority at more senior levels, considered better than IB; and in Fund Management there is a belief that it is easier for women to reach the senior positions than in IB. These ideas seemed conveniently neat, however I encountered a number of challenges. The first problem faced was that, despite having been sent the research proposal, which clearly stated that the project is looking at organizational demographics, most of the organizations refused to share that information. One IB gave me full and clear figures on the numbers of

women throughout her organization at each grade. Two of the organizations verbally told me, but asked for them not to be reported, and the others would not share the information. The second problem, which became apparent throughout the interviews was the question of how meaningful would comparisons be, even with the demographics at organizational level, due to the differing size, type, parent culture, and functional differences. For example, even within the two fund management firms, one is a small, specialized and highly academic organization with a total of only 2000 employees, 700 of whom are UK based; the other is a part of a much larger global organization, of 56,000 employees, covering all types of financial services. One of the IBs has 350,000 employees. Only two of the organizations are retail banks in the UK, although two of IBs have a retail arm in another country. Another IB does not have retail but has a credit card division. Most of the organizations operate globally, and some have US/EU parent companies. All of the organizations said there was a difference in the demographics between front office/producing and back-office/support divisions, and so the spread of the nature of the bank's business affects the overall demographics.

The study has showed that the division of banks by function is not so clear-cut in reality, which is a function of prior ignorance of the sector. However, in part 2 of study (which involves 30 interviews with senior women across just six investment banks) the level of analysis is the individual senior woman and therefore how she sees her world, and the appropriate "local" demographics therein will be significant. Demographics across the bank may be of limited value to individual women, as the banks operate in a very siloed manner. In most cases, the senior women are still few and far between and are very aware of how many women are at their level and above them. These "local" demographics are what are likely to be relevant for them.

### **Women's Work Identities**

“Since they perceived that either *acting like a man* or *acting like a woman* is likely to backfire or reduce their credibility, many choose a neutral or protective stance” (Ibarra, 2007, p.22)

Issues raised by the descriptions of senior women and role models include definitions of what women need to *see* above them in their organization, and on a more ontological level, what do they need to *be*. Part of this includes the question of what is “feminine”? It was a concept that many HoDs mentioned, and yet the parameters of their descriptions were quite different. For some it was something visible as in appearance, including the element of “softness” when talking about image, dress or tone of voice. For others, it was something about the women’s manner or air, or ways of working and being with colleagues, using words such as *warm*, *gregarious*, *fragrant*, or just *lovely to have around*.

The fact that these descriptions of the feminine are all positive is evidence of changing perceptions of how women should be, in the workplace, and how far things have come from women’s initial foray into the world of management in the 1980’s. Then the emphasis was on the necessity for them to demonstrate male behaviour, to “have balls”, and join in the male game. Women could be either “organizational playthings or quasi men” (Hopfl & Matilal, 2007). Career success then, for some women, came at a cost of a lack of authenticity. One question to be considered is whether this situation is changing to one of women being accepted for whom they are, or is the swing too far the other way in that women need to demonstrate femininity, as suggested by the Heilman & Okimoto study mentioned. One example of a very senior woman who put heavily scented lilies on her desk everyday had clearly made a big impact on the HoD in that organization, to the extent that she felt it was an intentional *statement* of femininity, as in Giddens’s (1991) Identity Enactment Theory, which describes the behavioural repetition of something that makes a statement about one’s identity. The HoD

talked about the act in admiration, almost as if it were a conscious act of bravado, rather than just the woman being herself. An explanation of this possible trumpeting of the feminine statement could be the social identity strategy of “social creativity” (Tajfel, 1981), which reinterprets low status group characteristics – e.g. female traits – as positive and distinctive from the high status group (men). Ashforth & Kreiner (1999) found evidence of this in their paper on “dirty work”, where people found a way of maintaining favourable self-evaluations, whilst doing unattractive work. In line with social identity theory, by positioning the comparison of women to men in such a way that exploits the positive distinctiveness of their gender, women manage the threat to their identity. One could argue that this is a function of the demographics in that if the demographics were more equal, then women’s identity would not be threatened and therefore they would not have to emphasise the positive distinctiveness of their gender, as demonstrated by Ely’s (1994, 1995) papers.

In addition, there was an example of a (male) HoD making more disparaging remarks about *retained femininity* which was described as *not bothering with the long hair or the make-up, the more practical look*. But as another HoD made the point, why do we comment at all about a woman’s appearance, whether positive or negative, as men do not receive critiques on that level. In answering her own question she concluded that it was down to the demographics as being *a senior woman you are much more isolated and more obvious*.

There was clearly a lot of admiration for many of the senior women within these organizations, in terms of being extremely successful business women/bankers. And for the majority of the HoDs as well as being very good at what they do, there was also an issue of how many of the women do it – with integrity, values, being true to selves. Included in the ideal, for a number of HoDs, was the fact that the senior women sometimes showed uncertainty, admitted error or asked for advice (contrasting with Murrell & Zagenczyk’s paper discussed earlier), which gave

them a sense of realness or honesty. Happily in many of the banks it no longer appears to be that “she” has it all by doing it the male way, and there appear to be the beginnings of belief among some HoDs, and evidence that there is an alternative way.

What was also evident was if role models are an important part of messages given to women about their career possibilities and symbolic messages of what success can look like, then as part of their function, the HoD needs to take responsibility for, and be cognizant of the messages and signals given. Women look up and make decisions based on “Do I want to be like her?” The HoDs need to think very carefully about the people the organization is endorsing. There is a challenge in that to some extent it’s chicken and egg, as exemplified by one HoD who felt that putting something different there (i.e. a woman) was a good first step – despite the fact that the women had been hired externally and were not British, so some women may have struggled to make a connection. However, as suggested by Sheridan (2007) whilst there may be diversity in terms of gender, is there diversity in terms of ways of working?

If having role models is important for professional development and there needs to be a degree of similarity/attractiveness for role models to be efficacious, this begs the question of “similar to whom”? Does this imply another, albeit different, single “type” of woman? Or, as one of the HoDs said of the men, the point is when you have lots of them, you have lots to choose from. If there is only one type of women the organization runs the risk of giving out a strong message, that this is the only way to be.

One aspect of role models both implied and discussed overtly by the HoDs, is their role in changing the organization’s culture. Strong organizational cultures are often described as positive things and organizations where there is a strong sense of community are often praised. However, this can become overwhelming, and lead to Identity Intrusion – a clearly perceived invasion of one’s personal identity by the social identity. Another challenge with a strong sense

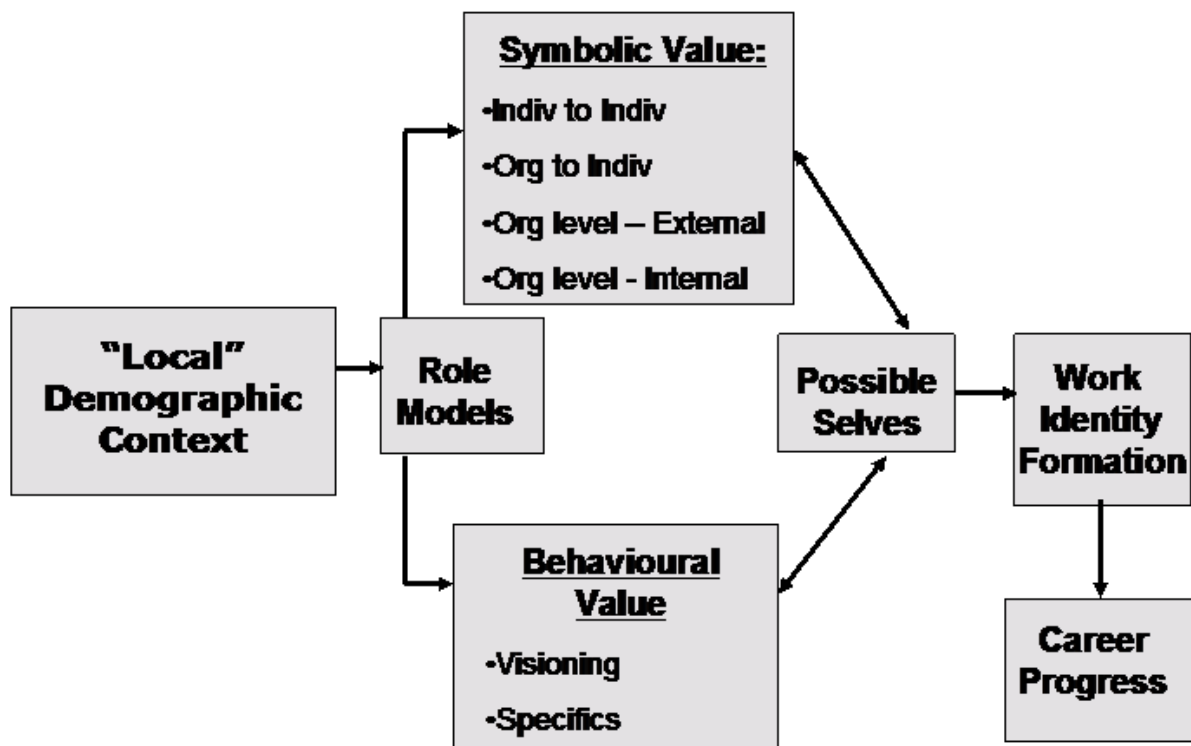


of organizational identity, according to Sluss & Ashforth is that it can cause a lack of Identity Transparency – whereas intrusion is perceived as an infringement of occupational demands on identity, a lack of transparency is experienced as an inability to show one’s identity to others, the belief that “true selves” should not be revealed as they will be perceived as inappropriate.

Ashforth’s term “situational relevance” defined as “the degree to which a given identity is socially appropriate to a given situation” (2001:32) is a good conceptual fit here. But who or what defines situational relevance? Presumably, this is where HoDs can have an impact. In terms of influencing the organizational messages, Pratt et al’s (2006) study found that “feedback and grapevines” are particularly important sources of information in the identity construction of professionals, the impact of the “hidden curricula” (p.258). In other words the HoDs must consider not only the official organizational messages, but also the implicit/unofficial messages as well. As confirmed by a recent paper by Ibarra,

“a firm’s socialization and career development practices, which are the mechanism by which they inculcate display rules, may be expected to exacerbate or attenuate the dynamics described (Ibarra, 2007).

A model summarising these ideas is proposed below (see Figure 1), which shows that the “local” demographic context will affect who the role models are that the HoDs and organizations are promoting. It is suggested that, if these “success models” convey all of the appropriate behavioural and symbolic elements outlined above, then this will allow successful learning and development of a “true to self” work identity for women, thus enhancing their career progress.



**FIGURE 1: Unpacking the Value of Role Models**

**CONCLUSION**

This paper reports findings from part of a larger study considering the importance of senior female role models for women in investment banks. The larger project also considers the role of the Heads of Diversity in shaping role models and role modeling in their organization, as well as collecting interview data from 30 senior female managers on the importance of female role models, their work identity development and career aspirations.

For this paper, substantial and rich data was collected and analysed, with varied and interesting findings. The proposed importance of the organizational demographics has been refined to highlight the “local” demographics for the individual senior women concerned. The paper suggests that, distinct from behavioural values, already well-documented, senior female

role models have additional “symbolic” values to women in a male-dominated workforce.

Detail was added to the conceptual value of role models in exploring the levels on which they operate, and suggestions made as to how this is relevant to the issues of women’s identity formation and career success.

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## **1.2 Forthcoming journal article to be published in *International Journal of Management Review* (accepted December 2008)**

### **The Importance of Role Models and Demographic Context for the Work Identity Development of Senior Women**

**Ruth Sealy and Val Singh**

#### **Abstract**

The lack of senior female role models continues to be cited as a key barrier to women's career success. Yet there is little academic research into the gendered aspects of role modelling in organizations, or the utility of role models at a senior level. The paper starts with a review of papers examining the construction of role models in organizational settings. This leads to the inclusion of two related areas – organizational demographics as the contextual factor affecting the availability of role models and how they are perceived, and work identity formation as a possible key explanatory factor behind the link between the lack of senior female role models and the lack of career progression to top organizational levels. Literature looking at social theories of identity formation is then considered from a gender perspective. The key gaps identified are that whilst the behavioural value of role models has been well documented, a better understanding is needed of how gender and organizational demography influence the role modelling process. Importantly, the symbolic value and possibly other values of female role models in the identity construction of senior women require further in-depth investigation. Finally this review calls for a more integrated approach to the study of role models and work identity formation, pulling together literatures on organizational

demography, the cognitive construal of role models and the importance for successful work identity formation in senior women.

**Key Words:** Role models, identity formation, organizational demography, senior women, gender

## **Introduction**

Women at the top of today's largest companies are not yet much in evidence. After 30 years of equality legislation, only 3.6 per cent of executive directors in the UK's top 100 companies were women in 2007 (Singh & Vinnicombe, 2005). The organizational reality in many countries is that women still struggle with rigid and male-dominated hierarchies, promotion based on uninterrupted linear career paths with little flexibility, lack of credibility in a masculine culture, isolation from other women and transactional rather than transformational management styles (Rosener, 1990). There are very few women at the top to act as examples, or role models, of how these challenges can be overcome. Whilst it can be argued that time will eventually provide more female role models for senior women as increasing numbers of women achieve top positions, the fact that there were only 13 female FTSE 100<sup>i</sup> executive directors in 2007 (up from 11 in 2000)] indicates that it will take many years before there is a substantial pool of available female role models at board director level.

This issue is important for several reasons. The lack of female role models is cited by academics as contributing to women's propensity to resign (Rosin & Korabik, 1995). Women often leave to join other, more synergistic organizations, where they feel their leadership qualities will be recognised, or set up their own businesses (Anonymous, 1992). The issue has been highlighted in a study by Catalyst and Conference Board (2003) of a large number of European managers who cite the lack of female role models

as the second biggest barrier (after sex-role stereotyping of leadership) to women's career success. Other recent surveys also highlight the lack of appropriate role models as an important barrier for women to achieve senior positions (Catalyst and Opportunity Now, 2000; Evolution, 2005; DDI/CIPD Leadership Forecast Survey, 2005). From psychology, we would expect role models to be part of identity development processes in early career (Gibson, 2003). But these European practitioner surveys do not explain why women approaching senior levels consistently report that they lack and need senior female role models.

However, despite this high profile and topical issue, initial examination of the literature on role models revealed few recent academic studies apart from that of Gibson (2003; 2004) who called for re-examination of this construct outside the mentoring field, and Ibarra (1999) who identified role models as vital for the successful development of young professionals. Very few studies appear to have addressed the gendered aspects of this phenomenon in business settings, and prior to Gibson's work, the importance of role models for people at senior levels seems to have raised little interest.

Whilst we recognise that senior women are not the only minority group in the workplace to have few similar role models, and that much of this literature review is relevant for other minority groups, our focus on women is derived from the desire to understand why senior women reportedly value female role models so highly, given their career maturity and success to date. What is the value of role models to senior women? If this can be established, then perhaps interventions can be designed to address that need.

Therefore a systematic literature review has been conducted to establish what is known and what more needs to be understood about role models for women as they establish



their senior organizational roles. Our research question is why are female role models reportedly so important for senior women? We begin with definitions of role models and the role modelling process, drawing on Gibson (2003, 2004). As the demographic context affects not only the availability of role models but also how those individuals are perceived, we next examine the context of organizational demography as it relates to role models. As Ibarra identified possible gender differences in the use of role models in professional identity formation, this literature review was extended to include women's work identity development. We then draw on social theories of identity to illuminate the process of role modelling as it impacts identity work in its organizational demographic context. Earlier research on role modelling has examined these processes in isolation from the male dominated context that most senior women find themselves in, whilst organizational demographers mention the important phenomenon of the lack of female role models only at the surface level]. We discuss the findings in relation to the paradox of the present cohort of well educated professional and successful women managers and their expressed needs for female role models.

The contribution of this paper is threefold. First, it brings together the literature on the micro-processes of role modelling and on identity construction for senior women in their macro-level organizational demographic context, underpinned by insight from social theories of identification, to identify important gaps in knowledge about the importance of role models that will be pointers for further research. Second, in bringing these literatures together, we also reach understanding of why some senior women are rejected as role models. Third, the review identifies the need to increase the conceptual understanding of the symbolic value of role models.

## **The Concept of Role Models**

We begin by examining how the term ‘role model’ has been defined. (Shapiro, Haseltine, & Rowe, 1978) defined role models as “*individuals whose behaviours, personal styles and specific attributes are emulated by others*” (p.52) and showed that modelling contributes to identity construction. A role model can be a symbolic entity, an inspirational and/or motivational individual, someone from whom one can learn and model desired behaviours (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). Similarly Gibson (2004) defines a role model as “*a cognitive construction based on the attributes of people in social roles an individual perceives to be similar to himself or herself to some extent and desires to increase perceived similarity by emulating those attributes.* (p. 137). Such definitions exclude learning how not to do things, the negative role model. However Gibson (2004) moves the definition forward to include this aspect in his definition of role modelling as “*a cognitive process in which individuals actively observe, adapt and reject attributes of multiple role models*” (p. 136)..

Gibson distinguishes the use of role models from mentors, which has more recently dominated the literature. Mentors provide advice and support through an interactive relationship, and behavioural role modelling is one of the functions of mentoring (Ragins and Cotton, 1999). Other distinctions are those of *permission* and *involvement* – individuals can choose role models without involvement or permission from the model, whereas mentors have to agree to participate.

## **The Dimensions of Role Models**

### *Cognitive dimensions of role models*

The focus of the Gibson papers (2003, 2004) is on the *cognitive construal* of role models. Gibson (2003) identified two cognitive dimensions: positive/negative role

model constructions and global/specific constructions. Negative constructions refer to observation of a role model in behaviours that are examples of how not to behave in a particular situation. Global constructions relate to a variety of attributes in a role model to be emulated, whilst specific constructions refer to a single attribute that can be drawn on in a particular context. Role models are seen as cognitive constructions based on attributes of people in social roles. The individual perceives the role model to be similar to themselves to some extent and desires to increase perceived similarity by emulating those attributes, resulting in a behavioural change.

Gibson (2003) found that the basis of construing positive role model attributes was perceived availability, defined as “*the degree to which the individuals think they are sufficiently similar in their environment*” (p. 599). We should understand here that *similarity* could be actual or perceived or desired similarity, and could cover a number of attributes – e.g. similar background, style or demographics. Gibson does not distinguish between these.

This is consistent with theories that link positive affect to similarity – e.g. social comparison theory (Collins, 1996). Individuals seek others with some similarities as they are informative for making accurate self-assessments and can be inspirational for self-improvement (Lockwood et al., 1997). This is an essential part of the identification process. In other words, if it is not possible to find someone sufficiently similar to emulate, then the individual loses out on potential benefits. Hence, in an organizational context, if women do not see similar women above them, they may perceive that there is no-one to emulate. Thus the recent surveys in Europe (Catalyst and Opportunity Now, 2000; Catalyst and Conference Board, 2003; Eve-lution, 2005; DDI/CIPD, 2005) citing a lack of available female role models may not just be referring to the low numbers of

actual women, but suggests an even lower number of women *perceived* to be similar to those seeking role models, or a lack of female role models to whom they would *desire* to be similar.

Gibson's interest is in the *cognitive construal* of role models, with the emphasis on the individual's cognitive processes, rather than the behavioural outcomes, but already he has introduced the issue that this construal cannot be independent from the social context in which individuals find themselves. The organizations in which individuals work are social contexts such as organizational demography and culture. This overlap of theoretical areas (individual and societal, cognition and behaviour) indicates part of the challenge of studying this topic. These need to be considered carefully when looking at how and why individuals construe role models as they do.

#### *Structural dimensions of role models*

Gibson (2003) also identified two structural dimensions of role models: close/distant and up/across or down. The close dimension refers to someone well known to the individual, whilst the distant is a role model outside the normal interactions. Up refers to a role model in a higher position, across is a peer, and down is a subordinate, and across or down might also relate to others with undefined status. The gender demographic context is important in terms of availability of senior role models, as men will have many more possible "up" candidates to select from in male dominated hierarchies. However the disadvantage for senior women of fewer available role models may be present at similar and lower levels too. Women at senior levels in male dominated organizations are likely to have far fewer female peers than men, and may find female subordinates to have only limited possibilities as role models, due to their different hierarchical status and experience.

### **Role Models and Career Stages**

We found only one research study (Gibson, 2003) that investigated role modelling at different career stages. Important to the present study are the mid and late career stages in which senior women are situated. Gibson examined career stage differences in the dimensions of role model formation. Traditional career theories (Erikson, 1950, Super, 1957) suggest that as individuals get older, confidence in self-concept is increased and hence the requirement for role models diminishes. However, Gibson's findings suggest that the tendency to observe role models does not diminish with age, but rather the individual changes the emphasis placed on various dimensions. In Early-career, which Gibson called the *acquiring* stage, individuals work on a viable self-concept – emulating others, using positive, close role models and a range of attributes in the construction of the professional identity.

In Mid-career (the *refining* stage), individuals seek to refine the self-concept as confidence begins to grow, selecting specific and generally still positive attributes from role models. The individuals in Gibson's study also emphasized the importance of having role models for task transitions but perceived that few were available. Mid-career was often a state of ambiguity and uncertainty, where individuals felt they lacked guidance, particularly through visible role models, of what the next career step should look like. Respondents in mid-career also felt that, as time passed, career choices became limited with further restricted availability of relevant role models. Role models were now different people for different things, as the individual created composite models. In addition, the respondents' ability to pick out useful attributes increased, giving them a better sense of their own self and style.

In Late-career (the *affirming* stage) individuals sought to enhance and affirm the self-concept, learning specific skills tied to specific goals. They often construed not just positive but also negative role models to help affirm their own sense of uniqueness.

The tendency of those in middle and late career stages was to integrate specific attributes of role models into composites that approximated a global role model.

Creating a global composite is consistent with social learning theory, modelling being a cognitive process in which the person creates an image of how a behavioural model does a particular task and then generalises that to different situations (Anonymous, 1977).

Gibson and Barron (Gibson & Barron, 2003) found that older employees in a large US engineering organization who perceived they had multiple organizational role models available and identified with them showed increased organizational commitment and job/career satisfaction. These late career stage employees created composite role models, based on their own cognitions rather than the actions of the role model. If losing valued female employees is an issue for organizations, particularly at senior level, then the Gibson and Barron study is significant in showing that availability of role models increases commitment and job/career satisfaction. The important factor is that the employees believed the role models had *similar values and goals to themselves*. Thus the recent European surveys may suggest a lack of role models (female or male) perceived to have similar or desirable values or goals to the women completing the questionnaires.

The implications of Gibson's empirical studies, with the first steps to developing a career-stage framework of role models, are valuable for organizations. In mid-career, individuals felt they lacked role models. Whilst organizations may feel that individuals

should find their own feet, they risk losing or misdirecting experienced talent by not addressing this developmental need. This may be congruent with the perceived exiting of women at mid-stage career currently occurring (Hewlett and Luce, 2005). Gibson's study suggests that organizations should recognise the growth needs of mid-stage individuals, by emphasising exposure to exemplary peers and superiors. In this era of more rapid organizational and career changes, individuals need to establish their own "network" or constellation of developmental relationships, varying in strength and variety (Higgins & Kram, 2001). Gibson believes role models are an important part of this relationship portfolio.

Whilst Gibson's research is undoubtedly important in terms of raising the profile of research into role models, there are some limitations of his studies and questions left unanswered. Firstly he does admit that in searching for patterns of difference across the stages, there was a risk of assuming more homogeneity within the stages than was actually the case]. This is particularly an issue in the mid-stage, where his sample has ten out of fifteen workers who have not yet been promoted to partner level] and only five who have made this important transition. We suggest that these two groups may have very different expectations and attitudes regarding their current career success or lack thereof. In addition, in his empirical paper (2003), the boundaries between role models, mentors and behavioural models become blurred as Gibson talks about close role models and watching response and feedback. Moreover, whilst he defines role models as cognitive construals, he does not overtly take into account the symbolic or inspirational effect or emotive value that role models have. Finally, this study of career stages is undertaken in two professional services firms, a sector that is particularly competitive, hence the need for more research is indicated into role modelling and

career stages in other environments. In the next section we examine research on organizational demography for deeper insight into the influence of environmental context on role modelling, given that women in management are frequently seeking female role models within male dominated hierarchies and organizations.

### **The Significance of Context: Organizational Demography**

#### *Tokens and minority groups*

Research on organizational demography and power addresses the context of the working environment that influences the availability of role models, and the processes of gender identity formation. In her ground-breaking work, Kanter (1977) observed the asymmetric power within an organization, part of a culture where the majority dominated and marginalised the minority, and where structures emerged to preserve this situation. The concepts of “homophily” and “tokenism” were based on the premise that people prefer to work with similar others. Kanter showed that women became “tokens” when in a numerical minority of less than 15%. Through processes including assimilation, polarisation and exaggeration, stereotypes were used to heighten boundaries, and women became both highly visible and isolated. In Kanter’s view, only when the proportion of women passes the 15% threshold to become a minority, rather than a token, could they begin to overcome these pressures. It is frequently assumed that by hiring more minorities and women, the power balance will improve, but identity groups need to be equal in their access to power resources (Kanter, 1983) for an improvement of attitudes (Kossek, Markel and McHugh, 2003). This suggests organizations may need demographic earthquakes to take them to the tipping point of 35% (Kanter, 1977) to prevent the perpetuation of stereotypical negative dynamics.

#### *Impact of unbalanced sex composition*



In her 1994 seminal work, Ely looked at the impact of women's proportional representation at the top of organizations and what effect it had on the relationships among other women in that firm. She found that in firms with few senior women, women were *"less likely to experience gender as a positive basis for identification with women, less likely to perceive senior women as role models with legitimate authority, more likely to perceive competition in relationships with women peers, and less likely to find support in these relationships"* (p. 203). She also found that in firms with more balanced gender representation at the top, the opposite was true on all accounts.

The presence of executive women signals the level, as well as likelihood, of possible promotion to other women. Women in executive positions may also be able to influence the organizational policies and culture and make it more attractive for women to stay with the organization. Elvira and Cohen (Elvira & Cohen, 2001) proposed that organizational sex composition at senior levels explains turnover differences for men and women in a female-dominated organization. They found that the proportion of executive women above them directly affected the turnover of women, who were more likely to leave if they were in the lower ranks, but not if they were in middle and top positions.. Elvira and Cohen speculate that lower rank women may perceive such a distance between themselves and the executive women that this limits their view of possibilities for change. In contrast, higher-level women are more similar and closer to the executive women who have the power and resources to affect their working conditions, and hence were less likely to leave the organization as the proportion of women above them increased.

Ely's work goes beyond that of Kanter (1977), as the latter suggested that balanced representation at peer level would reduce sex-role stereotyping and promote a greater

sense of belonging for women. But Ely says that this is not the case unless there are women in positions of authority in that organization, as “*sex may persist as a salient category with negative consequences for women lower down in the organization*” (1995, p. 590). Gender cannot be treated as an objective property, synonymous with biological sex, or universal across organizational settings. Gender is an ongoing social construction. Both Ely’s 1994 and 1995 papers show how women’s presence in positions of power positively affects the social construction of gender definition and the processes that create gender identity at work.

Women in male-dominated firms will perceive greater psychological and behavioural differences between men and women and will define these differences along sex-role stereotypes (Ely, 1995). Following social identity and self-categorisation theories (Chattopadhyay, Tluchowska, & George, 2004a; Chattopadhyay, George, & Lawrence, 2004b)), such women would evaluate women's attributes less favourably to the firm’s criteria of success. Ely found that sex-integrated firms (those with considerably more than token numbers of women in management at all levels) had greater latitude in gender roles, with the women consciously enacting masculine and feminine roles as they saw fit. In male-dominated firms, women’s discomfort with sex-roles and rating themselves less favourably in relation to the firm's requirements for success would explain lower levels of job satisfaction, lower expectations and desire for promotion. In sex-integrated firms, biological sex was less tightly linked to bipolar construction of gender. Women had a greater sense of acceptance, higher satisfaction with firms and optimism about their careers.

(Liff & Ward, 2001)) examined the under-representation of women in senior management positions within a UK high street bank. Junior and middle male and female

managers were asked their perceptions of the personality and behaviour characteristics associated with success within their organization. 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 behaviours varied - particularly in relation to the perceived incompatibility between active parenting and senior roles. The uncertainties around succeeding as a female in this UK bank were considered to be reinforced by the very small number of visible senior women who could act as role models. Those women who had made it to senior roles were described by participants as having “lost their femininity”. Characteristics and behaviours required for career success were reportedly more “male” than “female”, and descriptions of what was required were of either a paragon or someone “not very nice” or “unnatural”. This is a recurring theme in rationalist or voluntarist explanations of why women choose not to pursue high level careers. Paraphrasing Schein, Mueller, Lituchy, and Liu’s, (1996) well-known phrase, Liff and Ward suggest “*think female manager, think childless superwoman!*”

Gibson and Cordova (1999) found that the proportion of women at the various hierarchical levels within an organization made a difference to men's but not women's cross-sex role modelling patterns, and women in sex-balanced firms were less likely to place an importance on same-sex role models. They found that across organizations, women were less likely to have specific role models for success and more likely to have negative role models. In firms with a greater number of female partners, women were more likely to say they had good role models available to them for career success, though their role models were not necessarily senior females. These findings are consistent with many of those of Ely (1994; 1995).

Some practical implications are clear from these findings. Increasing the number of women in senior positions may help organizations both reduce turnover and draw on a wider range of female talent. These studies also suggest that visible role models of women in authority could be associated with an increase in women's ambitions, not just because the exemplars prompt the individual women to increase their career aspirations, but because, by their presence, they start to change the old gender schema of status and power (Ragins and Sundstrom, 1989).

### **Role Model Research - Relevance to Women Managers**

So far in this review, we have examined the process of role modelling and the significance of gender demographic context. We are interested in identifying work that pertains to women managers at senior levels, who we expect to be in their 30s to 50s. Gibson's (2003) work illustrates that there are career stage differences within the professional services context. Gibson's mid-career group average age was 38, whilst the late career group average age was 47 years, so findings related to both those groups are of interest. From organizational demography research, the work of Kanter on minority group interactions with the majority and research by Ely on the influence of different sex compositions of organizations on women's career outcomes are particularly useful in helping us understand the context.

There are a few studies on role modelling and sex differences but they are limited by undergraduate or junior samples and experimental designs (eg Murrell and Zagenczyk [2006] who allocated role model status to those who scored highly on performance measures rated by their peers.). (Lockwood, 2006) examined same-sex and opposite sex role models with undergraduate students, revealing that women are inspired by outstanding women in their field, although not by outstanding men. Lockwood suggests that female role models are particularly inspiring in situations where they are in the minority. They provide evidence that

barriers can be overcome despite discrimination, and may be an important means of undermining negative gender stereotypes. However, we suggest that the efficacy of the role models would depend on how “similar” they are perceived to be. Lockwood suggests that for women, exposure to another successful woman can make them rate themselves more positively. As she predicted, however, gender did not affect male participants’ identification with a role model, and their self-evaluations were not affected by exposure to male role models. Lockwood suggests this is because men do not face the same career barriers, and have no need for exemplars of success. Lockwood suggests that future research should look at the long-term effects of role models on women’s career performance.

Although Gibson (2003, 2004) did not take a gendered perspective, he does address sex differences in his discussion. Stating that women typically have fewer available same-sex role models, he suggests that women face an arduous cognitive task of translating male role model behaviour into behaviour that works for them. The pool of role model material for women is constrained, providing them with lower-quality information than that available to men. Women must adapt the types of behaviours that work for men in order to make them work for them. Women's role modelling requires greater cognitive processing. Whereas men can **take** the attributes that the organization has recognised and rewarded in their male role models and add those behaviours to their own repertoire, women have to **make** such images from role models that come from more diverse and fragmented sources.

This would suggest a structuralist rather than developmental standpoint – in other words, that patterns of modelling are dependent on the gender context that individuals find themselves in, rather than on inherent differences in modelling tendencies between men and women.

## **Why are Role Models Important in the Identity Construction of Senior Women?**

### *Developing “Provisional Selves” through role models*

To gain a better understanding of the importance of role models, we need to examine the utility of role modelling in the development of work identity. Work identity has been defined as an enduring set of attributes, beliefs, values, motives and experiences by which people define themselves in a given work role (Anonymous. 1978). However, as Gibson has shown above, work identity is not a fixed concept, but changes with work role changes. Career transitions are an opportunity for renegotiating one’s work identity through the mechanism of “possible selves”, defined as who one might become, would like to become, or fears becoming (Markus & Nurius, 1987). Ibarra has conducted extensive research into professionals in investment banking and consulting firms making transitions from middle to senior management positions (1999; 2000) and from senior management to leadership roles (2003; 2007). In her Adaptation Process, she revealed that successful transitions required three basic tasks: observing role models to identify potential identities; experimenting with “provisional selves”; and evaluating experiments against internal standards and external feedback.

In her 1999 study, over 90% of participants described how role models displayed the role identity they were attempting to assume. By observing successful role models, the subjects built a store of tacit knowledge, attitudes, and impression management routines. They created the idea of a “possible self” – the role identity they wanted to assume. They also learned about acceptable variation in how to enact the role by comparing different role models. They then experimented with these ideas, using a process of observe, practice/test and evaluate against internal standards and external feedback. Participants also matched role models based on their attractiveness – i.e. to

what extent did they admire or share the traits underlying the role model's behaviour. As with Gibson's studies, Ibarra found that participants used role models to define negative behaviours or characteristics, i.e. the role model represented a feared possible self, a negative role model. This suggests a value of more senior role models even if they are not attractive.

The process of acquiring behavioural skills, such as a work style, is different from learning knowledge in that the learning must be refined through personal experimentation, not just vicariously through observation (Bandura, 1977b). In Ibarra's study, the most prevalent form of experimentation was imitation. This was either done on a wholesale or partial basis (mimicking global or individual traits). Selective imitation, a "mosaic of different people" was a more sophisticated form of mimicry, combining facets from multiple role models to craft a more self-tailored persona. Those using this tactic suffered less concern regarding authenticity – i.e. the degree of congruence between what one feels and what one communicates in public.

In contrast, participants who used true-to-self strategies (e.g staying with their present style, focusing on their present strengths and searching for a very closely matched single role model) in making the transition made several references to caution, modesty, being acutely aware of their own limitations, avoiding exaggerated displays of confidence, and being more concerned with client credibility in the long term rather than creating a good first impression, focusing on substance over form. However, as they clung to their old identities, they struggled to transfer some of the new styles and skills required, experiencing longer-term dissonance between their current and ideal selves. Their actions also limited the growth of their repertoires, providing a restricted store of material from which to select and grow. Ibarra's study did not set out to give a

gendered perspective, so it is not until the discussion part of the paper, that she makes it clear that the true-to-self subgroup who used this limiting tactic was almost entirely women. She does not, however, attempt to explain why this might be. How much of this related to individual and how much to situational factors? There was a scarcity of senior females and Ibarra found that this did constrain the attractive identity matches for women, making it harder to learn.

Identification with role models infuses behaviours with meaning and purpose, providing more motivation to change. By identifying with role models, people move from compliance to assimilating role requirements (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986). As participants evaluated their provisional selves, they became aware of the need to find more appealing, feasible role models and so extended their role model set. Ibarra's study highlights the value of role models, increasing repertoire variety and therefore the likelihood of successful adaptation.

Ibarra proposes a model whereby the Adaptation Process she described mediates between situational and individual influences on one hand and the identity construction processes on the other. If successful identity construction is essential to career success, then the availability and successful use of role models become key antecedents to this. Her findings on the women's experiences of career transition show consistency with well-established findings on minorities and majorities in organizations (Kanter, 1977). Women were more likely to experience difficulty finding suitable role model matches, to use true-to-self strategies, and to perpetuate provisional selves that they described as inadequate. Combining Ibarra's findings with those on organizational demography above furthers our understanding of the processes affecting women's career transitions and the importance of role models.



Many of the issues concerning women in the workplace today are around the lack of a sense of authentic identity. (Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006) conducted a six-year qualitative study of medical residents in the US to examine identity construction after work-identity integrity violation: a mismatch between what they did and who they were. Like Ibarra, they found that role models were critical to learning. However, unlike Ibarra they did not find that the junior doctors tried on “possible selves” based on multiple role models. Rather they found that *“role model choice was based more on a justification or validation of an existing or emerging identity”* (p.255). But that presupposes a role model that can be aligned with the individual’s authentic “true self” identity. As (Kahn, 1990) noted, work becomes meaningful when one’s “preferred self” can be expressed through one’s work and one’s membership in an organization. Pratt et al (2006) argue that *“achieving alignment between identity and work is a fundamental motivator in identity construction”* (p.255). This is a complicated and challenging task for women aspiring to leadership in unbalanced demographic contexts.

#### *Developing managerial identities through role models*

In a qualitative study of young women managers, (Singh, Vinnicombe, & James, 2003)) found that they tended to use a selection of role models from a variety of domains, many from outside the workplace, to help them build appropriate identities. This is encouraging after Ibarra’s study which suggested women tended to search for a single global role model rather than plural, and is in line with Gibson’s findings. However, they did not create a composite global role model but rather drew on inspiration from any relevant role model for a particular task or situation. The role model sets crossed the business world, family and popular celebrities. Although 60% of the role models were from the business world, very few top businesswomen were mentioned and women reported very few acceptable role models available within their own work environment.

Often those women at the top who did not have families were rejected as role models. They were seen to have sacrificed too much of their social and emotional capital in their quest to succeed in the masculine workplace, echoing Liff and Ward (2001).

As in Ibarra's study, when asked what they learnt from their role models, the women talked about personal characteristics and style. Various "masculine" style traits emerged, such as control and determination. However, for others what was important was seeing their role models utilise their "feminine" traits in their work-style, as they wished to emulate these in their own working lives. Role models were used to develop "ideal selves" for their future career. But such role models were rarely available. This study is useful in establishing that role models are an important influence in work identity development.

(Sheppard, 1989) highlights problems for organizations without senior female role models. Additional time and effort is spent by female managers ascertaining how they should behave and present themselves at work. Women end up taking on an inauthentic work identity, like "wearing a mask". Men may sexualise and objectify women as a method of control, and women find themselves between a rock and a hard place of being either the unprofessional objectified sex object or the "not very nice", too masculine woman (Liff and Ward, 2001). Women without female role models tend to desexualise themselves as a coping strategy. Leadership and management styles are self-perpetuating in their masculinity, as the femininity is not valued by either men or women (Schein, Mueller, Lituchy, & Liu, 1996). (Wahl, 1998) comments that men get confirmation of themselves and their identity as leaders through a shared maleness, whereas, unless there are sufficient female leaders, women have no such resource.

### *Social Theories of Identity*

From the literature, we have shown that role models are used for professional and managerial identity development, and that organizational demographics have a major impact on the availability of female role models and the less favourable context within which women managers develop their work identities in male dominated organizations. We now move to explore whether social theories of identity can shed light upon the process of role modelling within identity development to explain why role models are so important for senior women.

Socialisation is a negotiated adaptation through which people aim to improve the fit between themselves and their work environment, by refining their emerging ideas of who they want to be in that role (Bandura, 1977a). Identity refers to the meanings or self-conceptions that are attached to an individual either by him/herself or others. These meanings are usually based on social roles (social identities) as well as idiosyncratic character traits or personal identities (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Identities have been regarded as socially constructed ((Anonymous. 2004), and negotiated as people convey images of themselves about how they would like to be regarded by others.

Ibarra's work concludes that having a clear and consistent professional identity is fundamental to career success, although it could be argued that whilst helpful, many other factors come into the equation. Nonetheless, many of the issues concerning women today, causing some of them to leave corporate life, are around the lack of a sense of authentic identity, a lack of clarity around *who am I?* Inside and outside the work environment, identity development is not just an individualistic concept but a socially constructed one (Ibarra, 1999).

## Social Identity Theory

Organizations are social environments and how people familiarise and define themselves within and in relation to these social structures will help explain how they will think, feel and behave at work. Social identity theory, developed in the 1970s by Tajfel (1972) and Turner (1975), concerns intergroup relations. Its fundamental psychological idea is that *“where people make social comparisons between groups, they seek positive distinctness for their in-groups compared to out-groups in order to achieve a positive social identity”* ((Anonymous. 2004), p. xix).

Personal identity refers to self-knowledge about one's own attributes. Social identity is the knowledge of the sense of who one is, defined in terms of *we* rather than *I*, as part of a social group or clustering. Social identity theory shows how social and psychological factors combine to determine the courses of action that individuals take in order to achieve a positive social identity. If they feel they are in a lower group, their response to this negative assessment and emotion is to endeavour to dissociate and assimilate culturally and psychologically into a higher-status group.

There is some evidence, however, contrary to this, that individuals may internalise both the psychological and behavioural attributions of their in-group as well as the wider social evaluation of selves as inferior and less-deserving ((Anonymous. 1982); Ashforth and Mael, 1989; (Ely, 1995). An explanation for this is that people have a general cognitive preference to have their expectations about reality supported, as opposed to experiencing cognitive dissonance. So if they accept the negatives about their own group, for example, if women expect men to hold higher positions, some will prefer to engage in low level tasks and behaviours corresponding to low performance and low

status. This is in line with expectancy theory (Anonymous. 1964), which states that an individual will act in a certain way based on the need to have their expectations met. This will clearly affect women's aspirations and beliefs in terms of their career potential. Psychologically and behaviourally, they will emulate characteristics associated with women as a group, and not with men. What remains unclear is why, with a shared understanding of status relations, some individuals will take this route and others will challenge the status quo – the individual idiosyncrasies that make each individual's interpretation different. Key to this is the individual's belief structures, in particular with regard to social mobility. (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) proposed strategies that individuals use for self-enhancement. Social/individual mobility beliefs state that anyone can rise to the top. Social change beliefs state that the only prospect for improving oneself lies in action as a group member. Social change beliefs are likely to be dominant when an individual believes themselves to be "*locked into their group membership*" (Haslam, 2004, p. 25) and feel they must act either to improve or defend their group's status.

Individual mobility is most likely to happen when a group has relatively low status but boundaries are seen to be permeable. The individual can disassociate themselves from other in-group members and work to improve their personal outcomes (rather than work collectively to improve the outcomes for the group). For example, with clear status differences highlighted by a predominance of men in positions of power, in attempting to join her higher-status counterparts, a woman may provide more favourable attributions to the out-group. There is plenty of evidence in scholarly work (Kanter, 1977) and popular literature of women "acting like men" as it allows women to feel favourable about themselves, despite the unfavourable evaluation they may give their

sex in-group. Women in male-dominated firms will often evaluate other women less favourably in relation to the organization's requirements for success than their counterparts in more sex-integrated firms (Ely, 1995). Some women have found that the glass ceiling can be broken by acting as an individual, defecting to become "one of the boys", rather than trying to improve status and treatment of women in general.

### Social and Gender Role Theory

According to social role theory of sex and gender differences ((Anonymous. 1987), women are expected to behave in a manner consistent with societal gender roles. There are general beliefs held that men have a higher level of *agentic* attributes, whereas women have higher level of *communal* attributes, although whether men and women *have* higher levels of these attributes or simply *utilize* them more often, is another question. Therefore, because leadership is still construed in masculine agentic terms, this presents a substantial barrier to women. Women are experiencing the double bind of incongruity between their gender role and leadership stereotypes. Eagly and Karau's (Eagly & Karau, 2002) theoretical paper on gender roles supported the notion that attitudes are less positive towards female than male leaders and potential leaders.

Another effect of the imposition of gender roles on behaviour is on self-regulatory processes. As Ely (1994; 1995) showed, women's social identities in their workplaces reflect the current gender stereotypes, particularly in organizations with low representation of women in senior positions. Women may behave gender stereotypically because of having internalised aspects of gender roles, especially if situational cues make these aspects particularly appropriate. Self-regulatory processes can induce gender roles, and may actually cause the women to become less attracted to top management positions (van Vianen & Fischer, 2002). Many women struggle with the issue of

balancing the feminine/masculine styles – they need to be sufficiently businesslike and professional to be considered a credible manager and sufficiently feminine to not challenge prevailing assumptions about gender. They compromise their career progression because they appear less confident or powerful, and do not ascend to executive leadership because they are perceived to lack sufficiently agentic behaviours. This is likely to be the result of stereotyping and prejudice. As Eagly and Karau (2002) state, none of this can change without a wider variety of role models.

Supporting Eagly and Karau's work, (Heilman & Okimoto, 2007) (2007) replicate previous work showing that when performance levels are ambiguous, women are perceived to be less competent than men in male gender-typed work, thus leading to discriminatory practices. And, even when performance is unambiguous, women are then disliked and seen as undesirable bosses. Women who are successful in male domains violate gender stereotypes, and their perceived lack of feminine attributes causes negative reactions. However, if there is clear evidence of the woman's communal traits, which need not be displayed, but can be inferred by roles such as motherhood, these negative reactions can be abated. This study shows that it is possible for successful women to be seen as both agentic and communal, previously considered mutually exclusive, and that it is "*the women's perceived violation of feminine "shoulds", not their taking on of masculine "should nots" that underlies and fuels the penalties these women incur for their success*" (p.91).

There is substantial literature suggesting that women perceived as communal are also presumed incompetent at supposedly male tasks, yet this study shows the double-edge sword, that women in the workplace have felt for years that without showing those feminine qualities, they are disliked by their colleagues (male and female). Perhaps the call for senior

female role models reflects women's search for exemplars of how to demonstrate both the agentic and communal traits successfully. The current demographic context in many organizations means exemplars are few and far between.

### Relational Identity Theory

The concept of relational identity is useful in explaining how individuals define themselves and construct identities through work relationships. This builds on models such as role theory and social identity theory by focusing on the interpersonal level, in an attempt to integrate the personal and collective levels of identity. (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007) propose that interpersonal relationships are simultaneously informed and influenced by both person-based and role-based identities; however they do not address gender. But Collinson (2003) mentions how men also work to construct, negotiate and achieve their masculine identity. The challenges of identity formation at work are not exclusive to women, but men do it in an environment that is predominantly masculine and therefore not so alien.

Sluss and Ashforth's paper theorises about *relational identity* and *relational identification*. The former looks at the nature of one's role relationship, e.g. manager-subordinate. It is the web of relational identities, roles and role incumbents, which form the social system of the organization. *Relational identification* is the extent to which one defines oneself in terms of that relationship, i.e. how much does one internalize that identity as a partial definition of oneself? This is clearly relevant to how an individual perceives and uses role models. Role-based identity is about the goals, values, beliefs typically associated with that role ((Anonymous. 2001), regardless of who is enacting the role. The person-based identity is concerned with the traits that define *how* that individual is enacting that role (e.g. considerate, fair, honest). The relational identity is the interaction of both person-based and role-based identities of two people within a relationship, and therefore draws on the



interpersonal level. This brings more depth to the concept of role models as proposed in this review, and we suggest that it could be useful to consider on what level role model relationships are working.

#### Lewin's Field Theory

(Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006b) use qualitative studies to look at how individuals in a very demanding occupation (Episcopal priests) actively negotiate the construction of their identities. They discuss the processes used to achieve an optimal balance between over-identification and individuation or under-identification, by differentiating or integrating individual and social identities. This interesting paper creates a conceptual model using Lewin's Field Theory to describe the processes of identity construction. In essence the paper explicates what the authors see as the various forces that interact to create a "field" or context in which individuals and groups operate. By identifying these forces, Lewin believed we could understand why individuals behave and react as they do (Papanek, 1973). This may be a useful model in which to consider the behavioural and other values of role models: the forces that help us understand better why individuals behave/react as they do and what the implications of strengthening or weakening these forces would be in terms of changed behaviour.

#### Identity Management

One of the challenges with trying to understand identity formation for senior women in terms of collective theories, such as social identity theory, is that these women are often so isolated that they do not have a collective of which to feel a member – they are visibly very different from their male colleagues and very removed from any other female colleagues. In such circumstances it is argued that individuals need to actively engage in identity management, in order to deal with "identity dissonance" (Gioia, 1998). Identity management is not always

just an individual process. As Alvesson and Wilmott (2002) argue, today's organizations attempt to exert power and discipline over individuals by shaping their identities and relationships through "identity regulation". The role of the organization in the construction of identities through role models would seem to be another important area for in-depth research.

#### Explanations from Identity Theories

This section has examined several identity theories for further insight into why role models are important in identity construction. Social identity theory explains how individuals seek out role models by comparison that leads to a desire to join the higher status group by emulating its group characteristics. This explains how and why many highly successful women are seen to use masculine-typed behaviours. Social and gender role theory explains that such violation of traditional feminine roles leads to censure from both men and women, and often rejection of the masculine-style women as role models. Relational identity theory highlights the interpersonal elements, as the individual seeks to emulate the higher status individual rather than the typical group characteristics. Field theory offers a new avenue for research into the forces that influence role model construction, including the organization.

#### **Discussion**

After a decade with little interest, organizational researchers are again beginning to treat role models as an important developmental relationship. However, as this review shows, the extant literature on role models is limited.

Figure 1 shows that the symbolic value of role models needs much deeper level research, as the outcomes box has relied on mainly experimental research with hypothetical "role models" looking at how various characteristics might affect performance, but using undergraduate samples or poor conceptualization of the role model construct. In addition, outcomes for senior women have not been identified. With

the exception of Gibson's and Ibarra's studies, there is little empirical research in organizational settings concerning the criteria for choosing role models and how this impacts identity construction, which we argue from this review is likely to affect successful role modelling. Apart from Gibson's career stage study, we found no research on role models at a senior organizational level. More research is needed to develop a better understanding of the process and the relevance of role models and work identity in demographic context.

**Figure 1:**

**Error! Objects cannot be created from editing field codes.**

One of the problems often cited with the psychological study of identity is that it is often treated from a Functionalist perspective (Gioia, 1998) – i.e. as something that exists and can be tested, as opposed to something socially and symbolically constructed. Gibson (2003) explored the cognitive processes of role modelling but even in his own definitions, (e.g. the basis of construing positive role model attributes was “*the degree to which the individuals think they are sufficiently similar in their environment*” (p. 599) he explicitly includes the social context. This review suggests that role models play a part in the continuous development of identity transitions in social contexts. Such issues “*that question the definitional dimensions of identity are a healthy sign of an underdeveloped but high-potential concept*” (Gioia, 1998, pp.24)

From the literature on social theories of identity, identification with a group is an important factor that affects the person's readiness to accept that social category as part of their definition of self. People organise and construe the world around them in ways that reflect the social groups to which they belong. For women at management levels in

token or minority demographic contexts, the lack of availability of senior female role models highlights the limited access of women as a social group to top levels of that organization. If an individual can identify strongly with the organization, they may interpret the world and their place within it, in a manner consistent with the organization's values, ideology and culture. This may be a key point when looking at women's common disillusionment with their organization (eg the off-ramping described by Hewlett and Luce, 2005 and 2007), explaining how they do not comfortably share the social identity of their work environment. If they cannot easily identify with the organization's (masculine) culture, perhaps it is at this point that the need for an individual role model becomes more salient. Alvesson and Wilmott (2002) talk about the emotional labour of counteracting imposed identities – which they describe as *micro-emancipation* (pp. 637). Women may find social and emotional support in networks and groups, but similar to Gibson's arduous task of cognitive processing, it is hard work to continually push back against an identity that others assign, if it is not congruent with one's own self-concept.

Social identity theory explains that the individual's belief structures regarding social mobility are the key to why some individuals take action to achieve a more positive social identity, whereas others assimilate the attributes of their social group to their personal detriment. But where do these beliefs stem from and who or what determines whether the desired group boundaries are permeable or not? As hinted in Gibson and Cordova's (1999) paper, perhaps the importance of the role models is mainly symbolic, to help both genders change their cognitive schema of what is possible. The presence of the senior female proves that boundaries are permeable. Gibson would argue that there needs to be some degree of attraction/similarity for the role model to be perceived as

“available”, and Ibarra would suggest, for the role model to be used successfully. But perhaps the symbol is sufficient to provide permission to change the gender stereotype role.

Kossek et al (2003) show the challenges of taking a purely structuralist approach of just recruiting more women, ‘throwing women at the situation’, as the result was that the male majority group started to acknowledge the competition as a threat to their own careers. In the UK, underlying structural or attitudinal factors may still tend to go unnoticed and unaddressed by equal opportunities legislation and relevant equality organizations such as Opportunity Now. Such initiatives are still based very much on the liberal feminist idea that if opportunities are made available and if women try hard enough, inequalities in the work place can be largely overcome. This can have negative connotations as it places the responsibility squarely on the women’s shoulders, emphasising deficiencies in their own behaviour or attributes. Men feel comfortable with these prevailing attitudes and norms which they perceive as gender neutral (Simpson, 1997). Women are more aware of barriers, but often find them hard to define, as individual successful women are held up as examples of why the system is not at fault. But all too often the example is not an attractive one for women aspiring to get to the top, in terms of either the style or behaviours used, the similarity to them, or the sacrifices made to get there - hence the requirement for more relevant and attractive role models.

Having established that role models are used in identity formation, one of the biggest challenges facing the authors in trying to establish why role models are important for senior women is the paucity of literature that links or integrates the various findings and levels of identity work. This is something that Cornelissen, Haslam and Balmer (2007)

noted in a recent article looking at the disparate areas of social identity, organizational identity and corporate identity. In the emerging field of work identity, there are a number of competing literature areas: the social identity literature which focuses on the cognitive psychological aspects of identity formation; the literature on human assets, social capital and networks; and the more sociological investigations of structures, demographics and institutional behaviour. The recent research on relational identity attempts to integrate personal and social aspects. But we feel that work on role models could go further in combining these literatures and show how micro-level cognitive processes, affected by macro-level demographics, feed into larger systems and the underlying mechanisms of organizational structures.

### **Conclusion**

A number of surveys recently cited the lack of senior female role models as a major barrier to women's career success. This led the authors of this review to one main line of questioning:

- Are female role models important for senior women, and if so why?

In addressing this question, we also added to understanding of a related question:

- Why are many of the few senior women rejected as role models by other women?

A comprehensive literature search of research on role models, as distinct from mentors or coaches, conducted in organizational settings produced a very small sample of studies. The behavioural value of role models has been well documented (Bandura, 1977b; Ibarra, 1999; Gibson, 2003). This review has indicated how role models are used, drawing on Gibson's work on the cognitive and structural aspects of role

modelling, and Ibarra's work on how behavioural role models guide the development of provisional selves. These studies in particular provide a partial answer to why role models are important: they are needed for identity construction. Our initial review of that small body of role model literature led to inclusion of two related areas – organizational demographics as the contextual factor affecting the availability of role models, and work identity formation as a key explanatory factor behind the link between the lack of senior female role models and the lack of career progression. Organizational demography research has highlighted that women struggle to find suitable role models in organizations where the demographic profile is not sex-balanced, and we have argued that this difficulty is likely to become stronger as women reach senior levels.

Work environments in the UK have changed in the past 15 years and a new generation of female middle managers have senior and executive management positions within their sights. They are armed with the qualifications and experiences required and hence there should be few barriers to their success. So why are their plans thwarted and why do they cite the lack of senior female role models as critical? Both men and women need to move towards changing their stereotypic cognitive schema of gender in the workplace, and this may be the key value of role models.

Building on the literature above, research is needed to ascertain further the value of female role models for women managers. As well as the behavioural value, the symbolic value has been mentioned but not explored in depth, but there may be other values that help explain why female role models are important for senior women. We need to understand whether the availability, proximity and successful use of role models are key antecedents to the cognitive processes critical to identity formation and crucial

to the career success of senior female managers. The role of the organization in the identification and promotion of female role models is also new and interesting – what, if any, influence do they have? New technology such as corporate web pages and new interventions such as women’s corporate networks allow for role models to be highlighted, but how are they selected?

The contribution of this paper is on three levels. First it highlights the need to take a more integrated approach to the study of role models and work identity formation, pulling together literatures on organizational demography, the cognitive construal of role models and the importance of behavioural and symbolic role models for successful work identity formation in senior women. Second, it provides insight into why the few women at the top of organizations are often rejected as role models. Finally, it recognises the need to increase the conceptual understanding of the symbolic value of role models.

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## **1.3 Interview schedule**

### **1/. Introductory**

- a). Could you confirm your position, age, married &/or children? What does partner do? and tenure – have you always worked in banking? (clarify what they actually do)
- b). In your division, are there many women more senior than yourself/at your level?

### **2/. Description & Impact of Role Models**

- a). Who have you seen as inspirational in this organization and why?
- b). What have you learned from them?
- c). Do you see yourself as a role model for other women? Why/not?)

### **3/. Description & Impact of Women at Top**

- a). How would you describe the women above you? (- or at your level if no women above)
- b). How would you compare yourself to them?
- c). Have you felt a need to adapt your working behaviours and style with those of men during the progression of your career?
- d). Do you consider that women more senior than you have assimilated the working style of the successful men in their area?"

### **4/. The Value of Role Models**

- a). A number of important surveys have cited the lack of senior female role models as a key barrier to success, why do think that is?
- b). Has [not] having role models affected your career progression or identity development?
- c). What do you think your organization can do to facilitate access to role models?

### **5/. Identity & Authenticity**

- a). How do you think others in this organization would describe the “you” they see at work?
- b). Is that the real you? How much does your job define you as a person? Has this changed over time?

### **6/. Messages from the Organization**

- a). Thinking about women at your level, do you think women’s experience at work would change if there were more senior women in the organization?
- b). Who do you see the organization putting forward as role models?  
(How/When/Where do they do that? What are the characteristics of those role models?)

## 1.4 Contact sheets – an example

### CONTACT SUMMARY FORM

**Case Name & Number:**

**Indiv Name:**

**Contact Type:** face

**Contact Date:** 29/11/07

#### 1/. Give a brief description of the context

Brown trouser suit, brown hair, not overly smart.

Services, not involved with the external clients – very much on the support side.

#### 2/. Which research questions/variables in the initial framework did the contact appear to focus on?

Really worked through all the answers

#### 3/. Summarize the information you got and failed to get from the target questions

Really worked hard at trying to work out the value of role models – the impact on having the person above you as a role model, or someone you can relate to.

#### 4/. What were the main things that struck you?

Focus on doing a meaningful job and making a contribution.

When asked about her bosses role, initially said she was interested, said she wasn't qualified enough. Then considered she might be having a "self-limiting belief!" It might be a life-style choice, "I don't want it cos I don't want to live like that". However, when pushed after recording and when asked if one of them had been female, she couldn't answer why not. Initially couldn't work out if it was the role or more likely the environment on which she would have to work and decided it was the latter, she didn't want to operate in that male-dominated situation.

She reckoned it took her five years longer to get to where she is than it might have done had there been more women – and she acknowledges that she did have more women available that other parts of the bank.

If you have the right organizational structures then the issue of RMs is not an issue and everyone has the same opportunities. **NB**, this is similar to that which [name] was saying, in [bank], role models are only an issue if the rest of the system is not sufficiently supportive.

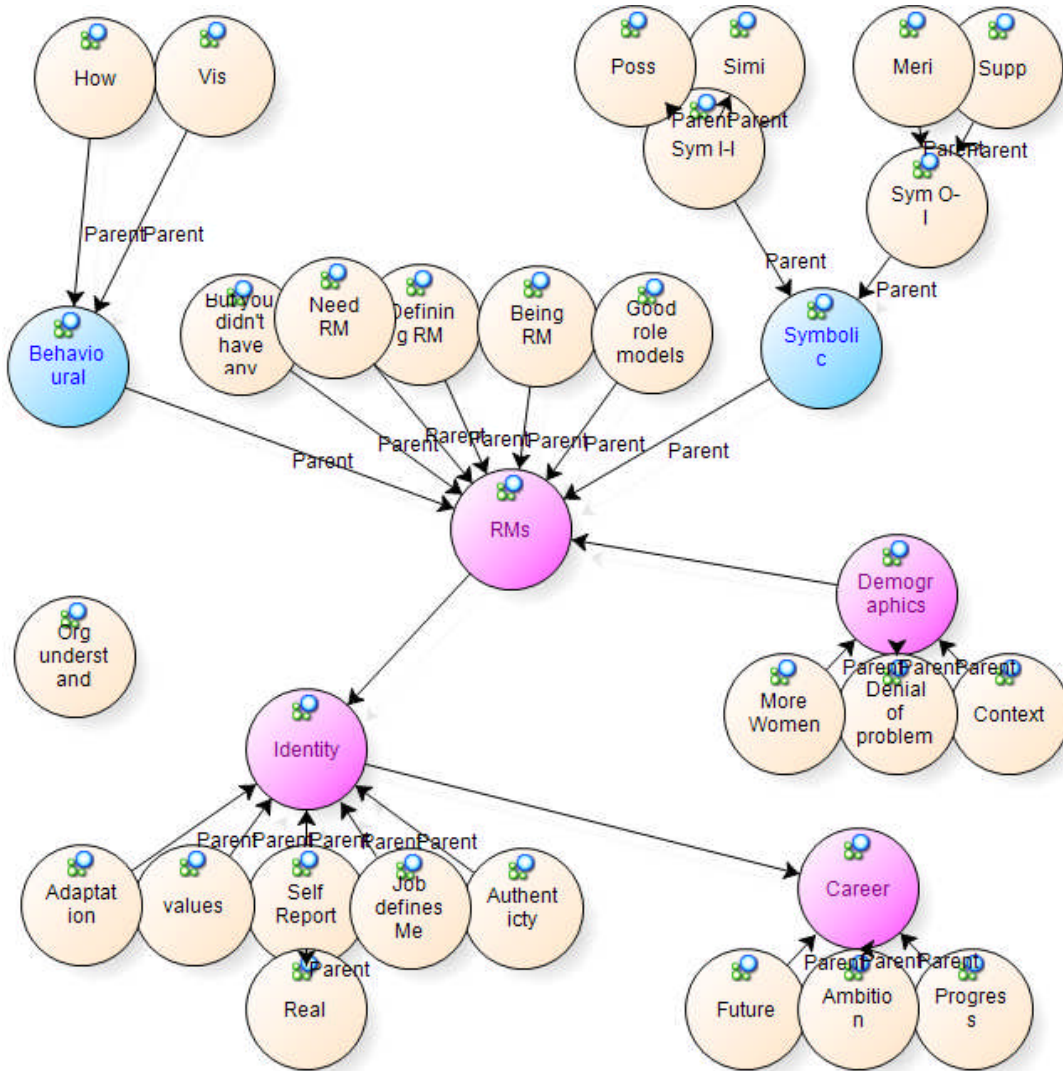
She was incredibly positive about [bank] and all the work that has been done thus far to get to an inclusive environment. It does take time and believes the organization is doing pretty much all it can.

#### **Post-transcribing:**

Good descriptions of two indivs who were significant role models for her – one male in the bank, one female in previous organization. Both had similar qualities and it was around management style: Calm, professional, developing people, collaborative, supportive.

But this is partly what she is being criticised for currently, in being described as *too professional*. She has ascertained that the problem for her business partners (as this is not a criticism from her team) is that she is not enough of a "sparring partner" (a term used to describe the biz/client relationship in the bank), does not shout and rant, deals with things *too* calmly! Sounds like she behaves in an adult manner, but the boys want her to play their game in their playground! This must be annoying and feel petty.

## 1.5 Coding framework after 5 interviews



## 1.6 Coding framework

Name	Memo Link			
<b>Career</b>				
<i>Tree Node</i>	Ambition			
<i>Tree Node</i>	Clients vs Colleagues perceptions			
<i>Tree Node</i>	Derailers			
<i>Tree Node</i>	Future			
<i>Tree Node</i>	Management			
<i>Tree Node</i>	Motivators			
	<i>Tree Node</i>	Adding value		
	<i>Tree Node</i>	Challenging role		
	<i>Tree Node</i>	Definition of success		
	<i>Tree Node</i>	Money		
	<i>Tree Node</i>	Recognition		
<i>Tree Node</i>	Process			
<i>Tree Node</i>	Progress			
<i>Tree Node</i>	Self Confidence			
<b>Demographics</b>				
<i>Tree Node</i>	One, twos, threes			
<i>Tree Node</i>	Context			
	<i>Tree Node</i>	Previous contexts		
<i>Tree Node</i>	Denial of problem			
<i>Tree Node</i>	Is it more than icing			
<i>Tree Node</i>	More Women	Yes		
<b>Identity</b>				
<i>Tree Node</i>	Adaptation			
<i>Tree Node</i>	Authenticity			
<i>Tree Node</i>	Boundaries			
<i>Tree Node</i>	Growing			
<i>Tree Node</i>	Job defines Me			
<i>Tree Node</i>	Overidentification			
<i>Tree Node</i>	Relational working			
<i>Tree Node</i>	Role-Person Id			
<i>Tree Node</i>	Self Report			
	<i>Tree Node</i>	Real		
<i>Tree Node</i>	values			



<i>Tree Node</i>	voice - passivity			
<b>Role Models</b>				
<i>Tree Node</i>	Behavioural			
	<i>Tree Node</i>	How to		
	<i>Tree Node</i>	Vision		
<i>Tree Node</i>	Being RM			
<i>Tree Node</i>	But you didn't have any			
<i>Tree Node</i>	Defining RM			
<i>Tree Node</i>	Good role models			
	Org understand			
	<i>Tree Node</i>	Close		
	<i>Tree Node</i>	Distant		
<i>Tree Node</i>	Inspi Qualities			
<i>Tree Node</i>	Lack of RM			
<i>Tree Node</i>	Need RM			
<i>Tree Node</i>	Negative RMs			
<i>Tree Node</i>	Symbolic			
	<i>Tree Node</i>	Sym Individ-Indiv		
		<i>Tree Node</i>	Possibility	
		<i>Tree Node</i>	Similarity	
	<i>Tree Node</i>	Sym Org-Indiv		
		<i>Tree Node</i>	Meritocracy	
		<i>Tree Node</i>	Support	
	<i>Tree Node</i>	Symbolic Org-Indiv		
			Of change	

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