WOMEN AT THE TOP: AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF WOMEN EXECUTIVES HOLDING TOP POSTS IN THE UK

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ABSTRACT

In the contemporary workplace persistent gender imbalance at top executive levels is a matter of public and political debate in the context of a growing realisation that this phenomenon is not only a social and cultural problem, it is also a business problem. From the perspective of improving business outcomes this thesis listens to the lived experience of 12 women holding, or who have recently held, top executive posts in the UK. The research includes two face to face interviews with each participant pursuing an abductive methodology and constructive grounded theory analysis of the data. Key findings of the study include:

A unique combination of elite characteristics demonstrated by the women in this study which may inform and target recruitment practice challenging the assumption that a larger pipeline per se will lead to more women taking up top posts.

Knowledge can be extended by considering public and private sectors together, including participants from the armed services, legal services and the police.

An increase in the number of non-executive directors on boards and top management teams may not increase the likelihood of more executive women at the top.

Individual relational capital and emotional choices may be key factors in whether women choose to take up a top post, or not.

Sponsorship is a prime driver in promoting women of high potential towards top posts.

The print press may account for considerable talent loss at the top in the UK.

The domestic contract is key; purchasing private childcare creates financial strain and may contribute to lost talent.

Generational change, the changed expectations and ambitions of women in the future, may mean less, not more, women arrive in top posts.

The views of women in this qualitative and explorative study are not intended to be representative of other women or of their organisations, but their views are powerful, and there are strong emergent themes which may guide further research and influence perspectives on the likelihood of achieving gender balance in the foreseeable future.

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PART ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE THESIS

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Research Agenda

This thesis explores the phenomenon of executive gender imbalance at the top of most private and public-sector organisations in the UK. The study investigates top boards and their equivalent in the public sector by listening to women who hold Chief Executive or Senior Executive positions at that level. This is a contemporary study in a crowded area of academic, political, popular and commercial interest in this issue (Doldor, Sealy and Vinnicombe, 2018; Hampton, 2018; Mills, 2018). My aim, through this research is to explore the persistence of this phenomenon which is such that business performance in the UK has been compromised in both the public and the private sectors (Hampton-Alexander, 2017; Jewell and Bazeley, 2018; Devillard, Hunt and Yee, 2018). I aim to explore through this research why, despite political pressure and contemporary workplace opportunities (Government Equalities Office and Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2010; Williams, 2013), most women still choose not to pursue a career path to a top executive position.

Much academic research, press and public noise has focused on the slow progress of women taking up top posts in the context of equality, equal opportunity and diversity (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2011). I undertake this study from the perspective of improving business outcomes across the public and the private sector in the current economic, political and social climate. This has been the focus of my work in the public and the private sector for many years and I have observed and experienced compromised business outcomes and flawed decision making due in part to gender imbalance at the most senior level. This perspective is not set in opposition to, or as an alternative to, a perspective which seeks improved equality and diversity per se (Coleman, 2011). Both perspectives are valid but I explore this phenomenon in relation to improving business outcomes because I perceive that this perspective can drive change with some urgency (Hampton, 2018). My positionality is that improved executive gender balance can drive improved business outcomes, but this is not necessarily a position rooted in a capitalist as opposed to a feminist approach. My work experience across both public and private sectors is that better business management in all sectors not only improves the bottom line, but also company reputation, Corporate Social Responsibility, entrepreneurial outcomes, product quality, and services which are profitably launched (Lyngsie and Foss, 2017; Fombrun, 2005).

The study focuses on those making executive decisions and is not concerned with overall numbers of women on boards and top teams (Sealy, Doldor and Vinnicombe, 2016). This research seeks to listen to women who make executive decisions at the top of private companies and in the public sector as

they describe their lived experience. The aim of this research is to explore whether there are any issues which emerge through a dialogue with women at the top which may indicate why women chose not to take up top posts at any increasing pace, thus contributing to knowledge and practice which may drive change. I have sought to include in this study women who have reached the top in both private and public organisations in the UK to explore if there are congruencies in the lived experience of women in top posts in both sectors, and to further enquire if there are shared lessons which can be learned across the sectors.

Executive Gender Balance and Business Outcomes

From a political perspective improving business outcomes is a key issue which drives the government commissioned reports on women on boards in the UK (Hampton and Alexander, 2016) and in Europe (European Commission, 2015), and which is a factor in the Sex and Power Reports in the UK which consider public sector leadership (Jewell and Bazeley, 2018). The business case for gender diversity is described as relating to four key dimensions, improving performance, accessing the widest possible talent pool, being more responsive to the market, and achieving better corporate governance (Doldor et al., 2012). The business case for improved executive gender balance seeks outcomes not necessarily related solely to the bottom line per se, but to the increased availability of funds for public services, reduced waste of talent and energy, and decisions which impact positively on living standards and quality of life for citizens of the UK. Compromised business outcomes where there is gender imbalance at executive levels are real and quantifiable. In the USA, companies with a high representation of women on the board are described as having 84% more sales, 60% better return on invested capital, and 46% more return on investments (Carter et al., 2011). Calculations in the UK are equally stark (Trinh et al., 2018) where the positive effects of female leadership on FTSE 100 stocks between 2006 and 2016 were calculated. There was particular positive value identified where there was a female Chair and female Directors. Some studies found less correlation between women at the top and business outcomes. Trinh et al. (2018), for example, reported a negative value associated with female CEO's, and there have been other studies which have identified negative, or no identifiable influence, of women at the top in some respects such as market performance, particularly where there was a weaker shareholder influence on the board (Bear, Rahman and Post, 2010; Post and Byron, 2014). Findings related to the presence of women at the top and business outcomes which indicated less than positive associations were contested in the same year as Trinh et al. published (Trinh et al., 2018). Hoobler et al. (2018) found the value of women as CEO's was identified as being very positive, particularly in sales performance (Hoobler, Courtney and Masterson, 2018). There are factors which can influence the positive relationship found between entrepreneurial outcomes for business and the presence of female managers at a most senior level (Lyngsie and Foss, 2017). This trend was found to

be negatively impacted where there are higher proportions of women in the workplace (ibid). However, the McKinsey Quarterly 2018 (Devillard, Hunt and Yee, 2018) summarises the presence of women at the top positively in general and more widely across the G20. In 2010 looking across 279 companies they report that where there is a greater proportion of women on executive committees there is an earned return of 47% more than companies with no female executive members. KPMG as sponsors of the Hampton-Alexander Reports state (Hampton, 2017, p. 6):

> *"Business leaders are beginning to understand the importance of the diversity debate and increasingly frame it as a conversation about performance, productivity and the bottom line as well as a vital issue for our society to address."*

It is not only in the corporate sector where often C-suite membership and business success are linked meaningfully, although there are fewer metrics on business outcomes in the public sector in the UK. However, The Women and Work Commission estimated that unleashing the full potential of women could be worth £23 billion to the exchequer (Business in the Community, 2013). From my perspective, an organisation which manages its business well creates better economic and service outcomes for all citizens and this is at the heart of this research enquiry. It is with enthusiasm that I undertake this research to explore whether change is possible.

Evidence of improved business outcomes for better balanced gender executive boards and management teams accounts for the high level of interest over the last decade by politicians and business who are keen to maximise talent and thus improve performance. This enquiry considers why, in the face of considerable academic research and political initiatives, there is evidence that little change of any significance has occurred over the last decade with regard to women taking up executive posts at the top of organisations with the exception of female executives in the NHS (Sealy, 2016). In the last decade there have been more women on boards in terms of numbers, more non-executive posts going to women, but there are few examples of increased numbers of women taking up the most senior executive posts in the UK and worldwide (Robinson, 2016). In the most recent government commissioned report the numbers of women on FTSE 100 boards was positively described as exceeding 30% for the first time, but CEO posts in fact fell to a low of 6 (Hampton, 2018). This study aims to explore why the cohort of executive female leaders is not improving in many areas by listening to what women holding top posts currently have to say about this issue and whether this position is likely to change in their view. The study explores the factors which influence the choices women make during their career path especially when the opportunity to take a top job is presented.

I have set the agenda for this research enquiry and pursued it with passion, but the factors which have influenced the outcomes of the enquiry and the contribution to knowledge have been led by the

participants and not by a hypothesis or research questions which I have imposed. The method of enquiry, an abductive research model, was chosen which delivered the ability to listen to participants, to review with them emerging themes, and to include their reflections and meaning making (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012).

1.2 Research Objectives

There are two overarching research objectives for this study and these are, contributing to knowledge and contributing to practice, in order to explore if change can be achieved in the field of persistent executive gender imbalance at the top of organisations in the UK.

To Contribute to the Body of Academic Knowledge

I look to contribute to extant research and theory from the perspective of women holding executive posts in this environment and to offer an interpretation of the realities they describe as their lived experience. The research objectives in this context consider the possible impact of the findings of this enquiry in contributing to extant research about workplace structures, reputation building, talent management, and workplace culture (Ariss, Cascio and Paauwe, 2014; Brammer and Pavelin, 2004; Williams, 2013). I also look to introduce to the body of academic knowledge factors which have influenced the choices women in the study have made and which they have observed other women making, which have not previously been extensively researched. Many of the research topics are identified from the emerging themes raised by participants.

To Contribute to Practice

I look to contribute to practice, to talent management, through improved understanding of the impact of coaching and other management development tools on women who are likely to progress to senior executive positions in the workplace and the support mechanisms which high potential women choose including those which are less researched (Ariss, Cascio and Paauwe, 2014; Sherman and Freas, 2004; Carter, 2001). I pursue this research objective by exploring which women are likely to progress to the most senior positions and where management interventions may best be applied.

Further, I aim to add to knowledge and practice by considering the reflections of the women in the participant group not only on their lived experience, their career path to date, but also through listening to their thoughts on the meaning and implications of persistent executive gender imbalance for the future workplace.

To achieve these overarching objectives the specific objectives of this study are to:

Critically review the literature on progress towards gender balanced executive leadership at the top of organisations in the UK, and review trends worldwide in order to identify any locations which illustrate success in establishing and maintaining better balanced executive gender boards.

Investigate the phenomenon of persistent executive gender imbalance at the top of organisations in the UK using an abductive method of enquiry, and critically appraise its success as a methodology.

Listen to what women at the top have to say, and present the findings, the contributions of women in the study, reporting any congruence as a group and emerging themes, as well as the important messages from outliers to this powerful group.

Interpret the findings of the study in relation to extant research and identify factors, as described by this group of participants, which I consider to have emerged as powerful in the way they influence the choices women are making as well as likely trends for the future.

Critically consider the implications of this listening study for contemporary knowledge and practice, and for future scholars in this field.

To achieve this, I have collected data from interviews with executive women currently holding top posts in both the public and the private sector and I have listened to what they have to say. Over a period of 18 months I have interviewed the participant group twice and analysed over 19,000 lines of audio transcript. I have analysed and interpreted the data to draw out emerging themes which address the research objectives and contribute to the extensive body of knowledge on this issue, and to practice, from the perspectives of some of those living the experience in the contemporary workplace.

I chose to pursue this study understanding that the approach was risky in that the participants were already highly successful in their own spheres and may well not describe their experiences in terms of any common themes; each lived experience could have been unique. However, there is a remarkable degree of congruence around major themes which is a powerful indicator of where the contribution of this study to research and practice might be valuable. Not all experiences are shared experiences; in some areas there is divergence and I explore this. These issues are pertinent to this study and lean to a contribution which looks across organisations and sectors to explore issues of divergence as well as well as congruence.

1.3 The Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is presented in five parts. Each part identifies a step on the research journey towards achieving the research objectives.

Part One: The Context and Research Agenda

Part One introduces the study from the perspective of the context of the enquiry and the research agenda. This section sets the study in the contemporary workplace and defines the boundaries of the research enquiry. I explain the limitations to the study, the boundaries set and the way the extensive body of literature has been managed.

Part Two: The Review of Literature

Part Two of this thesis presents a review of the literature and critically considers published academic literature and other relevant documents about both the public and the private sector, mainly in the last decade, and in the UK. The review of literature however, also considers published work describing trends worldwide where there may be examples of a much-improved executive gender balance at the top of corporate and public organisations, and I critically investigate why this might have been achieved and if such improvements have been sustained. The literature review considers the theoretical propositions which have been presented to account for persisting gender imbalance and some of the issues in previous academic studies which have been identified as needing review or requiring development such as the issue of reputational capital. The review of literature identifies the research topics to be explored in this study.

Part Three: Methodology and Method

The identification of a methodology appropriate to undertaking this enquiry is described in Part Three. An abductive research strategy within a social constructivist paradigm was identified as appropriate, as well as exciting, although there was some degree of risk. I balanced the risk in terms of the possibility of implementing a research approach which enabled me to listen, hear and capture what women executives occupying top jobs in the UK now have to say about the phenomenon in this enquiry against the chance that each participant would describe a lived experience that was unique. Part Three also describes the research methods deployed to practically arrive in the field to gather data, and the method chosen to analyse the data. The latter involved 24 face to face interviews and the use of constructive grounded theory and line by line coding to establish the degree of rigour which I required. Part Three also describes the issues of confidentiality which were integral to this study and the ethical consideration I undertook to achieve this.

Part Four: Findings

Part Four presents the findings through the voices and the contributions of the participants. I present the findings around five major themes which emerged, and several sub-themes which were identified as important by the participants. This part of the research does not include researcher interpretation,

but a gathering together and presentation, of what participants spoke of as important and their thoughtful consideration of emerging themes through reflection as well as a perspective on the future. This part of the thesis identifies, in the consideration of each theme, issues which were not controversial, and those which were not important enough to be worth more than a moment of participants' time. I include a presentation of themes which were highly controversial and where there was dissonance between participants. This part of the thesis identifies themes which emerged from a surprising congruence of views across geographies, organisations, and sectors.

Part Five: Interpretation, Discussion and Conclusions

Part Five presents an interpretation of the findings in Part Four and analysis in terms of the research topics and the objectives of the study. This part discusses the implications of the findings from this study for research and practice. In Part Five I identify the limitations of this research as well as possible areas for future research and exploration. I consider how reflexivity impacts the research process and I discuss lessons I have learned about the research process which may be useful for scholars in the future. In this part I look to draw together findings which may have a bearing on improving the executive gender balance at the top of organisations in the UK, and I also reflect on what the findings may mean for the longer term positioning of women in the workplace.

Figure 1: The Structure of the Thesis
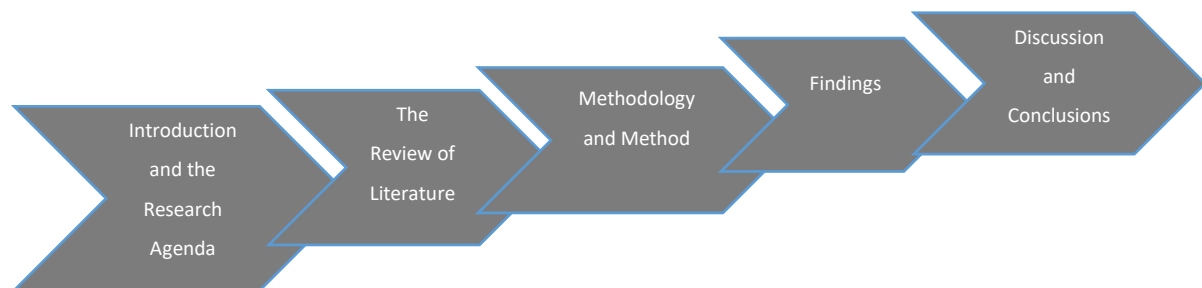
Summary: Introduction to the Thesis

This thesis explores the phenomenon of persistent gender imbalance at the most senior executive levels of the private and public sector in the UK from the perspective of improving business outcomes. The research considers executive women who have achieved top posts in the contemporary workplace and seeks to listen to what they have to say as they describe their lived experience. In this chapter I present a rationale for the approach that I have taken and the research strategy I have deployed to achieve the research agenda. I seek to contribute to extant research and knowledge, and to practice and the management of talent. The research enquiry travels through five steps which form the structure of the thesis, leading to an analysis of findings and an interpretation of meaning making,

highlighting congruence or divergence from current plans both political and social to achieve change and the pace of improved gender balance at the top.

PART TWO: THE REVIEW OF LITERATURE

CHAPTER TWO: THE STRUCTURE OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This review of academic and published literature presents the context for this research and determines the research topics to be addressed. Much has been written about gender balance at the top of organisations and this review of literature examines some of the significant contributions to this extensive body of work, from the perspective of business efficiency, effectiveness and best outcomes (Hampton, 2018; Hoobler, Courtney and Masterson, 2018). Academic research into gender balance, or lack of it, at the top of organisations often tends to focus on issues of equality, equal opportunity and diversity (Wingfield, 2010; Meyerowitz, 1994; Coleman, 2011). These are important factors and elements in the context of any investigation into gender imbalance at the top of organisations and in understanding the literature which is reviewed here (section 1.1). Intersectional issues are not excluded although this review specifically considers literature which focuses on exploring executive gender imbalance and the link to business outcomes with regard to individual challenge, organisational structures and systemic impact.

There is a wide range of published literature about women's career paths (Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban-Metcalfe, 2010; Davidson and Burke, 2011; Davies, 2011; Vinnicombe, Doldor and Turner, 2014). Much has also been written about barriers which impact on progress such that relatively few women appear to have taken up senior executive positions in the world of work (Eagly and Carli, 2007; Benko and Anderson, 2013; Followell, 2014; Glass and Cook, 2016). The recent literature examined here is often predicated on an assumption that women wish to progress to top posts but that there are barriers which prevent such progress which may not be the same as those experienced by men (Powell, 2019; Slaughter, 2013; Eagly and Carli, 2018). Therefore, a significant element of this large body of academic research has focused on understanding this phenomenon with a view to improving access to top posts by exploring perceived barriers for women (Singh, Terjesen and Vinnicombe, 2008; Hauser, 2014; Morley and Walsh, 2005; Eagly and Carli, 2018). There has also been published research on which interventions impact most positively on observed trends and on assisting women to surmount those perceived barriers (Kellerman and Rhode, 2017). The mentoring and coaching of senior women is a factor in this context (Followell, 2014; Leonard-Cross, 2010). This study explores factors which arise from listening to women at the top, which may add to the knowledge on issues identified in the review of literature. In particular this study examines the assumption that women wish to progress to top jobs and in many cases cannot because of institutional, systemic or societal barriers which prevent this. In this study I consider the possibility that women increasingly do not wish

to occupy top jobs and make career choices accordingly. In 1999 Carly Fiorina, previously CEO of Hewlett Packard is quoted by Eagly and Carli (Eagly and Carli, 2007, p. 6) as saying *"I hope that by now we are at the point that everyone has figured out that there is not a glass ceiling".* In 2011 Coleman (Coleman, 2011, p. 6) said *"the subtle barrier of the glass ceiling continues to be a force in the lives of women".* This study explores this debate and examines which factors determine which women chose to take top jobs.

The method of analysis of the data chosen is constructive grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). Classical grounded theory suggests strongly that a review of literature is undertaken after the data is collected and analysed to avoid the influence of the researcher's knowledge and assumptions arising from a study of the literature (Keneally, 2012). I chose not to use classical grounded theory in this research, in part because constructive grounded theory (Gibbs, 2013) is less emphatic on the point of when a review of literature would be best undertaken in relation to data collection and initial coding, as I had already completed much of the survey of literature. Also, the flexibility and application of that version of grounded theory best suits my research enquiry and methodological paradigm. However, I chose not to undertake a review of literature on management interventions to promote the pace of women progressing and achieving top posts until after the data collection and initial coding was completed. A review of literature relevant to the new themes arising in Part Four, The Findings, which did not emerge in the initial literature review is undertaken and described in Part Five, The Discussion. The rest of the literature review was undertaken in advance of the collection of data, the interviews with participants, and the initial coding of their responses.

This review of published literature focuses on two main areas which form the rationale for this thesis and the research agenda:

> A critical consideration of published evidence regarding the pace of progress made by women in recent years towards arriving in senior executive positions.

> A review of published research which offers analysis and explanation for the persistent phenomenon of gender imbalance at the senior executive level of public and private organisations in the UK in the 21st Century, and organisational responses to the perceived need for change.

The literature review therefore explores the underlying historical and current debate in which this research study is set including the identification of changes in the workplace structure and culture in recent years (Williams, 2013). Further, the literature review draws out key issues explored in recent research regarding newer constructs such as reputational capital, as appropriate to a contemporary work environment (Terjesen and Singh, 2008). This chapter describes the assumptions, scope, structure and limitations of the literature review and the sources used.

2.2 Assumptions

Generally, recent research has been based on an underlying assumption that a better gender distribution throughout the workplace, including in top jobs, is 'a good thing' for women and for the organisations in which they work (Hampton and Alexander, 2016). The business case for increasing the number of women on corporate boards includes accessing talent from the widest possible pool, aligning with a diverse customer base, and avoiding groupthink by achieving better corporate governance (Hoobler, Courtney and Masterson, 2018). This is not a recent consideration. More than twenty years ago a business case was considered for promoting gender diversity at leadership level because this offered a strategic advantage in the area of globalisation (Adler, 1997). Adler (ibid) considers that women could bring an added element of diversity, cross cultural awareness and transformational leadership skills to boards. Terjesen and Singh (2008) assume that that gender diversity on boards is advantageous for organisations and cite Adler (1997) in their study considering the global position of females on boards and environmental characteristics which impact on women's advancement. The Sex and Power Report 2011 suggests that *"squandering talent comes at a cost"* (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2011, p. 11), and the Women and Work Commission in 2006 (Great Britain Women & Work Commission, 2006) estimates that the cost of unlocking women's talent in the workplace could be £15 billion or more. The case made in the USA discussed in section 1.1 (Devillard, Hunt and Yee, 2018) is an example of an increasing number of contemporary contributions suggesting business problems associated with gender imbalance on top boards. Generally, the business case for gender balance at executive levels in the public and private sector in the UK may be considered made, and this assumption is accepted here.

2.3 Scope

The scope of this review of literature is not open-ended. It is bounded by considerations of literature relevant to the research within a particular timeframe, the focus of the review in relation to the phenomenon to be explored, the range of literature to be reviewed to build a relevant context, and academic disciplines and sources important to the literature review to enable a full picture to be identified.

The Timeframe

The review in this thesis looks to literature which provides a relevant context about current activity and therefore mostly considers academic literature published from 2008 and through the following decade. The intention is to sensibly contain the body of knowledge and refine it such that the critical review is relevant to women finding their way in the workplace in the 21st century. Key publications before this date are referred to in relation to their relevance to building the body of knowledge or

setting the direction of enquiry. A focus on 2008-2018 is a particularly important refinement in regard to discussion of published theoretical analyses which account for the lack of progress women have made in arriving in top jobs in this century. The mechanisms of communication, legislation and government, which all play a part now, are remote from the work environment of earlier decades and as such do not assist in the exploration of the research topics in this review about the present day position (Benko, Anderson and Vickberg, 2011; Ball, 2003). Although this review of literature looks to the past decade I am also cognisant of the fact that the pace of change in this decade is such that there is a focus here on the most recent literature where research has been undertaken after the financial crisis of 2008 and where there is an awareness of emerging generational variations with regard to women in top jobs.

The Focus of the Review

This review focuses on jobs which hold executive power and influence; those posts where decisions of influence are made. The Sex and Power Report 2011 (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2011, p. 2) refers to *"top jobs"* as those of *"positions of power or influence".* Titles vary depending on the organisation but in all cases this review seeks to explore women's progress in achieving top executive posts rather than non-executive positions or executive management roles which defer to top post holders for final decision making. The definition in the Sex and Power Report 2011 (ibid) regarding 'top posts' is adopted for the purpose of this literature survey.

The Range of Literature

This review of literature introduces an argument which considers how opportunities arise and can be captured by women to successfully take up top posts in the UK. However, the context in the world of work and for executive leaders at the top of organisations is often global (Singh, Terjesen and Vinnicombe, 2008). Singh et al. (ibid) discussing newly appointed directors in the boardroom note that 39% of new female director appointments to FTSE 100 companies in 2008 were not British. In order for this review to be relevant to the world of work in the 21st century it takes account of published research on women's career paths, influencing factors and practice worldwide (Ladkin and Spillar, 2013; Eagly and Carli, 2007; Robinson, 2016). Therefore, the substantive position sought in the literature search is for women in the UK in both the public and private sectors but includes a search of literature relating to the worldwide position as a reference point and to ensure that issues identified in the UK are not unique.

Academic Disciplines and Sources

Literature from several disciplines have been absorbed into this review. The phenomenon of women leaders accepting top executive posts, or not, is enriched by discussion and debate across philosophical, psychological, sociological and many other boundaries and perspectives. Further, it is recognised that the subject of this thesis is a matter for academic, political and popular debate and views influence each other and are incorporated across boundaries one with another. This review follows suit and includes in its scope recognition that this is a wide, current and politically charged subject which is in constant change (Sealy and Vinnicombe, 2013; Followell, 2014; Davies, 2011; Mills, 2018).

In relation to the review of literature, in areas which consider the substantive and the theoretical context of the phenomenon under review, that is, persisting gender imbalance at top executive levels in the public and private sector in the 21st century, there has been a thorough search of the Business Source Complete, Academic Source Complete, and Emerald Insight databases in addition to consideration of government documents, and Google Scholar searches which have identified other sources such as recent books, reports and edited collections of literature. The key search words throughout are 'women', 'leadership', and 'women at the top' linked with 'public sector' and 'corporate'. The most successful journey into literature has been through pursuing references made in key texts.

2.4 The Structure of the Literature Review

This review of literature flows through several sections summarised in Table 1. Academic and other relevant literature is explored relating to the position of women on boards and in the private sector in the UK using the international position as a comparison. The review considers theoretical and conceptual explanations and hypotheses for the positions identified and the changed and changing workplace of recent decades.

Chapter Three critically explores the pace of progress of women towards gender parity at senior executive levels in both the public and the private sectors in the UK, and Chapter Four reviews the body of academic literature on the international position of women progressing towards top posts exploring issues of congruence and difference to set the position in the UK in the context of the global world of work.

Chapter Five considers theoretical approaches and organisational concepts developed in academic literature to explain progress, and barriers to progress for women aspiring to gain top jobs, together with an exploration of literature which describes workplace developments in this century towards a

neoliberal environment and the impact of rapid change in the workplace on some opportunities for women. The literature review in this chapter also includes a section which considers published academic research on contemporary efforts by organisations to intervene to accelerate the pace of progress of women and their career paths.

Chapter Six draws together the research questions which arise from the literature review relevant to this study and which focus the choice of methodological approach of this research project and the original contributions to knowledge which are sought.

Table 1: Structure of the Review of Literature

CHAPTER	TITLE	AIMS OF THE CHAPTER
3	Trends UK: the direction of travel of women towards gender parity at a senior executive level	▪ To critically examine historical trends and research regarding gender balance at senior executive levels in the UK ▪ To explore the difference, if any, between progress and gender balance at executive levels, of women in the public and private sectors
4	Trends Worldwide: women in executive positions internationally	▪ To explore trends beyond the UK and discuss any impact or informative comparison with the UK sector
5	Theoretical approaches: barriers to women's progress and organisational responses	▪ To critically review traditional approaches to the study of organisational barriers preventing women from achieving top jobs ▪ To explore the impact of neoliberalism in the workplace, the internet, and the impact of performativity ▪ To review traditional leadership styles and alternative approaches relating to contemporary workplace environments ▪ To review the theory of reputational capital in a changing work environment ▪ To review management interventions constructed to improve talent management including the use of coaching and mentoring.
6	The Research Topics	A summary of the research questions arising from the literature review and an explanation of the rationale for these

2.5 Limitations

There are complex issues of intersectionality in any discussion of women in organisations and these are acknowledged. For example, with regard to women's career paths key intersecting factors include issues of race, class, family, financial capacity, remuneration and domestic responsibility. Some factors similarly influence men's career paths (Williams, 2013). Some academic literature has focused on intersecting factors (Meyerowitz, 1994; Wingfield, 2010). Important intersecting issues are not ignored here and the findings in Chapters 10-15 discuss intersectional issues of class, financial capacity

and domestic responsibilities, for example, as they arise in the data. Reference is made where relevant in the literature review but the main focus remains senior executive women who have the opportunity to access top jobs and those workplace factors which impact on their career paths.

It is accepted that for many corporate organisations their operational context is global but, for the purposes of this research, although the worldwide context is considered in the literature review, the focus is on the progress of women in the UK in the public and private sectors and issues identified in the review of worldwide trends mostly function as comparators or for clarification. The review of theoretical literature draws on academic research which has a bearing on women at work in the UK. The impact of interventions such as coaching and mentoring and the aspect of building reputational capital is considered in this literature survey only in the UK context. Some texts describing what is happening beyond the UK are illuminating to the line of argument and have been included (Benko and Anderson, 2013; Pini, 2005). Other texts have not been included in this literature review and the review does not offer therefore a comprehensive review of developments, theoretical analysis or interventions beyond the UK.

In some areas the literature review is limited by the small amount of published literature available such as in the area of reputational capital or sponsorship. This is acknowledged and is an important reason for further investigation in this research project, especially in relation to an increasing body of work concerning the neoliberal workplace where it was found that associated career planning concepts such as highly individualised career maps or individualised programmes of career development are increasingly sought and where reputational capital may be a key factor (Singh, Terjesen and Vinnicombe, 2008; Purcell, Christian and Frost, 2012).

This review of literature focuses on executive positions of influence at the top of public and corporate organisations in the UK. Women who progress and succeed in other sectors, such as the independent or charity sectors are not included in this review of literature or the research enquiry. This in no way denies the importance of other sectors, in the same way as some important intersectional issues such as race are not included in this literature review.

2.6 Summary: The Review of Published Literature

This chapter sets the context for the literature review, its aims and limitations and the approach taken to refine an extensive body of work on this subject. The literature review seeks to critically discuss published work relevant to the issue of women's career paths in the UK in the 21st century. This chapter summarises the structure of the review of literature and describes how the context for the thesis is set. As well as critically reviewing analysis of research on the progress of women in the last

decade, the review explores published research on concepts, theories and interventions which may impact on how aspiring women are attracted to top jobs and how current organisational interventions attempt to assist them to reach those posts in the public and private sector, should they so wish. In order to manage the extensive volume of published literature, academic, political and popular, some limitations have been applied. These include focusing on gender and no other intersectional issues such as race unless these arise as part of the emergent themes in the findings, focusing on the public and private sectors, and not including the charity or independent sectors.

CHAPTER THREE: EXECUTIVE WOMEN AND GENDER PARITY AT THE TOP IN THE UK

3.1 Introduction

This chapter brings together published research across the corporate and public sectors in the UK. I identify the substantive position of women today; the 'what is' with regards to the pace of progress towards women achieving senior executive positions. This chapter identifies a phenomenon of persisting gender imbalance at the top of most organisations.

3.2 The Corporate Sector in the UK

The movement of women into and out of the boards of FTSE 100 companies in the UK has been reported on an annual basis since 1999 by Cranfield University School of Management (Doldor, Sealy and Vinnicombe, 2018) and since 2011 by the government's annual Women on Boards Reports published by the Department for Business Innovation and Skills which concluded in 2015 (Davies, 2015). This was followed by the Hampton-Alexander Reviews looking at FTSE women leaders, first published in 2016 by the Department for Business Energy and Industrial Strategy (Hampton and Alexander, 2016) which extends its investigation from boards to executive committees (ExComms) and Direct Reports. It is therefore possible in this limited but important sphere of FTSE companies, to follow a detailed description of trends at the top of the corporate world (Hampton, 2018).

Trends in the Corporate Sector

The 2002 Female FTSE Report describes an environment in which there had been a period of stagnation and, although progress appeared to be very slow, there was an indication that this may change (Singh and Vinnicombe, 2003). That year the Female FTSE Board Report indicates that only a minority of FTSE 100 companies had any women on boards as executive directors (ibid). By 2007 the annual report described encouraging results overall although figures actually show the number of women in CEO posts to be the lowest for 9 years (Sealy, Singh and Vinnicombe, 2007). The counting of overall numbers, for both executive and non-executive posts, appears to be the critical element in reporting progress which masks the decline in women's executive power and influence. By 2012 more caution is expressed about the progress of women to board positions and there are wide fluctuations in-year between the number of women appointed to any position on boards of FTSE 100 companies, which stood at 40% in the first 6 months and fell back to 26% in the second half of the year (Sealy and Vinnicombe, 2013).

The 2013 report entitled 'The False Dawn of Progress for Women on Boards' indicates that progress was not only slow but had faltered and expectations had not been fulfilled (Sealy and Vinnicombe, 2013). However, the 2014 report is again positive and reports some significant areas of progress such

as the fact that the number of all male FSTE 100 boards had reduced to just 2 (Vinnicombe, Doldor and Turner, 2014). In spite of the positive language there was a fall in the numbers of women appointed to executive posts on boards in that year. Numbers were very low, with only 20 female executive directors (6.9%) on FTSE 100 boards and 29 (5.3%) on FTSE 250 boards (ibid). The 'false dawn' of 2013 had in fact continued. By 2018 the presence of women in FTSE 100 companies rose but the numbers of women in executive positions on boards stayed flat (Doldor, Sealy and Vinnicombe, 2018). The 2018 report by Cranfield University is illuminatingly entitled 'Busy Going Nowhere with the Female Executive Pipeline' (ibid). By 2018 although there was positive reporting because overall numbers of women on FTSE 100 boards exceeded 30% for the first time in fact they report that there were only 7 female CEOs and by October of that year this figure had fallen to 6.

The independent Hampton-Alexander Reviews from 2016 to 2018, which are supported by the Department for Business, Energy and Industry, include a gender analysis of executive committees (ExComms) and Direct Reports on the basis that more women just below the board would translate over time into more women on the board, however this had failed to impact by the report of 2018 (Hampton, 2018) . The 2017 report indicated almost no increase in women on FTSE 100 boards, up from just 22.1 % in 2016 to 22.8 % in 2017. There was even less progress between 2016 and 2017 on the ExComms where numbers of women moved from a mere 18.7% in 2016 to 19.3% in 2017, almost no rise whatsoever (Hampton, 2017). The number of female Chairs was entirely flat, and female CEO's on FTSE 350 boards fell from 15 to 12 (ibid). There was an increase in the number of all male boards and there were 74 boards where there was only one woman member (ibid). The 2018 report summarises poor progress in that between 2011 and 2018 the number of FTSE 100 female CEO's rose from 5 to 6. This poor rate of progress is masked by the increase in female non-executive directors from 15.6% to 36.5% on the same boards over the same period, with FTSE 250 companies showing a rise in female non-executive members to 30.5% but female CEO's falling from 10 to 6 (ibid).

The Davies 'Women on Boards Reports' was launched in 2011 as a political initiative by the then new Coalition Government (Davies, 2011). This was in the context of continuing debate over several years by the UK with the European Commission on what measures might be undertaken to bring about gender parity on boards and the explicit intention of the UK Government to avoid legislative quotas or European led legislative intervention. The 2014 report describes the subject of women on boards as a 'hot topic' and the increased number of women on boards (executive and non-executive) as evidence that the politically supported voluntary approach is being grasped by British business and is working (Davies, 2014) . The report fails to acknowledge that the number of women in executive or

decision making positions had in fact declined but focuses on overall numbers to demonstrate political success as did the Female FTSE 100 Report in the same year (Vinnicombe, Doldor and Turner, 2014).

The Equality and Human Rights Commission in its Sex and Power Report 2011 is more realistic. It looks across both the public and private sectors and describes the progress of women to positions of authority as *"tortuously slow"* indicating that at the current rate of travel it would take another 70 years to achieve an equal number of men and women directors (executive and non-executive) in FTSE 100 companies (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2011, p. 1).

Summary: the Corporate Sector in the UK.

A review of the Female FTSE Board Reports recognises the political pressure to achieve improved gender balance on corporate boards and resulting positive headlines. Nevertheless a critical review describes uneven and very slow progress. Over recent years there has been an increase in female non-executive directors and a reduction in female executive directors. Many more FTSE 100 and FTSE 250 companies have women on the boards, few have women in any numbers in the most senior executive decision-making roles such as CEO, CFO or COO posts.

3.3 The Public Sector in the UK

The term 'public sector' is used here with reference to the UK and therefore includes central and local government, police services, the judiciary, health, and higher education. I have not included elected representatives as part of this study although this may be an area of interest for future research. The public sector traditionally employs women in greater numbers than men and therefore has a significantly larger talent pool from which to draw women towards top jobs than the private sector in both the USA and the UK (Williams, 1995). Terjesen and Singh (Terjesen and Singh, 2008, p. 61) explore the proportion of women on boards in an international context, saying "*the public sector may be more influenced by the political will for change whilst the private sector is resistant"*. There has been political will for change explicitly expressed in the UK since 2006 (Prosser, 2009; Davies, 2011). The Sex and Power Report 2011 (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2011) confirms that progress in the public sector compares favourably with uneven progress, or even reverses, observed in the private sector. However, although girls routinely outperform boys both at school and university, with the exception of the NHS, few women make it to top posts. *"Where women do find positions of power and influence it is more likely to be in the public and voluntary sectors"* (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2011, p. 7). The report suggests however, that the figures for 2011 indicate a growing gap between the public and private sectors in terms of women taking up the opportunity of a top post. This is further enforced by the most recent Sex and Power Report of 2018 (Jewell and Bazeley, 2018).

Relative to the corporate sector there is little academic literature measuring the progress of women towards taking up top posts in the public sector and the few texts on the subject are described as *"scattered strands of literature on public sector leadership"* (Orazi, Turrina and Valotti, 2013, p. 1). The public sector emerges in published literature as a distinctive and different domain in the field of management studies and although improved performance is equally important in the public sector as the private sector, styles of leadership to leverage that success are of a different order and ethics and integrity play a more important role (Orazi, Turrina and Valotti, 2013; Ladkin, 2010).

Local Government

A review of literature reveals that published research in the local government element of the public sector (for example Social Care Services, Children's Services, and Education Services) is more focused on why the sector behaves differently to the private sector rather than the pace of change. There is also a focus on change in the pattern of leadership to explain organisational change (Lustig et al., 2013). Leadership in the public sector is seen as moving away from a simple unitary identity early in the 21st Century and emerges as a discursive phenomenon (Ford, 2006). Ford describes managers contracting with the discourse and questioning stereotypical notions of leadership and the traditional dominance of one form of leadership over another, one social group over another. Leadership developments are much more a key indicator in the literature of change in the public sector than the private sector. This masks gender imbalance at the top, by focusing on performance winners and losers and their leadership styles (Berg, Barry and Chandler, 2012).

A small but illuminating study on the challenge of leadership in Children's Services, an area with which I am very familiar, describes the challenge to perform in a complex, changing and high interruption environment, leading to a hybrid model of leadership being developed which includes charismatic, directive, participative, supportive and networking leadership styles (Purcell, Christian and Frost, 2012). Purcell, Christian and Frost, (ibid) comment that the Local Government Workforce Survey of 2008 demonstrates that 86% of councils operated a 'grow your own' career pathway approach and that it may well be that senior jobs such as the Director of Children's Services would go to those in the workforce who could *"demonstrate performance across a range of requirements suitable to a particular locality"* (Local Government Association, 2008, p. 95). The issue of the impact of this change is not assessed in terms of gender balance.

There has been a steady increase in women taking senior posts in police services, up in the last 7 years. Records indicate that by March 2017, 28.8% of Chief Officers were women (Hargreaves, Husband and Lineham, 2017, p. 32).

Higher Education

The history of academic institutions are hegemonic masculinist and have excluded women from universities in the UK for 600 years stated Hereward (Heward, 1996). She saw no progress following the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975. In the 21st Century change appears slow but there is movement. There are more women at undergraduate level but they remain in the lower levels of the profession generally (Morley and Walsh, 2005). Heward (1996) views Institutions of higher education in this century as gendered, hierarchical and masculinist and promotion appears to occur in the context of a traditional workplace environment. She is supported in her views to some extent by the Hansard Report of 1990 (Hansard Society, 1990) which investigated women in the House of Commons and their professional backgrounds and heavily criticises universities for encouraging women to enter university but failing to promote them in the academic profession. This position has improved. The Sex and Power Report 2011 (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2011) describes women's representation in university Vice Chancellor positions as moving from 12.4% in 2003 to 14.3% in 2010/11 with a high point in 2004 and a low point the following year 2005. The Universities UK website puts the 2014 figure at 17%. Manfredi et al. (Manfredi et al., 2014) confirm the number of women in top positions in higher education to be 17% in that year and set this in the context of 50% of undergraduates being women, 44.5% of academics being female, and 20.5% of professors being women . Professor Janet Beer (University of Liverpool), only the second female Vice Chancellor to be appointed to the UK Russell Group of Universities, summarises the overall position in the report on Gender and Higher Education Leadership (Manfredi et al., 2014, foreword) as *"this research… gives us hard evidence to support the contention that it is more difficult for women to be appointed as the Chief Executive in our universities and colleges".* Professor Beer notes that some women and some men are clear they do not wish to be considered for the top jobs but if they do *"women are less likely to fulfil their ambitions or their potential"* (Manfredi et al., 2014, foreword). The position has improved recently. Although only 20% of Vice Chancellor positions are filled by women, the number of recent recruits to board posts indicates that of the 66 posts filled between 2012 and 2016, 29% new posts were taken by women (Oakman, 2016).

Healthcare Services

The poor pace historically of women accessing top jobs in the health service has already been mentioned with regard to the Sex and Power Report 2011 (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2011) although it can be seen in that report that the NHS leads the field in terms of numbers of women in top jobs. There is an assumption that transformational leadership skills are required in healthcare and that women particularly possess these skills (McDonagh and Paris, 2012). It is acknowledged in

this study (ibid) that some women have reached senior executive posts but also that there is a continuing dearth of women in the boardroom related to *"unconscious gender schemes"* which they consider are a factor in judging leadership in terms of performance (ibid, p. 23). The same study describes the availability of women qualified for leadership as a unique strength in this sector of public service.

In healthcare services, as opposed to local government, leadership is viewed less as a means of managing the complex and volatile workplace environment but more akin to the private sector in that successful leadership delivers acceptable performance for the organisation (Berg, Barry and Chandler, 2012; Purcell, Christian and Frost, 2012). McDonagh and Paris (2012) link diversity at the top of the NHS with an opportunity to increase the organisation's potential for transformation. The traditional career path in healthcare however is still described as linear, a style which does not serve women well. In the early years of this decade a maze of obstacles still confront women who seek career advancement in the complexity of health care organisations, which has been described as a labyrinth (Eagly and Carli, 2007). Recent studies show however, that in this area of public sector service, the NHS, there have been significant developments and there is now approaching 45% women holding executive roles on hospital boards, and 42.6% of Chief Executives are women (Sealy, 2016). More recently the model of leadership required for today's healthcare services in the UK has been revised and moves onward from assumptions about transformational styles to more complex and multi-faceted requirements of leaders (Storey and Holti, 2013). There is no assumption that this approach will be more successful at bringing forward executive women leaders to top jobs in the NHS although early signs are that 50% executive women on NHS boards is a possibility by 2020 (Sealy, 2016).

Central Government

In the civil service the number of female Permanent Secretaries rose marginally between 2011 and 2018 (Jewell and Bazeley, 2018). This remains an area of service which has retained and improved slightly its pace of progress towards improved gender balance, although the figure still stands at less than a third of all top post holders in the civil service (McAvoy and Burgess, 2017). There is very little published research on the armed services which are managed through the MoD, but contrary to most of the civil service where the number of Permanent Secretaries, top post holders, who are women is about 31% the figure for the MoD was 2% in 2017 (ibid). Further enquiry by McAvoy and Burgess (2017) reveals a slightly better position in the military itself, where there were 52 high ranked female officers, but of these few were top post holders.

Summary: Women and Top Jobs in the UK Public Sector

A summary of recent trends regarding the progress of women reaching executive positions in the public sector is summarised in Table 2. The groups are a mix of top jobs across the whole sector and are not statistically comparable but nevertheless give an indication of the proportion of women in top executive posts within each group, with the exception of the police, and trends in recent years.

Table 2: Women's Representation in Selected Positions in the Public Sector as a Percentage

	LOCAL AUTHORITY CHIEF OFFICERS	SENIOR POLICE OFFICERS	SENIOR JUDICIARY	UNIVERSITY VICE CHANCELLORS	HEALTH SERVICE CHIEF EXECUTIVES	CIVIL SERVICE TOP MANAGERS
2007/8	19.5	11.9	9.6	14.4	36.9	26.6
2010/11	22.8	16.8	12.9	14.3	31.4	29.2
2018	33	N/A*	17	26	43	31

Source: Equality and Human Rights Commission, Sex and Power Report 2011 and Fawcett Society, Sex and Power Report 2018
*Only Police Commissioners are represented in the Sex and Power Report 2018. The Home Office Report, Police Workforce England and Wales: 31 March 2015 states that 21.4% of senior officers (Chief Inspector and above) are women.

In contrast to the private sector there is a large talent pool in many parts of the public sector from which women might progress into top jobs. However, although the percentage of women in senior executive posts is overall higher than that in the corporate sector in most areas such as central and local government, higher education and the police which are major employers in the public sector, trends mirror those found in the private sector in that there has been a slow increase in women's executive presence around top tables and this, in some cases, from a very low base. There are variations across the public sector. In the NHS over 40% of Chief Executives of NHS Trusts are now women. This is also the sector where the literature review demonstrates that healthcare organisations link leadership styles and organisational performance, and where followership is an issue of importance departing in many cases from charismatic leadership styles (Berg, Barry and Chandler, 2012; Ladkin, 2010). Although Table 2 shows a dip between 2008 and 2011 recent publications indicate that this has now adjusted and the NHS leads the public sector in moving towards gender balance in the most senior executive posts (Sealy, 2016).

There is little published on leadership and the link to organisational performance in the higher education sector. The direction of promotion is linear, the environment traditional and the number of women achieving top job status is still low, but the position appears to be improving although leading academics in senior posts can find progress slow and difficult (Oakman, 2016).

For both men and women, a change in expectations by government and the public, leads in many areas to public-sector change and to restructuring as a constant factor. This is particularly evident in local government and healthcare organisations as they struggle to meet the challenge of managing volatile public businesses on a daily basis (Benko and Anderson, 2013; Purcell, Christian and Frost, 2012).

3.4 Summary: Executive Women and Gender Parity in the UK.

In the private sector there has been significant political and business effort to improve gender balance on boards, both in the context of diversity and improved business outcomes. There has been significant published and lauded success in rapidly increasing women's presence on executive boards in the private sector from a low base and there are reports that this has improved since 2011 towards about 25% across FTSE 250 organisations. However, on critically evaluating this trend I find that most, if not all, the increase in women round the top table refers to non-executive directors. This study is about women in the most senior executive posts and in the private sector almost no progress has been made. There are still only 6 female CEOs in the FTSE 100 at March 2019. In the public sector there is a much larger talent pool and in all areas of public service there have been improvements in gender balance at senior executive levels. There are a significantly higher number of female CEOs at the top of the NHS and gender balance is realistically anticipated in 2020. There are improvements in central and local government and in higher education but the overall level of women in top jobs rests below a third. Women in top posts is at an extremely low level in the senior judiciary and the armed services.

CHAPTER FOUR: WORLDWIDE TRENDS

4.1 Introduction

A review of literature regarding the UK identifies slow progress in most sectors towards the appointment of women to executive posts of decision and influence. There are variations across sectors and the appointment of women to senior executive posts in some parts of the public sector reflects higher numbers and a faster trend to improve the position. Overall however, the trend is very slow and in some cases, there are reverses or a plateauing of the number of women holding top executive posts especially in private firms. In the UK where business and governments work increasingly on a global stage it is important to explore whether there are any significant international variations to this trend, and whether gender imbalance at the top of organisations exists elsewhere to the extent that it continues to do in the UK. This review is not intended to be a comprehensive or detailed review of the position of women leaders worldwide but is selective in identifying countries where trends are comparable or significantly different to the UK such that there is an opportunity to reflect critically in future sections of this literature review on relevant and successful interventions employed elsewhere.

An overview of published literature worldwide indicates that generally there is acceptance that the business case for gender balance on corporate boards and at the most senior leadership level in the public sector is advantageous for nation states and many have legislation in place to reflect this (Davidson and Burke, 2011; Terjesen and Singh, 2008). The 2015 European Commission Fact Sheet 2015 (European Commission, 2015) states that gender imbalance on corporate boards is *"a waste of talent and loss of economic growth potential".* There are some worldwide newsworthy events. For example, in 2009 Venice appointed its first female gondolier in 900 years, India elected its first female speaker in parliament, and the first woman ever was elected to parliament in Kuwait (Davidson and Burke, 2011). These highlights are set however in the context of a varied picture internationally regarding the progress of women towards leading executive positions.

Terjesen and Singh (2008) consider the position of women in 43 countries using data gathered in 2003-2005 and Davidson and Burke (2011) consider women in 20 countries using data gathered in 2008. There is overlap between the studies of all except 4 countries. This provides an opportunity to consider the direction of travel over a brief period in the last decade which included the beginning of the financial crisis in the west. Terjesen and Singh (2008) do not distinguish executive and non-executive positions at the top of organisations which blurs the trend in part, but overall the direction of travel is the same. There is increasing participation worldwide of women in the workplace, but this is not reflected in the progress of women taking up executive or board positions. "*Women have increased*

their participation rates in managerial and professional jobs in most cultures" but *"they are still woefully under-represented at senior levels of management"* (Davidson and Burke, 2011, p. 2)*.* More recently published studies confirm the position in the public sector to be similar to the corporate position. In Indonesia, for example, there is an increasing number of women working in the public sector but they rarely (6%) hold managerial positions and only 4% of CEO's in state owned enterprises are women (Dewi and Rachmawati, 2014).

There can be wide variations in interpretation and analysis of the substantive position. For example in terms of women's representation on corporate boards, from data gathered 2003-2005, Norway is shown at about 16% (Terjesen and Singh, 2008). Three years later Norway is shown with to have 44.2% female representation on boards (Davidson and Burke, 2011). A more detailed analysis describes a position in 2008, where only 18% of senior managers in private companies were women and 27% of women were top managers in the public sector (Traavik and Richardson, 2011). Further exploration finds that 57% of women working in Norway at that time were part-time workers and the equality and antidiscrimination ombudsman in 2008 stated that *"Norway has one of the most gender segregated labour markets within the OECD regions"* (Traavik and Richardson, 2011, p. 129). The headline figure has masked the position that although there are a relatively high number of women in Norway who have reached senior executive status, these are in a limited number of organisations; in other organisations there are very few. The workplace is gendered, and executive influence is also gendered. This review highlights the importance of careful consideration of headline figures. Coleman (Coleman, 2011) for example, advocates a Norwegian approach to promoting gender equality without fully appreciating the gendered outcomes achieved by the legislative approach taken in that country.

Given that the position under the headline figures across all nation states is complex, with Norway being just one example, this survey of literature considers some underlying issues which impact on women's participation at senior executive levels. Some of the influencing factors are political, some socio-economic and others are socio-cultural.

4.2 Political Factors

Directives

Within the 28 Countries of the European Commission, although there has been a European Directive since 2013 promoting gender balance on corporate boards, setting an objective of 40% for each gender, progress has been slow (European Commission, 2015). The average proportion of women on the boards of EU publicly listed companies was 20.2% in October 2014. The EU reports do not distinguish between executive and non-executive members of boards but executive power and

women's presence in jobs at the very top is indicated by the fact that only 3.3% of the largest listed companies in the EU have a woman as CEO and this has hardly changed over the last 3 years; not at all since the directive. Further, there are variations within the member countries of the EU, from France which has 32.4% of board members who are women to Malta which has 2.7% where other issues such as socio-cultural influences outweigh the directive. Only 4 countries (the UK is not one of them) have boards where women account for at least 25% of board members. Progress is concentrated in a few states and even in those states progress has slowed (ibid).

Quotas

Most improvements for women have been in countries where there has been legislative action such as France, Sweden and Italy, where quotas have been introduced. Norway introduced 40% female quotas for board members in 2003 and achieved this by 2009. The underlying factor here is that high numbers of women appointed as senior executives to meet the quota are concentrated on a small number of boards (Traavik and Richardson, 2011). Even this level has now plateaued, and legislation remains in place to prevent a reversal. The legislation only applies to corporate boards. Quotas appear to make a significant difference to overall numbers of women in senior posts on boards but there is an underlying lack of progress with regard to women in senior executive positions as the 2015 European Commission Report demonstrates.

Recruitment

In the 28 countries in the European Union (EU), including the UK, reforms have been introduced to promote progress including gender neutral selection procedures. In non-profit organisations this has led to an increase in the number of women leaders and executives although women are still under-represented in leadership positions in that sector. In for-profit organisations a pattern of gendered leadership continues in spite of reforms to recruitment practice (Claus, Callahan and Sardinlin, 2013).

4.3 The Developed Welfare State and Localisation

A study of 22 industrialised countries found that a developed welfare state assists women to access the labour market generally but does not assist them to access positions of power (Mandel and Semjonov, 2006). Large public sectors across the globe tend to have high levels of female participation generally but a correspondingly low female representation in managerial occupations (ibid). This position is little changed 5 years later in many countries including the Netherlands, Canada and Australia (Tijdens, 2011; Sohrab, Karambayya and Burke, 2011; Wood, 2011).

Localised power structures might have been expected to provide an opportunity for women to achieve leadership positions of influence but for women in South Africa for example (Beall, 2005) the decentralising of power to local government limited women's opportunities for participation and prevented the application of national policies which would otherwise seek to address gender issues. Family and socio-economic factors outweighed national policy direction (ibid). Similarly in Izmir, Turkey, leadership locally has been found to be driven by power mechanisms that have been in place historically and which are dominated by patriarchal rules (Senol, 2013). Men are supported for election by gendered neighbourhood networks. A few women were strong enough to participate in the system but had to seek backing from a local male leader in order to enter the government system (ibid).

4.4 Socio-cultural Factors

In many countries cultural constraints can halt or hinder political and economic direction and a mixed picture of women's progress to positions of influence and the decisions they make emerges due to this factor, and this in turn impacts on the pace of change which can take place. A study of women professionals in Udaipur, India (Meta and Khushboo, 2014, p. 8) indicates that women are benefitting from the impact of globalisation and that *"Indian women are no longer treated as showpieces to be kept in the home".* The study in India identifies some strategies to successfully empower more women, but further research over time is required to measure any successful impact and to test the degree to which women resist socio-cultural pressures; none have been identified at present. In South Africa the socio-cultural environment is also influential in determining whether females go on to leadership positions (Mathur-Helm, 2016). In Turkey the support of men in the family is needed for some young women to progress to leadership positions in higher education (Kabasakal et al., 2016).

In some countries progress is not consistent at any level across all geographical and employment areas. For example, considerable progress has been made by women in Ghana in getting to some positions of influence but the number of women gaining entry to the civil service is poor due to socio-cultural pressures in this particular area (Ohemeng and Adusah-Karikari, 2014). In 2011, 6 women gained positions in top jobs in that sector out of the 36 which became available. Similar cultural constraints are described in Israel and Greece (Kark and Waismel-Manor, 2011; Petraki-Kottis and Ventoura-Neokosmidi, 2011).

4.5 The Women's Pipeline

In the USA the pipeline in terms of talent and volume is positive, particularly in the healthcare sector, but the impact on the pace of progress of women achieving executive posts is disappointing (Hauser,

2014). Over half the graduates on the Master of Health programmes in the last 25 years in the USA have been women, but only 6.4% of those graduates are currently in leading executive finance or HR positions in healthcare. In the US healthcare sector, while women make up 74% of the workforce only 18% lead in hospitals as CEOs and only 14% sit on healthcare boards. In the rest of the public sector in the USA there is little advancement of women to top positions (ibid). The position is the same in the corporate sector. At the top of leading companies in the USA, Fortune 500 companies, women held only 16% of top leadership positions in 2014 (Cook and Glass, 2014). The position has not improved, it has declined significantly. There were 25 women in CEO positions in Fortune 500 companies (5%) at the beginning of 2018 and this sank to 24 (4.8%) later in the year (Taylor, 2018).

The 2015 European Commission Report shows that although 60% of university graduates in EU countries are women, women are still outnumbered by men in executive positions in the corporate sector throughout the EU (European Commission, 2015). Countries with higher levels of female representatives in legislature, and female senior officials and managers generally, the women's pipeline, were shown to be more likely to have more women on corporate boards (Terjesen and Singh, 2008) but it was also found that countries with a long history of women in political office are not likely to have more women on their corporate boards. In fact, countries with a shorter history of women in political office tend to have more women in board positions (ibid).

In Hungary, major changes in higher education were made specifically to assist women to move towards leadership positions (Noszkay and Borsos, 2014). It was found that due to state intervention and change, the pattern improved with regard to state and administrative organisations, more so than in higher education itself. In spite of these changes, compared to western countries the proportion of female leaders is below the level the state hoped for. Half of all doctoral students in Hungary were women in 2014 but 7 times more men than women became professors (ibid).

Contra-indications

Literature has been reviewed worldwide to assist in an investigation into the position of executive women pertinent to this research. It would be misleading however, to present a perception that generally worldwide there is a desire in government to assist women to progress to positions of influence and leadership and that the problem is simply in identifying the best approach. There are areas where the nation state is not so inclined and macro-political influence dominates. In China, women have one of the highest levels of participation (45%) in the labour market but face formidable challenges if they aim to advance their careers, and the position is described as worsening (Cooke, 2011). In Russia, since 1989 women have been displaced in favour of men even in traditional female

sectors (Hunt and Crozier, 2011). Women are rarely found in decision making roles. One state official is quoted as saying: *"Why should we employ women when men are unemployed?"* (Hunt and Crozier, 2011, p. 144).

4.6 Summary: Worldwide Trends

A review of mainly 21st century published research indicates that the picture in the US, Europe, Asia, Australasia and many other nation states is very similar to the position in the UK. There is acceptance generally that there is a business case for gender balance at the top of corporate organisations and in the public sector in terms of economic advantage there is better engagement and an improved strategic approach, as well as a moral obligation to meet the diversity challenge. There is a focus in many countries on encouraging the participation and advancement of women but globally, progress is slow. In many areas the participation of women in the workplace is increasing but progress to senior executive levels remains slow. Political directives and quotas improve the position, but the improved position is hard to maintain and often there is a plateauing of the number of women in top jobs and sometimes the lack of progress is masked by a gendered response to quota demands, as in Norway. In some countries such as the USA, the number of women at the top is declining. Socio-cultural variables often play a part in initially improving the position for women trying to access jobs, but progress is significantly slowed in those areas where local socio-cultural variables are not consistent with a national political direction of travel which encourages women to progress to leadership positions.

CHAPTER FIVE: THEORETICAL CONTRUBUTIONS TO UNDERSTANDING THE WORKPLACE

5.1 Introduction

Chapters Three and Four sought to determine the 'what', the factual context for this research study and reviewed published data on the current position women occupy with regard to top jobs or senior executive positions. Chapter Three explored literature in relation to the position in the UK and Chapter Four considered literature which described the international position. This chapter explores the 'why', the conceptual context derived from published academic literature which seeks to explain the persistent gender imbalance at the top of UK public and private sector organisations. I explore the theoretical context relevant to the UK in which this phenomenon exists in spite of political action and pressure to reverse the trend, and in spite of the general acceptance that in all sectors gender balance at the most senior executive level is advantageous. Historical theoretical explanations for the phenomenon of this study give context, but I mainly focus on theories relevant to the contemporary workplace.

Published research is considered which describes change in this century from a traditional workplace environment to a neoliberal workplace environment in many work settings, and which assesses what the impact of that might be on career progression for men and women. The review of literature in this section considers theories, themes and concepts including the possible importance of building reputational capital which may impact on the consideration of women for top posts and the choices they make if top posts are offered. The rise of management initiatives to assist women in managing perceived barriers and challenges impacting on career progression is also reviewed.

5.2 Early Theoretical Explanations

Early academic research to explain why, in male dominated organisations, women failed to advance to top posts in the corporate sector was the subject of an article published by the Wall Street Journal which publicised the phrase 'glass ceiling' (Hymowitz and Schellhardt, 1986). This metaphor caught the imagination and continues in public dialogue today. In countries where the movement to address gender imbalance at the top of organisations is at an early stage such as in India this is still the concept which identifies the problem and is addressed by governments and organisations (Meta and Khushboo, 2014). The barrier was imagined to be an absolute obstacle at a specific, albeit high, level in organisations.

Theories to explain why, in female dominated public sector organisations, women also failed to advance produced the 'glass escalator' metaphor (Williams, 1992) where men pass by women, even where women are the majority of employees. As early as 1977, research sought an explanation for

men receiving preferential consideration for career advancement and the theory of tokenism was developed (Kanter, 1977). This worked most positively for men who took posts in what was traditionally a female work organisation where they were most visible and described an organisational preference for male characteristics which were thought to be level headedness, impartiality, technical proficiency and even aggression (Williams, 1992). Tokenism was held to account particularly for the success men achieved in progressing to senior posts in female dominated workplaces where they were able to prominently display those organisational characteristic preferences. Tokenism relies on traditional workplace organisations and linear travel to the top and is a consideration in exploring the reason for the low numbers of women at the top table in some traditionally managed corporate and public organisations today. A token woman has high visibility and therefore opportunity, but by definition such women are few in number (Kanter, 1977).

5.3 Neoliberal and Traditional Workplaces

Where glass ceilings and glass escalators are viable concepts they rest on an assumption of traditional organisations with hierarchical structures, lifetime careers, career ladders and full-time stable jobs where loyalty and seniority are rewarded (Williams, 2013; Crowley and Hodson, 2014). A review of the glass escalator theory found that many workplaces in the 21st century had transformed from traditional workplace organisations to neoliberal workplace organisations (Williams, 2013). Neoliberal organisations are described as rewarding flexibility and adaptability, where contracts can be temporary, jobs can be part-time, workers switch from job to job, consultants and specialists are important, structures are flatter, developments can be project driven and downsizing, computerisation and mergers are common (Carter, 2001; Williams, 2013). This change has impacted on the possible and desired career paths of both men and women. The concept of the neoliberal workplace describes the context in which women in many organisations are now likely to forge their career paths and make their decisions about taking up an executive post, or not, and the context in which interventions such as coaching and mentoring are likely to take place. Williams (2013) refers to the 21st century work organisation as transforming career planning from career ladders to career maps or 'I-deals' which are individual personalised forward career plans. This is an important concept for this thesis because it suggests a shift in focus from group support for women and men in more traditional organisations to support for individualised career plans; the development of personal brands or personal profiles for those who wish to advance in neoliberal workplaces.

The concept of the neoliberal workplace in the 21st century emphasises market practice and unrestricted deployment of organisational resources to achieve optimal economic performance, and an intensely competitive environment (Crowley and Hodson, 2014). The impact of this approach can

be seen in increased turnover of staff and a reduction of peer training and effort as well as in job quality (ibid). This approach and these working conditions are considered with the for-profit sector in mind but may also be observed in public sector businesses in the thrall of competition for reducing public sector funds and the demand for increased output, which in their case means service outcomes (Ball, 2003).

The neoliberal workplace is an element of a neoliberal ideology. The term is used in literature in different ways but in general it refers to the promotion of a free marketplace, and by association can mean privatisation, austerity, de-regulation, entrepreneurial activity and free trade. Neoliberalism has been blamed for issues which are as wide ranging as the collapse of public health and education, resurgent child poverty and the rise of Donald Trump (Montbiot, 2016). In a Guardian Article Monbiot (2016) considers neoliberalism to be *"an ideology at the root of all our problems"* and he states that today the term neoliberalism is only used pejoratively. Neoliberalism is said by Montbiot (2016) to encompass issues of class, ability, education and poverty linking all to the focus on developing a market economy.

There is a significant body of published work on the impact of neoliberalism on the workplace in higher education. It has been suggested that neoliberalism accounts for the *"stigmatising of those who do not pursue a traditional academic career"* (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009, p. 117) and creates barriers for those from working or middle-class backgrounds to be successful in higher education (Livesey, 2019). Livesey in an earlier paper also focusing on the impact of neoliberalism on higher education institutions goes further, stating that "*neoliberal mentality is implicitly and explicitly white supremacist patriarchal hetero normative and ablest"* (Livesey, 2015). There has been a recent rise in the number of female Vice Chancellor appointments (Oakman, 2016), 19 between 2012 and 2015, raising the number overall at the end of that period to 20% which is still a low figure but rising at a steady rate (Table 2), as is the number of women appointed to Russel Group Universities. The number of women pursuing PhD's is also rising which improves the pipeline within higher education (ibid). This presents an alternative view of outcomes to the gender bias argument described, within the higher education workplace.

Local authorities have been subject to austerity measures and severe financial cuts since the Coalition Government of 2010 (Conley and Page, 2017), and before that the modernisation of local authority workplaces including outsourcing, new regulation and performance measures (Berg, Barry and Chandler, 2012; Purcell, Christian and Frost, 2012; Ball, 2003), together describing transformation to a neoliberal workplace (section 3.3) and the impact of that change. Conley and Page (2017) argue that in this context although over 500 local authorities had introduced equal opportunities policies the

Gender Equality Duty of 2007, later included in the Equality Act 2010, which was meant to promote the equality of men and women, became a tick box exercise in the new workplace environment and that equalities legislation has become a barrier to business. This view accords with research describing behaviour of executive women in the workplace as creating an environment of blame and the idea that those who persevere will, in the new environment, inevitably become successful (Baker and Kelan, 2018). However, progress towards appointing female CEOs in local authorities has accelerated since 2011 (Table 2) and this runs counter to some concerns regarding gender equality in the neoliberal workplace environment of local authorities (Conley and Page, 2017).

The elements of change (Carter et al., 2011; Williams, 2013) are real and integral to the new business workplace. The survey of literature confirms that for many men and women working in a non-traditional workplace, the changes that have been felt are real and have impacted on progression depending on how new opportunities in the workforce are taken up.

5.4 Precarious Positions

It could be argued that the theoretical models around glass ceilings and glass escalators are no longer appropriate metaphors to aid research into women's advancement in the 21st century where for some, not all, a more neoliberal approach to managing organisations has been introduced. However the 'glass cliff' theory may have merit (Ryan and Haslam, 2005). Following research to counter the Times article of November 2003 (Judge, 2003) 'Women on the Board: help or hindrance' which suggested that that women may be perceived to *"wreak havoc on companies' performance and share price"* and *"corporate Britain may be better without women on the board"*, Ryan and Haslam (2005) found that the causal link between the appointment of women to boards and share price was in fact complex. Women can be appointed to boards following a general financial downturn in the preceding months, rather than a downturn following their appointment. This may lead to women taking account in their career portfolio planning of the circumstances of the company, surrounding executive posts, and the positive or negative aspects of appointments to 'precarious positions' at the top of a glass cliff (ibid). . Recent studies have indicated that not only are CEO posts offered to women following or approaching a crisis for the firm, but that women seek out such high risk assignments possibly in a bid to build their reputation, be very visible, or satisfy a need for high level job satisfaction (Glass and Cook, 2016). There is no evidence that women are regularly appointed following a crisis, but there is some evidence that there can be a negative correlation between company value and the appointment of a female CEO (Trinh et al., 2018) which may reflect such precarious appointments. This was not a common finding and there were contradictory findings later in 2018 where both monetary value and value

accorded to the organisation generally were found to be positive on the appointment of a female CEO or CFO (Post and Byron, 2014; Lyngsie and Foss, 2017).

5.5 Performativity

The public sector has been said to have been subject to a tipping point in 2000 when the World Wide Web impacted on the public and private sectors and the development of the neoliberal workplace commenced (Benko, Anderson and Vickberg, 2011). In the public sector new technologies were considered to align the public sector with the methods, culture and ethical systems of the private sector (Ball, 2003). At this point the public sector began to organise itself in response to targets, indicators and evaluations and the government's regulatory services followed this development making it possible to govern the public sector in a different way, for example using technology to measure outcomes and rates of progress against pre-set targets. The phrase 'performativity' (ibid) was thought at first to describe this new form of state regulation or performance management and the grip of this new approach dominated and still dominates local and central government services and to some extent healthcare services. However, performativity as a concept is wider than a performance management culture and impacts on applied technologies, judgements, incentives, rewards and sanctions. In schools for example *"teachers contrive to add value to themselves, to improve productivity, strive for excellence and live in an existence of calculation"* (Ball, 2003, p. 217). With regard to the impact on individuals in a performativity environment, and therefore on women planning career paths in the public sector, Ball (ibid) suggests that people learn to talk about themselves, their purpose and their motivation in a new way. Individuals wishing to progress in this environment become adept at presenting and re-presenting themselves using new vocabulary such as 'effective policy outcomes', or 'productivity targets'.

5.6 A Lattice

Transformation in the corporate workplace in a neoliberal era can transform the way career progression takes place. Organisational explanations for gender imbalance in the 21st century must relate to a multidimensional context. Benko et al. (Benko, Anderson and Vickberg, 2011) initially describe a new corporate environment developing partly in response to the same tipping point in 2000 when the World Wide Web was adopted in the public sector and multiple ways of sharing and managing knowledge began. Later the 'corporate lattice' is presented in place of the corporate ladder as a metaphor for career advancement in the corporate sector (Benko and Anderson, 2013).

The concept of the corporate lattice describes a sea change which responds in the corporate sector to the way knowledge management now dominates the economy. A corporate world is suggested in

which, for the individual, career paths go down as well as up, individual focus is about transformation, and the concept of talent management is strengthened in regard to the development of the individual so that they can compete in new organisations. Work styles move towards the introduction of prolific project work and associated team work, and careers are no longer a straight forward climb to the top but a lattice-like journey *"of undulating climbs, lateral moves and planned descents"* (Benko, Anderson and Vickberg, 2011, p. 11). Benko et al. (2011) go on to describe the associated change in career planning where *"development plans are highly personalised and designed to balance the employee's skills and goals with the companies needs and initiatives... non-linear careers are becoming the norm"* (Benko, Anderson and Vickberg, 2011, pp. 13-14,140).

As the new work environment changes, it introduces new challenges that employees must meet. Companies can accept virtual 'work anywhere' options, and teams follow the sun around the world; flexibility is key. Employee engagement is important, but this is not necessarily office based; teams work remotely. Career progression is not linear and relies on skills such as communication and connectivity, talent assets, and reputational capital (Benko and Anderson, 2013). The neoliberal and digital corporate world may well suit women better than men. The Families and Work Institute, National Study of the Changing Workforce 2008, produced by the US Department of Labor, states that men report more work-life conflict than women, which may indicate that that this new workplace may be a more difficult place in which to progress for men than women.

5.7 A Labyrinth

In the neoliberal workplace of the public sector, where movement is more complex in terms of performativity, theoretical concepts have developed from glass ceilings and glass escalators to concepts such as the 'lattice' (Benko and Anderson, 2013) and 'labyrinth' (Eagly and Carli, 2007; McDonagh and Paris, 2012). Eagly and Carli (2007) insist that metaphors matter and they can compel change and emphasise a certain kind of intervention. The concept of the labyrinth creates an image of a complex journey or career path, a goal worth striving for, unexpected twists and turns and the requirement for sustained focus, awareness and careful analysis of the way ahead (ibid). An approach to career progression which is individual is described. Ball (Ball, 2003, p. 220), imagining a similar concept in the world of teaching, refers to it as the *"labyrinth of performativity"* with attendant re-presentations of self to meet the challenge. Describing a pathway which requires soft skills, transformational leadership, connectivity and communication McDonagh and Paris (McDonagh and Paris, 2012) suggested this may align better with traditional female characteristics. Ladkin (2010) had already extended thought on new forms of leadership which may reflect the new workplace environment (Ladkin and Taylor, 2010).

5.8 Reputational Capital

The concept of human capital as a measure of assets an individual might bring to an organisation has been part of published literature for most of this century, but the concept of individual reputational capital as a separate element has emerged only in recent years (Singh, Terjesen and Vinnicombe, 2008). Company reputational capital has come to be recognised as a key corporate asset and there has been effort to measure some elements and develop standards in areas such as Corporate Social Responsibility but overall empirical evidence is rare (Fombrun and Shanley, 1990; Logsdon and Wood, 2002; Kotha, Rajgopal and Rindora, 2001). Some links have begun to emerge in published research which relate boards and their diversity to reputation but there is little research which explores how the contribution of an individual appointed to a CEO position might be considered in relation not only to the human capital they are expected to bring but also their reputational capital (Park and Berger, 2004; Sohn and Lariscy, 2012)

Human Capital

Human capital generally refers to assets an individual brings to an organisation such as education, knowledge, skills and experience (Singh, Terjesen and Vinnicombe, 2008). A comparison of men and women directors newly appointed to the boardrooms of FTSE 100 companies from 2001 to 2004 found that, in terms of human capital so defined, new women directors brought *"fairly similar and sometimes additional human capital to their male peers"* (Singh, Terjesen and Vinnicombe, 2008, p. 56). The same study included exploration of reputation and status as part of the human capital measure and included in this element titles, honours, listing in Who's Who and Debrett's 'People of Today', Oxbridge or Ivy League connections and Google hits. The study did not distinguish between executive and non-executive director appointments and did not identify CEO appointments. However, the findings suggest that other factors were at play in selection since despite the parity of human capital, women were appointed to only between 10.5% and 17.0% of available posts each year during this period. Reputational capital may be a distinct and important factor in recruitment to board posts.

Company Reputation

The concept of reputational capital has featured increasingly in this century in published literature in relation to business and company profitably. Reputation in company terms is described as one of the intangibles, which may include authenticity, trust, dignity, compassion and respect (Jackson, 2004). Recognition of the impact of reputation on the bottom line is increasingly apparent and understanding of this factor therefore increasingly studied. *"In today's business reputation is everything"* (Jackson, 2004, p. 19). There is a growing body of work which has come to understand that the link between a company's reputation and how this is built and sustained relates largely to external perceptions of the

company (Logsdon and Wood, 2002). External perceptions of a company include a perception of how the organisation contributes to society and the importance of demonstrating Corporate Social Responsibility is of rising importance in the 21st century (Fombrun and Shanley, 1990; Fombrun, 2005; Brammer and Pavelin, 2004; Logsdon and Wood, 2002). Reputation is partly a perception (Fombrun, 2005) but can also be measured in tangibles such as share price and on reputation listings. The Reputation Institute founded in 1997 is one such reputation listing used by companies to measure and compare their reputation on a global scale.

Board Diversity, CEOs and Reputation

As part of an effort to measure Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and to create ratings and standards, a link between board diversity including the number of women on the board, and the firms CSR rating has been identified (Bear, Rahman and Post, 2010). The role of the CEO in regard to the reputation of an organisation is increasingly recognised as a factor and although, so far, research has considered CEOs already appointed, it is a short step to exploration of potential CEOs career paths and the weight of consideration which may have to be given to reputational capital on appointment (Sohn and Lariscy, 2012; Park and Berger, 2004; Bear, Rahman and Post, 2010; Kotha, Rajgopal and Rindora, 2001). Building on the understanding that reputation matters the Hampton-Alexander Review 2017 (Hampton, 2017) recommends metrics related to the number of women on boards and executive committees in FTSE companies should be published, and these lists are published in the most recent report (Hampton, 2018).

Summary: Reputation Management

Women have been found to offer the same or similar human capital assets when consideration for a CEO post is underway. The current focus on company reputation, efforts to measure some elements of reputational capital, and the emerging link between the CEO and a company's reputation, indicates that the individual reputational capital women offer may also be a factor in their consideration for such posts. This is an under-researched issue, measures are not apparent, and issues such as how women present reputational capital or leverage their networks to demonstrate their social or reputational capital is unclear (Doldor and Vinnicombe, 2015).

5.9 Management Interventions

This part of the literature review took place after the data collection and analysis. This was in part due to a co-incidence of timing and the sudden availability of some participants before the literature search was completed. It was also a response to my decision to analyse the data using constructive grounded theory. Importance is placed in classic grounded theory strategy and practice in collecting

data and beginning the analysis *before* approaching the literature review (Charmaz and Bryant, 2010; Keneally, 2012). In my case I had almost completed an initial literature review except for a consideration of organisational initiatives to improve talent management, so this proved an opportunity to test the appropriateness of this approach in my research enquiry.

This element of the review of literature therefore is influenced by the interviews with participants. In descriptions of their lived experience there was not a high level of value accorded to coaching in achieving top posts but coaching was much valued to aid transition after top posts had been offered. There was very little reference to mentoring and almost none to management development programmes during the part of the interviews where participants reflected without prompt on their career paths (sections 12.2 and 12.3). In response to my prompts in the semi-structured part of the interviews most participants, not all, identified coaching as important to them from time to time, and all talked of mentoring and coaching other women. There was little indication of a definitive understanding of any difference between mentoring and coaching activities, the words were used interchangeably. Management development programmes were not commented on at any length even after prompt except with reference to extending networks.

The literature review on this subject reflects the emphasis on management interventions which emerged in the data analysis, focusing mainly on coaching activities. This review does not attempt to be an extensive or complete review of literature on coaching and mentoring, or on the impact of management development programmes.

Investment in Coaching

Literature indicates that there has been considerable investment in coaching in the last decade by both the public and the private sector. It is known, for example, that more than $1billion was invested in the Executive Coaching Network in the USA in 2014 and although no equivalent information is available for the UK it is known that most organisations in both the public and private sector in the UK invest in coaching at high levels in organisations, often at C-suite level or at Direct Reports level (Carter, 2001). In the UK it is estimated that the equivalent of up to 15% of an executive's salary may be invested in coaching at a cost of approximately £2,000 per day (Carter, 2001; Sherman and Freas, 2004). Thornton (Thornton, 2010) considers the failure rate of senior level leaders in terms of executive performance to be high, and notes that executive failure has severe consequences. For this reason, she suggests executive coaching costs are high, and in the current economic climate companies typically focus their resources on CEOs and corporate suite executives, or the equivalent in the public sector. A recent review of coaching internationally (Passmore et al., 2018) found that fees

ranged from over £1,000 per hour to less than £50 per hour. Most fees paid in the UK, about 30%, were between £200 and £400 (ibid).

Critical Skill Shortage

The new growth of coaching is, in part, a response to an increasingly neoliberal workplace, the downsizing of organisations and de-layering, resulting in flatter organisations. This, combined with the gradual retirement of the Baby Boomer generation, is described as creating a crisis in the availability of experienced and skilled senior staff in the new workplace to support men and women who have potential (Carter, 2001; Abel, 2014). The Conference Board Report (Abel, 2014) supports this view globally and finds that, in particular, the retirement of Baby Boomers has led to a widespread skill shortage and external coaching has entered organisations to assist in developing the critical skills needed at the top of business and the public sector. The report found that among the 140 organisations who responded to their survey 75% were using external executive coaches to develop potential leaders. Consideration of the new growth of executive coaching and its limitation is linked to the economic climate. Executive coaching brought in to fill the skills gap may prove be too expensive to sustain and therefore be self-limiting in the context of the same reduced economic flexibility (Carter, 2001). A recent review of coaching indicates that fees are if not flat-lining then reducing on a general basis, but there is still a small percentage of coaches in the UK who are charging high rates (Passmore et al., 2018).

Lack of Impact Evaluation

The rush to use executive coaching to fill the skills gap in assisting both men and women towards the most senior posts is not viewed positively by all (Berglas, 2002; Ariss, Cascio and Paauwe, 2014; Sherman and Freas, 2004). There is concern that companies hire advisers to help with performance problems without any certainty that this will in fact improve performance (Berglas, 2002). In other cases, companies introduce coaching with no real plan at all, but as part of a movement to demonstrate contemporary thinking, almost a 'go-with-the-flow' approach (Sherman and Freas, 2004). In recent published literature concern overall arises from the lack of training, absence of outcome measures and absence of practice standards (Rose, 2015; Carter, 2001; Ariss, Cascio and Paauwe, 2014; Leonard-Cross, 2010). With reference to standards, a recent survey of coaching indicates that of the coaches who responded to the questionnaire, 951 worldwide, most received no supervision at all, and the next largest group received less than 26 hours of supervision a year (Passmore et al., 2018).

Media coverage projects a very positive image of executive coaching, and business and consulting firms are found to drive the view of a sustained business advantage by the use of executive coaches (Leonard-Cross, 2010; Ariss, Cascio and Paauwe, 2014). Although the positive advantage of coaching at the top of organisations is accepted in many cases (Rose, 2015; Eagly and Carli, 2007; Thornton, 2010; Sherman and Freas, 2004) there is little in the way of outcome measures to support this view. Berglas (Berglas, 2002) is concerned at the rise of the influence of consultant coaches within organisations. Rose (Rose, 2015, p. 8) reports that *"no other HR activity attracts such high hopes and appears to deliver so little".* There is general agreement that investment is needed around coaching goals and how to reach them if executive coaching is to be a long term useful tool in the successful management of talent (Ariss, Cascio and Paauwe, 2014).

The emphasis previously, from a feminist perspective, where executive coaching is sought to assist women in overcoming the perceived barriers they find in the workplace as a result of conscious or unconscious gender bias and discrimination, appears to have declined. Coleman (Coleman, 2011) describes a third and fourth wave of feminism where women reject the 1960s issues of the reversion of 'a women's place in the home', 'the workplace as a male environment', and the element which considers 'women as superior', in favour of a reaction against victimhood and a focus on power, production and emotional relationships. She describes a backlash against feminism and particularly against positive action and positive discrimination for women. Coleman (Coleman, 2011, p. 11) notes that there are now *"no undergraduate programmes in women's studies in the UK"* and goes on to note that some iconic feminist writers such as Fay Weldon and Margaret Attwood are turning their attention elsewhere (Khaleeli and Williams, 2009). This reflects the data from this study which shows that the participants did not describe seeking executive coaching for help in managing feminist issues but focused on transition to top posts and business issues.

Absence of Practice Standards

There appear to be no clear practice standards and no professional bodies offering accreditation to coaches except that offered by the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) which does not operate at the executive coaching level (Leonard-Cross, 2010; Sherman and Freas, 2004; Carter, 2001; Thornton, 2010). The International Coaching Federation Certificates and the UK Certificates do not appear to be standardised (Thornton, 2010). *"Anyone can set up in business as an executive coach"* (Carter, 2001, p. 5). Internationally the recent picture is that most coaches are engaged on the basis of the experience of the coach and few on the basis of qualifications or membership of accredited boards (Passmore and Fillery-Travis, 2011; Passmore et al., 2018). This open door aspect of coaching, in turn, leads to a wide range of views about which attributes of coaches are sought, often focusing

on experience in the world of business but also executive credibility and coaching reputation which may or may not be helpful to coachees or the goals sought by coachees (Thornton, 2010; Rose, 2015; Abel, 2014). Thornton (2010) raises the issue of whether the lack of practice standards, variation between goals desired by coachees and those set by coaches and commissioning organisations may account for women in particular making alternative career choices such as becoming entrepreneurs or remaining in post but failing to achieve the desired improvement in performance or to demonstrate a desire to move to a senior executive position. *"In an industry without universally accepted standards, all the parties need to be clear about their goals and how to reach them"* (Sherman and Freas, 2004, p. 1).

Wide Ranging Coaching Methodology

There are a large range of coaching strategies and practices which may respond to an equally large range of intended purposes in those commissioning executive coaching (Passmore et al., 2018). The Conference Board Report (Abel, 2014) indicates that 75% of respondents used external coaches to develop leader's executive presence, influencing skills, team leading skills and the ability to develop people. Within these general categories the report describes external executive coaches offering performance improvement, personal development, transition and career coaching, on boarding coaching, diversity coaching and assistance with 360 degree feedback (Abel, 2014). The latter appears to be a key factor in executive coaching particularly in local and central government, in public administration, and in the not for profit sector where 90% of external coaches are enlisted to assist with 360-degree feedback (Abel, 2014). Other research indicates a rise in coaching methodologies to develop soft skills such as gaining trust, communicating and influencing, tenacity and insight and other skills to assist in the transactional environment of the flatter organisation where the relationship with an employer replaces the job security of the traditional environment (Carter, 2001; Eagly and Carli, 2007; Passmore et al., 2018).

5.10 Summary: Theoretical Contributions to Understanding the Workplace

A review of published literature indicates that in this century and particularly over the last decade there has been fundamental and fast change in the way public sector and private sector business is managed and organised. In response to new technology, the development of the internet, new ways of managing knowledge, and the reality of corporate business working in a global environment, a neoliberal workplace has manifested itself in terms of the rise of project working, an increased focus on measuring performance, new leadership skills and the importance of connectivity and flexibility which has propelled new ways of organising real and virtual workplaces (Ladkin and Taylor, 2010; Brammer and Pavelin, 2004; Sohn and Lariscy, 2012). In the public-sector performance management

is enabled by similar technology and approaches to knowledge management, as well as the response of the sector to increased complexity, changed requirements of leaders and the importance of connectivity and communication skills (McCallum, 2013; Lustig et al., 2013). Organisational structures and workplaces, subject to neoliberal influence changed over the last two decades and this, in turn, changed patterns of work, career paths and behaviours of both male and female employees (Carter, 2001; Williams, 2013; Ball, 2003).

In this new workplace environment extant research describes women who still do not progress to take up top executive posts in the increasing numbers or at a pace anticipated or hoped for by governments (Davies, 2015; Hampton, 2018). Theoretical analysis moves from an understanding of this phenomenon in terms of barriers and glass ceilings to considering a labyrinth or a lattice type of pathway to career progress (Benko and Anderson, 2013). Individual pathways, career plans, and performance as success measures are core concepts going forward within such theories. Many women make their way along a career path in a neoliberal environment which varies between organisations and although progress has been made by women in the recent decade extant research indicates that there are challenges as well as opportunities for some women operating within some neoliberal workplaces (Conley and Page, 2017; Baker and Kelan, 2018; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009). There are changes in both public and private sector organisations, but this review of literature indicates that those changes have taken place in different ways and at different speeds between sectors and between organisations.

Management interventions to assist women to progress in a changed workplace environment focus on a consideration in the literature review of the rise of executive coaching. Mentoring and management development programmes are not identified as high value by the participants in this study in relation to a career path to a top post and this element of the literature search followed the collection of data and therefore the focus of the participants. Coaching is important but more in connection to sustaining a post achieved or transitioning into a post rather than the key to progress or managing bias. This review of literature identifies widespread concerns about the lack of standards, lack of clarity and poor outcome measures associated with coaching (Sherman and Freas, 2004; Carter, 2001; Rose, 2015) which do not appear to be changing.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW

6.1 The Current Position

The review of published literature on the pace of progress of women worldwide to executive positions at the top of organisations confirms that the UK is not unique either in terms of slow progress or the continued low proportion of women in top executive positions on boards or senior management teams. In countries where quotas are in place to secure the percentage of women on boards it has been found that in some cases there is difficulty in maintaining the level once reached and, in some countries, the overall higher number of women can disguise gendered recruitment patterns, such that women are in high numbers but in few organisations. In the UK there is variation between the public and private sector, and within the public sector, in terms of both overall numbers and the pace of change. In summary however, overall numbers of women in executive positions of power at the top of most organisations in the UK in the private sector has changed very little in recent years, there has been some slight improvement in the public sector. This, in spite of public and political pressure and encouragement to make significant progress.

In seeking to understand why women fail to progress in equal numbers, or do not progress by choice, in comparison to men in the workplace, a number of theoretical explanations are considered in the published literature. It is clear that early barriers to women progressing in the workplace, the glass ceiling, for example, assumed a traditional workplace of linear career progression. In many cases this was found to be no longer a valid explanation in the neoliberal workplace environment of the 21st century with individual career plans incorporating several organisational moves laterally as well as upwards, and a career map replacing a career ladder. The impact of increased technological and communication capacity and function has been explored. In some public-sector organisations, the new performance culture reflects previous monitoring of targets set by private companies and career progress in terms of successful leadership qualities which could address the performativity and complexity climate. In some areas in the public sector where the workplace remains traditional and linear such as in the judiciary, the number of executive women at the top remains very low.

In the economic climate of this century, particularly in the private sector, explicit connection has been identified between a company's reputation and its profitability and capacity to ride a crisis. The review of literature indicates that in recent years the link between the composition of the board, specifically the number of women on the board, and also the personal reputation of the CEO impacts reputation and consequently business success. Human capital, such as represented in a CV, has for many years been a measure of how successful an individual application for a senior executive position might be. Reputational capital in relation to board executive positions has been identified as under-researched

but also possibly an important factor in women's success, or otherwise, in reaching the boardroom. The importance of reputation and the profile and reputation of the CEO in public sector organisations is a topic of importance in retaining public and government confidence such that scarce financial resources are attracted and performance improved.

The review of literature identifies management interventions, in particular coaching, as a key factor for management investment in recent years in all sectors. The review indicates grave concerns about the level of investment, and the increasing influence leveraged by an industry which is not subject to practice standards and where evaluation and outcome measures are not published and therefore not validated. The high level of investment has been found to focus on aspiring and high potential executives.

6.2 Research Topics

The review of published literature has provided a historical and contemporary context for study of the phenomenon of the persistent poor pace of women in taking up executive positions of power at the top of the public and private sector in the UK. Three key research topics emerge from the literature review which influence this research study.

Organisational Structures

The assumption that the neoliberal workplace generates more opportunities for women than traditional workplaces, together with the challenges a neoliberal environment can present to women in the workforce are explored. A superficial assessment could indicate that traditional environments such as those found in police services and the judiciary produce significantly fewer women in top posts, and this may also be born out in the armed services which do not feature in extant research. However, the NHS is traditional, advancement tends to be linear, and there is little project management to deliver outcomes, but gender balance at senior executive levels has improved significantly in this organisation in recent years. There is little evidence to date that the neoliberal workplace environment which exists in most of the corporate sector is a contributing factor in accelerating or decelerating the pace of progress of women. The impact of organisational structures on the advancement of women is a research topic of this study.

The Talent Pool

There is no indication in the literature that where there is a larger workforce of women there is a greater likelihood of women progressing to senior executive positions. In international studies this is profoundly not the case. The assumption of current government programmes is that the larger the

talent pool, the more extensive the pipeline, the more likely it is that women will move into senior executive positions and this is explored further. Recently published literature is beginning to indicate that other issues are at play which influence women's decisions in choosing a career path to the top, or not, and this is investigated. This study also explores whether the impact of any management interventions such as coaching or mentoring influence or assist women's career choices. Issues around the women's talent pool, and the factors influencing women's decisions to progress to top posts, or not, is a research topic of this study.

Recruitment and Reputation

The review of literature strongly indicates that recruitment to top posts, particularly in the private sector might involve consideration of individual reputational capital which can be brought to the board. This is an under-researched area and this study explores what influences recruitment to the most senior positions in both the public and the private sectors, and what importance, if any, is assigned to reputation. The factors which influence recruitment to top posts, both for employer and employee, is a research topic of this study.

The research topics described above inform the direction of the research enquiry and influence the choice of methodological paradigm and methods of investigation to take this research forward.

PART THREE: METHODOLOGY AND METHOD

CHAPTER SEVEN: METHODOLOGY AND A RESEARCH STRATEGY

7.1 Introduction

Chapter Seven explains the decision made to undertake a qualitative research enquiry and position the enquiry within a social constructivist paradigm resting on subjectivist ontological and interpretivist epistemological assumptions. The research strategy I have identified for this study reflects the research agenda, the research objectives and the research topics which emerged from the literature review, together with my world view relevant to this research. Together they form the methodological context for the way this research was undertaken.

Figure 2: Methodological Positioning of this Research Enquiry
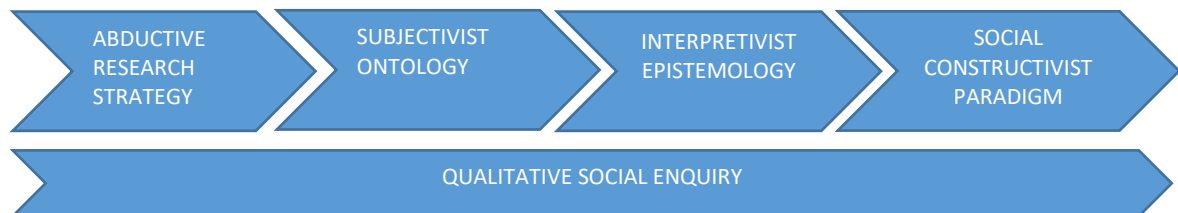
My experience over 30 years as a senior manager in the public, private and independent sectors in the UK, and the factors identified in the literature review, suggest that if senior executive women wish to seek a top job and are well qualified to do so there are few structural barriers remaining in the UK in the contemporary workplace to prevent this. The small number of women who seek such a career path and arrive at the top are however few (Hampton, 2018) and therefore it is my view that there are factors at play which discourage such choices. This research study seeks to identify some of those factors by listening to senior women in post in top jobs as they reflect on their lived experience in their different organisations. I have chosen to undertake a study which listens to executive women in post because the literature review indicates that, in spite of decades of academic research exploring this issue and identifying possible theories and testing hypotheses, little has changed in practice. The literature review prompted me to engage in listening to the lived experience of women occupying top posts and explore issues which they raise.

Chapter Seven discusses the methodological options open to me as the researcher within a social constructivist paradigm and explains in particular why an abductive logic of enquiry is chosen, since this choice frames the research design and the methodology. Chapter Eight describes the research methods and the design of the study.

This thesis seeks to explore the gender imbalance which persists across executive posts at the top of UK public sector and private sector organisations. My intention is to contribute to the body of research which seeks to improve business efficiency. The literature review confirms that a gender balanced board or management team at the top of organisations is believed by government, and by managers, in both the public and private sectors, to improve outcomes for the organisation and this therefore constitutes the context for my study (Hampton and Alexander, 2016). Within this general focus the methodology chosen assists in further exploring the issue of reputational capital which is identified in the literature review as a possible factor in assisting successful career paths, particularly in 21st century neoliberal organisations (Fombrun, 2005). The research explores how far reputational capital is a feature of both public and private sector organisations, and if coaching as a management development tool contributes to building reputational capital and assisting career progression for senior women executives. I also consider workplace structures and talent management in terms of recruitment and the women's pipeline as identified in the literature review.

The review of literature indicates that for several decades, theories seeking to explain the low number of women who take up top jobs have been proposed and tested (Hymowitz and Schellhardt, 1986; Williams, 1992; Ryan and Haslam, 2005). However the phenomenon of persistent gender imbalance at executive level persists in both the public and private sectors of the economy (Doldor, Sealy and Vinnicombe, 2018; Jewell and Bazeley, 2018). This research seeks to identify meaning directly from successful executive women through their discourse about their lived work experience. The research focuses on female executives who are in post in top jobs and their view of their career path and work roles in organisational settings. The research strategy of this study identifies new concepts which emerge from in-depth interviews with those senior women as well as allowing the research topics which emerge from the literature review to be discussed.

This study does not seek to approach the phenomenon of executive gender imbalance by testing a particular hypothesis such as the 'possible lack of sponsorship for women', or 'possible difficulties for women in building up a digital profile' because research following this approach has so far failed to achieve an impact on business efficiency or assist businesses to improve and sustain gender balance at the top. Executive gender imbalance on all boards and most top management teams is either level or falling as the literature review indicates. Instead, I consider an alternative approach which may contribute to creating change and improving business efficiency. The approach of this study suggests new theories and concepts in relation to this phenomenon which are identified by the participants, not the researcher. This approach may identify new areas for future research and highlight issues not previously identified in literature which could lead to change in practice.

Research philosophy has its roots in antiquity, and today's research philosophy continues to extend the proud traditions established by Plato and Aristotle through to Popper, Merton and Durkheim in the 20th century (Johnson and Duberley, 2000; Blaikie, 2007). Many recent philosophies of science and social science research were established in the 19th century, and there has been philosophical debate and dispute particularly with regard to methodological approaches to social enquiry since then (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). In recent decades social scientists have recognised that choices made regarding a research approach, a research paradigm or a particular logic of enquiry can produce fundamentally different research outcomes. Cunliffe (Cunliffe, 2010) is quoted in the introduction to Duberley et al. (Duberley, Johnson and Cassell, 2012) as suggesting: *"Our meta-theoretical assumptions have consequences for the way we do research in terms of our topic, focus of study and what we see as data, how we collect and analyse the data and how we write up our research accounts".* My belief and assumption that senior women could take up top posts but chose not to do so has consequences for the focus of this study and how the data is collected and analysed.

There are several ways for the contemporary researcher to reach a chosen methodology which is appropriate to their research topic within a philosophical perspective, and there is also debate about the start point. It has been suggested that the methodological choice of the researcher should flow from the researcher's philosophical stance and the social phenomenon to be investigated (Holden and Lynch, 2004). In the case of this study my view is that this particular social enquiry will be most productive if concepts and themes are sought from data arising from discourse with women already holding top posts, the participants in this study, rather than approaching the study with concepts arising from previous academic research. This view influences both the start point and the chosen methodology.

Some suggest that the topics of research and the research question can reveal the approach which determines the key methodological elements rather than commencing with a philosophical discussion of ontological and epistemological assumptions (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012). Recently there has been emphasis on the choice of methodological approach which suits the personality of the researcher, in addition to the researcher's philosophical stance (Blaikie, 2014; Clarke, Broussine and Watts, 2015). In this case my personality is inclined to discussion and listening rather than focused questioning, and this has impacted on the choice of method more than methodological positioning and or the choice of research paradigm. Practical advice is to identify and stay consistent with a settled theoretical approach (Silverman, 2013).

Section 7.2 evaluates the underpinning methodological question of qualitative or quantitative research and discusses the decision to approach this study primarily from the perspective of a

qualitative enquiry. Within this broad methodological approach, a qualitative social enquiry, this chapter evaluates the relative strengths and weaknesses of different philosophical research paradigms and approaches to logical enquiry in relation to this project. Following discussion of the quantitative/qualitative debate regarding the subject of social enquiry and acknowledging my contemporary perspective as the researcher, the specific research topics and the research phenomenon under question, this chapter goes on to discusses the logic of enquiry in relation to the research study because this drives the direction of the research to be undertaken. This chapter then subsequently considers the philosophical and theoretical framework appropriate to the research strategy identified. Such positioning guides the choice of research methods discussed in Chapter Eight.

7.2 Establishing a Qualitative Social Enquiry

Qualitative research is developed in response to social enquiry and assumptions to do with the nature of human behaviour (Duberley, Johnson and Cassell, 2012). This assists researchers in gaining an understanding of the underlying reasons of 'why is it happening' as well as 'what is happening'; providing insights into a trend of thought or opinion (ibid). Generally, qualitative analysis is used where sample sizes are small, at least less than 30, and where samples may well not be representative of the population, but selected to fulfil a quota (Pallant, 2013).

Quantitative research has been widely critiqued as insufficient for considering contemporary social enquiries (Silverman, 2013; Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Critical issues include the lack of context for the enquiry, the exclusion of meaning and purpose, the inappropriateness of applying general data to individual cases and not recognising the interdependency of theories and facts (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Guba and Lincoln (ibid) consider that facts can only exist within a theoretical framework. There are also challenges around the problem of not recognising the impact of the researcher on the data produced (Clarke, Broussine and Watts, 2015).

This research focuses on a small group of 12 participants because the research population is small; there are few female executives at the top of public or private organisations in the UK (Jewell and Bazeley, 2018; Doldor, Sealy and Vinnicombe, 2018). Also, the planned approach for this study is to undertake in depth discussion through interviews with participants and, for practical reasons, the number of potential participants is therefore further reduced.

The sample may not be representative of the whole population of female executives on top boards or top management teams. Each participant may well be unique. The research enquiry considers the meaning made by the participants and not a reality which is measurable, or which can be entirely or partially empirically investigated. The research study seeks to access lived experiences, views or

concepts which are constructed by the participants, as well as opinions, insights, concepts and themes for further investigation. This approach does not lend itself easily to quantitative or mixed method analysis but it is not exclusive of either (Guba and Lincoln, 1994).

I consider the underpinning methodological approach most suitable for this study is qualitative, although the distinction between qualitative and quantitative approaches is not the main driver in this enquiry, but that that the research enquiry allows for increasing sensitivity and understanding of the research topic to emerge.

QUALITATIVE SOCIAL ENQUIRY

7.3 Identifying the Logic of Enquiry

Research strategies describe the processes required to generate new knowledge and to solve difficult research questions and puzzles (Blaikie, 2014). There are four main strategic research approaches in use in contemporary qualitative research enquiries, inductive, deductive, retroductive and abductive (Blaikie, 2014; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012). Each has a particular start point and each has a particular pattern of approach either linear or spiralling with an integral iterative process. I have considered all options in relation to this project. This enquiry is not suited to data collection with a view to forming data patterns and theories; therefore an inductive enquiry is not pursued. Here the data pattern is already clear, few women arrive in executive leadership positions at the top of UK organisations. Deductive enquiry would commence with the identified behaviour pattern and test a hypothesis related to this. However, this approach has so far had little impact on the phenomena under study here and I propose to move away from this approach to social enquiry. Retroductive research considers patterns related to underlying structures and mechanisms and would be appropriate to test a hypothesis on, for example, reputational capital. However, although this research strategy would test this concept, it would *only* test this concept. The literature indicates that the phenomenon to be researched in this study is so embedded, there has been so little change to the executive gender balance on top boards in the UK, that there may be a range of concepts, theories, possible explanations as well as reputational capital which may be identified through a more open-ended approach to logical enquiry. Therefore, a retroductive research strategy is not the approach chosen. An abductive logic of enquiry is chosen for this study.

Abductive Research Strategy.

Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012) refer to abductive reasoning as beginning with a surprise, a puzzle or a tension. All of which are elements of the phenomenon at the

heart of this research. The logic of abductive enquiry moves away from the linear approach of inductive or deductive enquiry and instead describes a spiral of enquiry where the researcher moves continually in an iterative and recursive pattern between the puzzle and possible explanations for it (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012). Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (ibid) make the argument for abductive enquiry being useful when anticipating the struggle of the researcher to make sense of the puzzle or anomaly. There is congruency here with this research study where the persistence of the phenomenon which is the research question, is a puzzle. The review of academic literature explores previous social enquiry and research undertaken, and notes the political, social and organisational action and change delivered to shift executive gender balance at the top of organisations both in the UK and elsewhere. Yet the position has remained little changed. Indeed, a puzzle, a surprise and a tension.

In this research study I interview a small purposive sample of successful women executives who have reached the most senior level in their respective organisations and I aim to grapple with their meaning making, seeking an interpretation of data which may make sense of the puzzle. The purposive sample is small because the cohort of successful executive women in top posts is small, and in-depth interviews and second interviews of this small group are anticipated from the outset and would be conducive to an abductive research enquiry approach.

Blaikie (2014) acknowledges that an abductive research strategy is very different to an inductive or deductive enquiry (Blaikie, 2014). He acknowledges that here the aim is to discover the way participants or social actors construct their reality; in this research, how participants give meaning to their work life and career path. Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012) link abductive enquiry to interpretive research and identify four ideas which drive the abductive researcher to:

Acknowledge surprise

Recognise the expectations and prior knowledge the researcher brings to the field

Accept that new concepts, explanations are likely to be created

Accept this approach provides a rationale for reflexivity and consideration of the researcher's own positionality.

(This list is amended from Scwartz-Shea and Yarrow, 2012, p. 33).

These elements are in accord with this research. The phenomena which is the subject of the research is a puzzle; this approach acknowledges the impact of the researcher and allows for a process of reflexivity in relation to the position, focus and purpose which I have expressed in regard to this project; and this approach allows for new concepts and themes hitherto not identified to be created.

In following an abductive logic of enquiry the researcher is expected to learn more about their research question during the conduct of the research; this is not a pre-determined hypothesis testing approach and the learning must be recognised as speculative because it will not have been tested, in the sense of testing a hypothesis, as with inductive or deductive enquiries (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012).

Some critiques of the abductive logic approach struggle with what can appear as shaky ground (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012) because the learning which arises across the duration of the project, including the data collection period, transforms understanding and the research topic can, and likely therefore will, change during the research as the researcher better understands it. Thus, the research is revised whilst being interpreted. Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (ibid) argue that although this approach is less programmed and more dynamic this is not necessarily less useful than a pre-planned approach. Abductive logic enquiry gives the researcher an opportunity to develop a better or different research topic or question whilst undertaking fieldwork. The research follows the data. This approach allows for questions to be refined as one interview follows another, and key themes emerging can be raised with later participants through an iterative process which would suit more than one in-depth semi structured interview with each participant.

In abductive logic enquiry the literature review and the methodology do not necessarily display a direct relationship (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012). The research topics to be explored as identified in the literature review are not directly researched but the literature review provides the researcher with prior knowledge about the issues. In this case the literature review provided me with, for example, information about trends in terms of female executive appointments to boards, comparison between the UK and other areas of the global economy, consideration of the position in both the public and private sectors in the UK and it raised the concept of reputational capital and the impact, or not, of leadership development tools.

Abductive logic enquiry highlights the position of the researcher. Clarke et al. (Clarke, Broussine and Watts, 2015) recognise that the researcher cannot enter the field as a blank slate and always brings prior knowledge, referred to above and also personal experience, expectations and interpretation. The researcher in this enquiry design, as in most interpretive designs, is the sense maker and this brings power not only to identify the topic, the context, and how the data is collected, but also the sense making and theorising connected to the lived experience described. The ability to identify the concepts identified by those who describe their lived experience lies with the researcher. This is further explored in Chapter Eight. The spiralling iterative approach of an abductive strategic approach helps with 'member checking' to confirm that the researcher has correctly interpreted the concepts

and meanings arising from a hermeneutic dialogue of first order participant concepts and meanings and the second order concepts and interpretations identified by the researcher (Blaikie, 2014; Charmaz, 2014). The planned research method for this project allows for member checking through second interviews.

The elements of the abductive research strategy are congruent with the purpose of this research study and my values as the researcher. This logic of enquiry is therefore chosen to achieve the objectives of this research study.

ABDUCTIVE RESEARCH STRATEGY

QUALITATIVE SOCIAL ENQUIRY

7.4 Defining Ontological and Epistemological Assumptions

Philosophical research paradigms describe a basic set of beliefs which guide the overall methodological positioning of research and subsequently the method of enquiry. There is an ever-extending array of classical and contemporary philosophical research paradigms which rest on a combination of ontological and epistemological assumptions. Some argue that methodological choice should be consequential to the researcher's philosophical stance and the phenomenon to be researched (Holden and Lynch, 2004). For this reason, I have identified the logic of enquiry, an abductive strategy, because this provides the best fit with my philosophical stance and also because of the failed impact of previous research which pursued other logics of enquiry. My aim is to investigate new concepts and themes which may improve impact, shift the gender balance, and which can be further explored in later research. Nevertheless, it is my belief that positioning research within a methodological context is important and sets the research within the community of academic research which is important for publication and raises the opportunity of achieving the impact I seek. The next sections therefore consider the methodological options open to this research study given the strategic research strategy which is determined. Ontological and epistemological assumptions are considered in relation to their appropriateness to an abductive logic of enquiry and qualitative research.

Ontology

Ontology considers reality, existence and the essence of phenomena. Ontological questions concern whether or not the phenomenon which is the subject of research exists independently, whether it can

be observed, measured or counted, or if *"what we see, and usually take to be real, [is] instead an outcome of acts of knowing and perceiving"* (Duberley, Johnson and Cassell, 2012, p. 1). A realist view is that 'it' exists, there is reality 'out there' to be observed, measured or tested. A subjectivist ontological stance would position a reality as something created by social actors. In this case recent research has not been able to measure 'successful career paths' or 'success' although there has been significant work published on contributors to that success (Terjesen and Singh, 2008). The idea of 'successful' may be a social construct. The essence this research seeks to identify is created from meaning made by social actors in the organisations in the study. The abductive strategy assumes a model of spiralling iterative interviews with participants, listening to their views as they reflect on successful career paths and factors which have assisted, or been barriers to, their success. This approach reflects my focus and values as the researcher and I draw concepts, themes and theories from the data gathered from participants during these interviews and to explore their reality and social constructs. In this way new research ideas, topics and questions may be identified.

Assessing the value of life stories as an element in moving to position research within an appropriate methodology and in coming to an understanding around occupation is important in this enquiry (Wicks and Whitford, 2003; Wicks and Whitford, 2006). Life stories introduce a uniquely subjective reality for each participant. My research approach is to begin each interview with a request for a reflective life story of the participant's career path to date. Life stories can be used as data although each reflects a reality which is unique. There is a congruency between the research I have planned and a subjectivist ontology.

This research is set in a paradigm which assumes a subjectivist ontology.

SUBJECTIVIST
ONTOLOGY
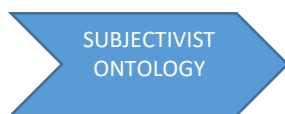
Epistemology

Epistemology considers how we can know; the knowledge of knowledge. Researchers can vary their epistemological stance in relation to different pieces of research (Johnson and Duberley, 2000). The ontological assumption described above, and the epistemological assumption assumed here relate to this research study and not to a fixed stance which I have assumed as a researcher.

In their discussion of the determination of epistemological assumptions Johnson and Duberley (2000) considered how to gain knowledge and query whether it is possible to know anything by neutrally observing the world. They come to the view that the ability to observe the world has been undermined

by the growing recognition that in the act of observing the world we inevitably influence that reality (Duberley, Johnson and Cassell, 2012). Duberley, Johnson and Cassell (2012) argue that the epistemological choice for the qualitative researcher is between a subjectivist (relativist) epistemology and an objectivist (realist) epistemology. This discussion is pursued to a point where it is recognised that if the possibility of neutral observation is rejected it is necessary to consider whether reality exists out there at all, and thus the ontological philosophical issues discussed above apply. Guba and Lincoln (Guba and Lincoln, 1994) are clear on their view of the relationship between ontological and epistemological positions and although writing almost 20 years before Duberley, Johnson and Cassell (2012) recognise that if an ontological assumption is that in a particular research study 'reality' is constructed by social actors and the underlying assumption is ontologically subjectivist, the epistemological question, the knowing, rests on the relationship between the knower or would-be-knower; that is on interpretation by the researcher. In this research study I as the researcher cannot be objectivist or detached. The 'way of knowing' has already been described by establishing that in this study the research is an abductive enquiry. This means that the reality investigated is constructed by the participants; the ontological assumption, is subjectivist as described above and the epistemological assumption assumes the interpretive role of the researcher.

INTERPRETIVIST EPISTEMOLOGY
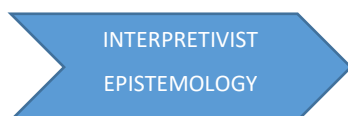
Summary: the Choice of Ontological and Epistemological Assumptions.

The abductive 'way of knowing' is an interpretive activity and can describe 'looking' and 'talking' as a dialogue which moves out in widening circles, as a hermeneutic spiral (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012) and which is an integral concept to this interpretive research design. This research therefore assumes a subjectivist ontology and an interpretivist epistemology.

ABDUCTIVE RESEARCH STRATEGY → SUBJECTIVIST ONTOLOGY → INTERPRETIVIST EPISTEMOLOGY

QUALITATIVE SOCIAL ENQURY
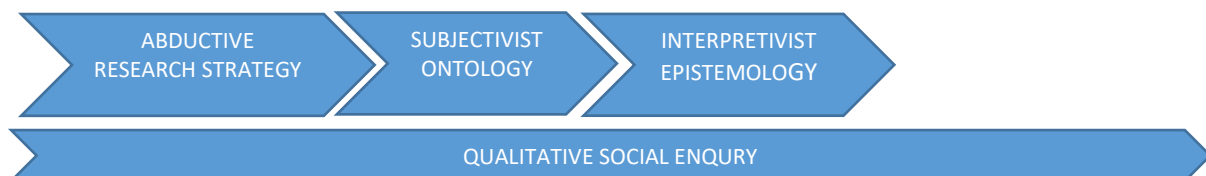
7.5 The Research Paradigm

Research paradigms of the past, mainly developing in the scientific field, have been referred to as the philosophical and theoretical traditions within which research is conducted. Blaikie (Blaikie, 2014)

recognises that although he refers to research paradigms as the main determinant of methodological enquiry in the past (Blaikie, 2007), such paradigms now sit alongside methods of logical enquiry or research strategies, and together they form the approach taken to social enquiry.

I have chosen to conduct this research from the perspective of an underpinning and primarily qualitative enquiry. I have established that the chosen logic of enquiry is abductive. The abductive research strategy leads the research design and provides a best match for the contemporary nature of the enquiry, and the purpose of the enquiry from the perspective of my world view of the research topic. That is, business efficiency is likely be improved by a better gender balance of executive roles at the top of UK organisations in the 21st century and the current imbalance is unlikely to have persisted as a result of structural barriers. There may be other factors which discourage women from pursuing a path to the top and those factors are to be explored through discourse with senior women in post. The ontological and epistemological assumptions defined above provide a 'best fit' with the way the research design has emerged. The nature of the enquiry assumes that there is no reality out there to be measured, success is a reality created by the participants in organisations. Therefore, the ontological assumption is subjective. The 'way of knowing' is through investigation of the topic with senior women. The data is created by women in interviews and not by the researcher. The iterative design of the abductive process means that although checking with participants is undertaken, I as the researcher inevitably impact on the enquiry and therefore the epistemological assumption is interpretative and acknowledges this element.

I have chosen not to progress towards positioning this research in the traditional way, that is, a qualitative or quantitative decision, the identifying of a suitable research paradigm, defining the ontological and epistemological assumptions to fit the paradigm, and finally determining my research strategy. This research study explores a puzzle, a tension and a persistent phenomenon (few women in top posts) and the logic of enquiry leads the research design to investigate this in an abductive manner and apply the ontological and epistemological assumptions summarised above. This has been determined from the starting point of a logical enquiry suitable for the research topic rather than pursing a philosophical response to historical traditional approaches. Nevertheless, is useful to site this research in a philosophical context and this section undertakes this by exploring classical research paradigms and then contemporary paradigms which are more relevant to this enquiry. This establishes the research study in the community of research such that any academic impact of the research can be considered appropriately.

The Classical Philosophical Research Context

In the past classical research paradigms have determined methodological options especially as qualitative research was said to develop under the umbrella of shared philosophical critique by the positivist mainstream (Duberley, Johnson and Cassell, 2012). Others considered that positivism was in fact no longer mainstream and that it was not necessary to consider all qualitative research in relation to a positivist paradigm. Blaikie (Blaikie, 2007) challenges the positioning of qualitative research in relation to a positivist paradigm as *"something of another age"* (Blaikie, 2007, p. 107) and almost a decade later it is clear that qualitative research has developed a language of its own and contemporary paradigms have developed to accommodate this rapidly developing range of approaches to social enquiry (Silverman, 2013).

The main research philosophical paradigms discussed here are those which assist in positioning this research appropriately in a philosophical community of research. After exploring the alternatives I focus on constructivism as the best positioning for this study. I describe below the reasoning which led to this decision.

Three main philosophical research paradigms are discussed which describe a journey, give a context for this discussion, and demonstrate some of the options still discussed and debated. Philosophical research paradigms are numerous, contentious and often over-lapping. For example, as early as 1994 Guba described positivism, post-positivism, critical theory and constructivism in relation to qualitative research (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Blaikie reduced the range of paradigms relevant to positioning qualitative research within positivism, critical rationalism and interpretivism (Blaikie, 2014; Blaikie, 2007). Duberley, Johnson and Cassell (2012) discuss options which include positivism and neo-positivism, interpretivism, critical theory and post-modernism, and post structuralism. The role of the researcher is increasingly recognised as an important factor in positioning a research study and the *"theoretical positioning of the researcher includes [the researcher's] motives, presuppositions and personal history which leads towards and shapes a particular enquiry"* (Duberley, Johnson and Cassell, 2012, p. 29).

Many philosophical research paradigms developed as part of a wave of paradigms established as alternatives to positivism which assumes a reality that can be measured and knowledge which is based only on what an observer can perceive (Blaikie, 2007). Most were designed to be more appropriate to quantitative social enquiry. I refer to positivism here to acknowledge the source of constructivism which is part of the philosophical dialogue of enquiry and research established for over 400 years, although challenged as not being appropriate to any qualitative research at all and specifically not for

this research since it assumes an objectivist ontology and is anchored in hypothesis testing and quantitative analysis.

Post positive critical realism is one of several post positivist paradigms designed to better accommodate social enquiry methodologies and includes modified data testing such as a form of triangulation to verify data, but a hypothesis must be applied to bring some order to the data (Blaikie, 2007; Popper, 1959). Popper (ibid) expounds critical realism and accepts that theories can never be entirely true, but he believes that by rigorous testing, false theories can be eliminated and those provisionally accepted must be subject to further testing. Swans are white until black swans are discovered. As with positivism the ontological assumption of post positivist paradigms such as critical realism is that a reality exists out there in the social world to be measured and tested and ontological subjective assumptions cannot be accommodated within this group of paradigms.

As with critical realism, critical theory is a blanket term for several paradigms developed as alternatives to positivism and post positivist models. These models, sometimes referred to as post structuralism or post modernism, were introduced after World War 2 and they represent a move towards discourse forming the centre of the methodology (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Blaikie, 2007) and this begins to align with the approach this study takes. There is a recognition of the researcher as interactively linked to the object of the investigation and the ontology is transactional and subjectivist. However the focus of enquiries adopting these paradigms is in identifying structures and often reflection over a working life is more aligned to 'historical moulding'. Critical realists are assuming that there is a reality out there waiting to be identified and although there is congruency with an abductive logic of enquiry this approach does not reflect that the 'knowing' will come from the data; there are a range of epistemological assumptions within this group of paradigms.

Constructivism and Social Constructivism

Guba(Guba and Lincoln, 1994) and Silverman (Silverman, 2013) promote constructivism as a paradigm at the opposite end of the continuum to positivism. Here realities are constructed by social actors or participants and are their realities. Therefore, there could be many realities. Guba and Lincoln (1994) describe the epistemology as being subjective and the distinction between ontology and epistemology as slipping away. They accept that realities and constructs may change during the life of the research and as created by the participants. Knowledge consists of those constructions about which there is consensus or relative consensus. Importantly for this research study constructivism considers not only 'what is going on' but 'why it is happening'. Silverman goes further and considers the constructivist paradigm as absorbing the ability to enquire about how social realities which participants identify are

constructed and how they are maintained (Silverman, 2013). He considers that this paradigm can explore process, and this is critical for this research study. I explore through the lived experience of senior female executives not only how they reached senior positions but the processes which they see as having helped or hindered that journey.

Constructivism focuses on interaction, discourse and practical activities (Silverman, 2013). The ontological assumption of the constructivist paradigm is that reality is not an external reality but the outcome of people having to make sense of their activities in the real world and with other people. This understanding of meaning making can be described as constructivism or social constructivism. The former strictly relates to meaning making by the individual and the latter to shared knowledge and meaning making that is social rather than individual (Blaikie, 2014). This research study is about social phenomena, and therefore the paradigm most appropriate is social constructivism, often shortened to 'constructivism' in academic and other literature. For example, Silverman (2013) refers to social realities and social enquiry and describes this as a constructionist agenda.

Since there is no reality (successful career paths) out there to be measured a social constructivist paradigm rests on a subjectivist ontology. Also, since that reality is described during social enquiry within this paradigm on two levels, the reality of the participants or social actors, and the interpretation of that discourse with the researcher, this paradigm also rests on an interpretive epistemology. As previously discussed the abductive logic of enquiry allows for review and reflection during the research with participants, to ensure the interpretation reflects the reality, the social world of the actors or participants who describe it.

Challenge to a Social Constructivist Paradigm

Social constructivism appears to be the appropriate research paradigm within which to position this research. However, this is a contemporary paradigm created to accommodate a particular approach to qualitative enquiry and there are issues to consider, and challenges to meet, if this paradigm is accepted for this work. A constructivist or social constructivist paradigm can be critiqued from several perspectives. Some consider that social constructivism has moved so far along the hypothetical continuum from positivist paradigms that the approach almost excludes any factors which are relativist and therefore excludes all natural world factors (Clark, 1998). Clark (ibid) considers that the constructivist approach forms the best explanation of the way knowledge changes, rather than any other proposed amongst social scientists.

Much critique centres on the feature of interpretive research which is at the heart of this research paradigm (Myers, 2009). Interpretative researchers are almost as much subjects of the research as

the participants since their prior knowledge, focus, and understanding of the context, is as critical as that of the participant (Myers, 2009). Gergen (Gergen, 1985) explores the social constructivist approach in his article on social constructionism as understanding meaning which is collectively generated and where knowledge is generated within a process of social exchange, but he considers that accounts are an expression of relationships between people and not about internal, organisational, or social processes. By 2015 however Gergen (2015) challenges some critiques from psychological disciplines regarding social constructionism. This is similar to social constructivism and also provides an opportunity for creative deliberation and action. Like social constructivism *"the most important feature of social constructionist thought is in its relevance to the times"* (Gergen, 2015, p. xi). The criticisms of both constructionism and constructivism relate to the underlying values of the researcher and their knowledge and values. Gergen (2015) challenges the researcher to consider what the gaps in the enquiry are, what the researcher has overlooked, and if there is a reporting style which benefits either participant or researcher and fails to be objective.

Burr (Burr, 2015) critiques social constructionism but the challenges equally apply to social constructivism, and she agrees that social constructivism shares many fundamental assumptions with social constructionism. Therefore, her challenge is important. She considers objective observations and interpretations and takes a critical stance on what can be taken for granted, ways of understanding the world. She queries the understanding the researcher may have of the cultural and historical specificity of the context in which data is gathered and she challenges the absence of knowledge which may occur about social progress which occurs from daily interaction between people, in the context being researched.

Summary: The Research Paradigm

This research is set within a social constructivist philosophical research paradigm since this best accommodates ontological subjectivist and epistemological interpretivist assumptions and the chosen abductive research strategy within a qualitative social enquiry. Critical comments on the social constructivist paradigm chosen are taken into account in interpreting the data, through reflexivity and reflection. For example, the analysis of the data includes fieldwork notes which include comments where I as the researcher may not have understood the cultural context on some occasions such as interviewing a participant in the armed services. I make the best effort to understand when social progress has occurred and note when processes are changed or changing, such as between generations (section 16.5).

| ABDUCTIVE RESEARCH STRATEGY | SUBJECTIVIST ONTOLOGY | INTERPRETIVIST EPISTEMOLOGY | SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST PARADIGM |

QUALITATIVE SOCIAL ENQUIRY
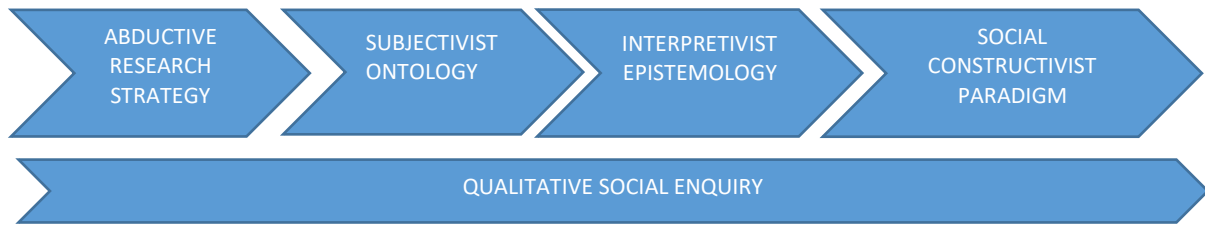
7.6 Summary: Methodology and Research Strategy

This research is qualitative and led by an abductive logic of enquiry. The philosophical and methodological context identified to support this approach is a social constructivist paradigm which rests on interpretivist epistemological and subjectivist ontological assumptions. A full consideration of all options has identified this positioning as the best to deliver a contribution to knowledge and to augment existing research into the phenomenon of persistent gender imbalance at the top of organisations in the private and public sectors in the UK. The critiques and challenges associated with abductive research design will be met through methods specifically introduced during the period of data collection and interpretation and are fully discussed in Chapter Eight.

CHAPTER EIGHT: RESEARCH METHODS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

8.1 Introduction

Chapter Seven described the methodology and research strategy of this study and explained this research as a qualitative social enquiry following an abductive research logic of enquiry set within the philosophical context of a social constructivist paradigm. The study assumes a subjectivist ontology and an interpretivist epistemology. This chapter describes the research design and the methods chosen to best pursue this research strategy and achieve the objectives of the research. I explore the phenomenon which has led to an organisational position in the UK such that business performance is compromised in both the public and private sectors by the persistence of executive gender imbalance at the top of organisations (Jewell and Bazeley, 2018; Doldor, Sealy and Vinnicombe, 2018). This is the research agenda (section 1.1). I investigate through this research why many women still chose not to pursue a career path to a top executive post.

For some the term 'methodology' includes the method of data analysis and 'methodology' is loosely referred to as a 'method of research' (Blaikie, 2007; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012) whereas for others the method of research refers specifically to research techniques such as data gathering and analysis (Silverman, 2013; Myers, 2009; Symon and Cassell, 2012). This chapter assumes the distinction between methodology and method. In this chapter I describe the methods chosen and the techniques employed, to practically undertake the research within the methodological context described in Chapter Seven.

In this chapter I review the research topics to clearly set the context for the choice of particular research methods. I then explain how the sample of 12 participants was determined, why in-depth face to face audio interviews were chosen as the mechanism for the collection of data and how the data was analysed including the choice of an application of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). This chapter also addresses the challenges presented by qualitative enquiry generally and a social constructivist paradigm in particular, and discusses reflexivity, quality criteria in qualitative research, and the ethical practice applied.

A Review of the Research Topics and Research Questions

The decision to pursue an abductive research strategy means that questions raised by the literature review are not necessarily linked directly with the method of data collection (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012). The aim of this thesis is to generate data from reflective accounts of women's career paths to the top of organisations by those who have lived the experience to contribute to the body of extant research on this topic. It was anticipated that concepts or themes may emerge as senior

executives looked back over their career which would support, augment or challenge existing research. The research topics identified in the literature review were raised as prompts during interviews and were therefore indirectly addressed (Appendix 8). There are three main topics of enquiry:

> Consideration of the organisational structures in which the participants worked to explore whether traditional or neoliberal work environments influenced the progress of women to the top of those organisations, or if they did not.

> Issues around the management of talent. This includes recruitment to senior posts, the women's pipeline and management interventions to achieve progress and pace in the advancement of women to top posts.

> Reputational capital and whether this was an important factor for women pursuing a successful career path and whether this was felt to be significant by women in both the public sector and private sector.

The methods of research described in this chapter show how these research topics will be explored and how data is generated and analysed.

8.2 Recruiting Participants

The aim of this research study is to explore with a number of women who currently hold the most senior executive posts in the both the public and the private sectors in the UK, through reflection and discussion of their career path, those events and choices made which assisted or presented barriers to their journey. This section describes how the participants for the study were recruited and the sampling technique which was used.

Sampling Constraints Encountered

The cohort of women who occupy the most senior executive positions is small. When data collection commenced for this research in 2016 there were only 6 female CEOs appointed to FTSE 100 posts and less than one third of public sector chief officers were female, with the exception of the NHS which was over 40%. The sample of participants therefore was limited by the small nature of the total population. The number of participants was also limited by issues of access and cost, both of which are recurring themes in qualitative research studies (Saunders, 2012). CEOs are busy people and as such are protected by clerks, PAs and administrators whose job it is to limit access to them. Access is through such brokers or via colleagues of the post holder or through networks where access can be negotiated. It is a difficult process and practical considerations therefore indicate that the choice of a small sample is a sensible way forward. Similarly, qualitative studies are limited by what can be done within the resources available (Patton, 1990; Saunders, 2012; Patton, 2002). In this case CEOs, or their

equivalent in some organisations, are located the length and breadth of the UK, and travelling costs for a part-time self-financing researcher is a limiting factor. The method of data collection also impacts on the sample size. The data was collected through two in-depth face to face interviews with each participant of about an hour each and it was intended initially that these interviews would be about two weeks apart. This reflects an abductive research strategy which looks to collect data through an iterative and spiralling process, returning to refine and clarify interview content with participants to develop a rich data set. Available time therefore limits the sample for this study since engaging in this process with 20 or 30 participants (even if they existed in the population and could be accessed) would be complex and not necessarily allow the depth of interview with each as intended. Given the constraints identified above the nature of the sample emerged. The sample sought was a small group of 12 participants, half in the public sector and half in the private sector. A pilot project to test data collection and analysis was undertaken with 2 participants, one in the private sector and one in the public sector.

A Non-probability Sample

The sample is a non-probability sample and fits with the definition of such samples as being exploratory, aiming to deliver a rich understanding of the research topic but not aiming to estimate statistically any characteristics of the total population, that is women in top jobs (Saunders, 2012). The research does however aim to generalise theoretically from the small number of participants and to contribute to extending understanding of the research topic.

A Purposive Sample

Saunders (2012) identifies four options for selecting non-probability samples. These are quota samples, purposive samples, volunteer samples, and haphazard samples. A purposive sample was the pragmatic choice for this study. A quota sample was not relevant as there were only two elements to the study, two possible quotas, which were women executives in the public sector and women executives in the private sector. I chose not to consider further factors which may have led to quota sampling because the population and sample size was so small. This is further discussed with regard to diversity within the sample below. My decision was also made on the basis that senior executives are unlikely to volunteer for a research study unless directly approached, given the time pressures they experience, and there were insufficient women in top posts to expect that a haphazard or snowballing selection where the researcher accepts someone who is referred by another participant would be productive (Saunders, 2012).

For the purposive sample, participants were chosen on the basis of my judgment. I considered who was likely to respond to a request to participate in the study, for example, who had shown an interest in the issue of gender balance at executive levels. I also considered who was accessible, where I had access through a network or a potential participant's colleague, and who was located near enough for me to interview within a day's travel. I considered the timing of the data collection since some potential participants were willing to participate in the study and/or the pilot but could only offer access many months ahead and could not be included. It was necessary, part-way through recruiting participants, to revise the timing overall of my initial request for access to potential participants in the private sector since the referendum decision by the UK to leave the EU was towards the beginning of my recruitment of participants and it was clear that CEOs of major companies were unlikely to offer any time to this study in the few months immediately after that decision was taken. I therefore delayed requests for participants in the private sector for 3-4 months. The public sector appeared unaffected. This meant that data was collected from the two sectors at slightly separate times, but within the same 18 months.

The Sample Selection with Regard to Diversity

Patton (Patton, 2002) believes that ultimately the validity and understanding reached through purposive sampling is more to do with the skill of the interviewer rather than the size of the sample. Saunders (2012) refers to Patton (2002) and the criteria he defines which can assist the judgment used by the researcher as the participants are selected. Saunders (2012) refines Patton's 16 varieties of purposive samples down to the 5 non-probability purposive sampling techniques mainly used by qualitative researchers today. The sample of participants identified which is most relevant to this study includes 'heterogeneous cases' where a diverse group might be chosen to reveal or illuminate key themes. Saunders (ibid) includes a 'theoretical' sampling technique which may be thought to inform emerging theories and which was considered in relation to this study but rejected on the basis that any concepts, theories or themes which are likely to emerge do so on the basis of the analysis of the data generated by participants; the participants were not selected on the basis of codes, categories or themes identified by me as the researcher in advance of data collection. 'Critical cases', 'extreme cases' and 'typical cases' identified by Saunders (2012) were not relevant to this study for the same reason; they emerged during the study and were not chosen for these attributes.

It was my aim to include in the purposive sample for this study a range of senior women, that is, a sample of 'heterogeneous cases' from the small cohort available. In the event the issues discussed above, location, availability and accessibility, prevailed for practicability reasons and although no-one was excluded specifically in relation to whether or not they added to the diversity of the sample, the

sample overall was not chosen on the basis of diversity. A larger sample size may have enabled me to ensure that a richer sample was chosen with regard to racial diversity, a diversity of culture and location, a diversity of family type including married and single women, divorcees, women with and without children, and a diversity of sexual orientation. In the event many of these categories were present in the sample but a heterogeneous sample was not specifically sought for practicability reasons.

In summary, the sampling technique chosen for this study was a non-probability purposive sample which was appropriate to the research topic and the research strategy chosen. The sample was small but appropriate to the population of executive women leaders in top UK organisations**.**

8.3 Data Collection

The aim of this research is to contribute to extant research on the phenomenon under study; the persistence of executive gender imbalance at the top of UK organisations in spite of political, financial, social and structural efforts to change that position (Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban-Metcalfe, 2010; Followell, 2014; Hauser, 2014; Sealy and Vinnicombe, 2013). This research seeks to listen to the views of women who have reached the top and occupy executive positions currently. The ontological assumption underlying this exploration is subjective in that there is an assumption that participants in the study describe their reality and that their reality is unique. The epistemological assumption is interpretive which indicates that as the researcher I interpret what is heard from those women about their experience. The abductive strategy applied to this enquiry means that data gathering is iterative. I shared my understanding of themes or concepts emerging in the first interview during the second interview with each participant for clarity and refinement.

Interviewing

Interviewing is a central technique of 'knowing' and is most used in organisational studies in business and management (Alvesson and Ashcraft, 2012). Alvesson (ibid) describes an 'Interview Society' where interviews take place in relation to almost any subject from speed dating to political analysis. In the case of this study other opportunities of listening to the lived experience of senior women executives were few and ethnographic studies or focus groups for example did not offer an opportunity to explore the research topics adequately or attract willing participants. Therefore, the method of data collection for this research chosen was the interview.

Interviews can be structured, semi-structured or unstructured (Myers, 2009), or in the categorisation that Alvesson and Ashcraft (2012) suggest, oriented to demonstrate approaches such as neo-positivism (structured); romanticism (an authentic dialogue drawing out subjective knowledge

through forming a relationship); localism (where the statements are understood only in the context specific to the situation); or interviews demonstrating reflexivity where the interviewer 'combs the process' to see how that process has informed the phenomenon under investigation. I describe reflexivity as applied to data collection and analysis in the following chapter (section 9.5).

This research study incorporates both semi-structured and unstructured time within the interview. There are often varying degrees of structure within one interview and this is the approach in this study (Silverman, 2013). The interviews were semi-structured overall but allowed for an unstructured open question at the beginning to ask the participant to reflect on her career path without prompt or guidance. The second half of the interview was semi-structured with prompts to ensure that there was consistency across the interviews and where there was opportunity for the research topics to be raised specifically and comment sought. An example of a prompt sheet can be seen at Appendix 4. All interviews were face to face, except in one instance where the second interview had to be abandoned half way through due to an announcement that trains out of London Paddington for the day were to cease shortly due to a fault and we both needed to get home. The interview was completed on Skype later.

The Challenge of Research Interviewing

I am experienced at interviewing, and over 30 years have interviewed many people including children who have been abused, CEOs of local authorities under Special Measures, mentally ill clients in need of hospitalisation, prospective adopters, applicants and witnesses during tribunals, people at job interview and senior police officers. I have also interviewed in many settings including door steps, Tribunal Chambers, courts, Council Chambers, on the street, in prison and in hospitals. I consider that this experience is useful, and I found this to be the case in the pilot and the main study interviews in this research. I have a good understanding about preparation and rapport and this was useful. However, there were specific challenges in research interviewing which I had to address. These included understanding that the process is complex and that the 'truth' is as the participant wishes to communicate it. Alvesson and Ashcraft (2012) consider that technique is important but discussions on decisions of best practice are best formed in terms of the deeper epistemological orientation, in this case interpretation by myself as the sole researcher. *"The methodological issue of whether the interview responses are to be treated as direct access to experience or actively constructed narratives"* must be considered and a position described, advises (Silverman, 2013, p. 45). In this study, after consideration, the interview was treated as direct access to experience whilst accepting the challenge this might present particularly regarding my subsequent interpretation of data gathered in this way.

All the interviews in this study were by appointment and in most cases were time limited by the availability of the participant. At least an hour was booked for each interview. A second interview discussed the transcript of the first and any amendments the participant wished were made. The first half of first interview was entirely unstructured, the participant reflected on their career path. The second half was semi structured and prompts for the discussion were consistent across all the participants' interviews and were related to the research topics. The second interview raised themes and concepts which emerged in the first interview and also referred to themes and concepts arising in other participants' interviews, thus refining, clarifying and focusing on a reviewing and iterative process. All interviews in all cases were audio recorded and transcribed by a professional and independent transcriber. The transcript of the first interview was sent to the participant in advance of the second interview to facilitate discussion of themes or concepts arising.

In summary, interviews were chosen as the technique to collect data for this research. The interviews were semi-structured with an unstructured element at the outset and were audio recorded. The ontological assumption that the reality described by interviewees was their reality was accepted throughout and the reality described was accepted as direct access to the experience of the participant rather than a construct for the purpose of the interview. An abductive logic of enquiry was followed in that the return interview provided opportunity for review, refinement and through another iteration a better understanding of the research topics and other emerging themes.

8.4 Data Analysis and Validation

This section describes the scheme chosen for data analysis and explains the difficult choices made. I have described in chapter 7 the decision to apply an abductive research strategy in this study which I consider offered the best opportunity for obtaining data from the sample. I made this decision knowing that data obtained from this approach can be viewed as 'shaky' or 'messy' (Myers, 2009; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012) because of the spiralling, recursive practice applied in obtaining it. It was my clear and focused intention to meet this challenge by establishing an approach to data analysis which ensured that the data produced by this research would be robust and rigorously analysed and that the analysis would be accessible and transparent thus presenting the maximum opportunity for the research to be considered trustworthy and valid. I made the decision to apply a version of grounded theory, constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014; Gibbs, 2013). I considered this would deliver the rigour I sought and also be appropriate to the interpretive epistemology and the social constructivist paradigm within which this study is positioned. The application of 'variations' of classical grounded theory has been challenged in recent academic publications (Keneally, 2012) and this section explains the decision nevertheless to apply a variation

of grounded theory following full consideration of other analytic options and understanding that variations to purist grounded theory can be held to be of value (Charmaz, 2014). This section summarises the approach to the data analysis scheme chosen, constructivist grounded theory, and a 'progressive focusing model' (Sinkovics and Alfoldi, 2012; Gibbs, 2013).

Grounded Theory as an Analytic Scheme

The 'why' question in regard to the persistent gender imbalance amongst executives at the top of UK organisations in both the public and the private sector is the key phenomenon in this study and grounded theory has long been established to address the 'why' question in analysing qualitative data (Charmaz, 2008; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Corbin and Strauss, 2008). It is also an approach to the analysis of interview data which has similarly been long established and employs 'sorting techniques' from which *"orderly patterns will emerge"* (Alvesson and Ashcraft, 2012, p. 250). In this study a form of data analysis was sought which would accommodate analysis from the beginning of the data collection process, reduce and regroup the data to allow concepts and themes to emerge from the data produced by the participants and allow for cross comparison of data from interviews throughout the process. Grounded theory meets all these requirements (Silverman, 2013; Thornberg and Charmaz, 2014; Charmaz and Bryant, 2010).

Grounded theory allows thematic headings to emerge and consists of regrouping data as it is produced, and this analysis can also incorporate data from fieldwork notes as well as interviews (Silverman, 2013), thus allowing for a reflexive element to be part of the data analysis of interviews which is so important in this study. Grounded theory can absorb data which assumes multiple realities and multiple perspectives (Bryman, 2006; Thornberg and Charmaz, 2014) which is a key element in this research project where executive post holders at the top of a range of organisations will express a range of realities and perspectives on the research topic. It was anticipated that each participant would have a unique perspective and it was important to identify an analytic scheme which could absorb this, enable comparisons across cases and also search for uncharacteristic activities or views, in other words deviant cases (Silverman, 2013). Evidence suggests that grounded theory is well suited to organisational research in that it captures organisational complexity and links well with practice (Bryman and Bell, 2015). Bryman (2015) points out that grounded theory is the most widely used framework for the analysis of qualitative data, the approach is iterative and recursive hence the data collection and analysis can proceed together. One of the most significant positive attributes of using grounded theory as an analytic scheme is that most software programs which assist with qualitative data analysis are written with grounded theory in mind (Bryman and Bell, 2015). I discuss my decision not to use software at section 8.5, although this was a factor in choosing grounded theory as an

analytic scheme initially. The underlying principles and some modern application of this analytic scheme therefore meet the needs of this research to a high degree.

Critiques of Grounded Theory

Since grounded theory was established by Glaser and Strauss in 1967 there have been many later versions and variations (Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Thornberg and Charmaz, 2014; Charmaz, 2008). An argument presented strongly in recent academic publications promotes the view that the application of grounded theory analysis only in its purest original, classical form produces valid and robust results (Keneally, 2012). The application of classical grounded theory appears to be increasing in popularity and particularly in management fields (Keneally, 2012; Bryman and Bell, 2015). Classic grounded theory is explicitly emergent and is an analysis which searches data for theories to explain the phenomenon under research using coding and supra coding methods. For some this means that data collection and analysis are undertaken in advance of any literature review so that the researcher cannot be influenced by a priori theories or concepts in literature (Keneally, 2012). Keneally (ibid) decries the inclination to adapt grounded theory methods although he acknowledges *"it is difficult to find examples of research in the organisation and management field that follow the exact tenets of classical grounded theory"* (Keneally, 2012, p. 410). Dr Keneally is a management consultant and it is appreciated that to enter the field to explore social phenomena without the encumbrance of an extensive literature review may be advantageous in terms of saving time and saving money and is simpler to present to commissioners, which may account to some extent for the popularity of this approach in the business consultancy field. Others accept that classic grounded theory offers explicit guidelines but if applied narrowly or rigidly can result in superficial studies and that grounded theory has evolved beyond classic grounded theory in the 21st Century (Bryman and Bell, 2015; Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Thornberg and Charmaz, 2014). Grounded theory *"is honoured more in the breach than in the observance"* (Bryman and Bell, 2015, p. 585). Classic grounded theory relates to an objectivist epistemology where an explanation of the 'why' is sought and theories and predictions are made at a general level. I have sought a form of grounded theory which relates to interpretivist epistemology and subjectivist ontology.

Qualitative researchers from a social constructivist or social constructionist methodological position apply a grounded theory social constructivist model of data analysis (Charmaz, 2008). It is argued that that this application of grounded theory allows the researcher to give close attention to the research problem and can lead to vibrant studies with theoretical implications that address the 'why' problem (ibid). The social constructivist application of grounded theory includes examination of the researcher's perspective, the reflexivity notes of the researcher, and considers data which depicts

social constructions in the phenomenon under study. This approach has a close fit with the scheme of data analysis sought for this project. Thornburg and Charmaz (2014) revisit a social constructivist application of grounded theory and confirm that this method of data analysis will assist the emergence of concepts and themes around *"what people do and the meanings they make of their actions"* (Thornberg and Charmaz, 2014, p. 154). The application of a social constructivist variation of grounded theory includes the key features listed in table 3.

Table 3: Elements Included in the Application of Social Constructivist Grounded Theory

1. Data collection and analysis undertaken simultaneously as an iterative process
2. Focus on an analysis of actions and processes initially, rather than themes and structure
3. Continual use of comparative methods
4. Drawing on the data to develop new conceptual categories
5. An emphasis on theory or theme construction rather than a description of current theories
6. Search for variation in the categories; the exception
7. A focus on developing a category rather than covering a specific empirical topic.

Adapted from Charmaz (2010, Chapter 11, p. 155)

The constructivist model of grounded theory also meets some of the critiques of grounded theory. For example, the challenge that researchers are unlikely to suspend their awareness of current theories and concepts is met in part by including in the analysis, fieldwork notes which includes reflexivity and which are likely to highlight the researcher's impact on the data collection process. The challenge that this form of research may not result in a new theory (Bryman and Bell, 2015) is accepted. Taking a rigorous approach to the generation of concepts may not be generalisable although it was planned that the concepts would be gathered into themes and discussed at second interviews with participants as part of an iterative process. A comparison between participants' interview data applied from the outset and any generalisable themes, was discussed with the participants. Bryman (2015) suggests that grounded theory generally is vague on the difference between concepts and categories and this method of data analysis invites the researcher to fragment their data thus losing the flow. The constructivist version of grounded theory meets this challenge better, in that it is recursive and this, together with an abductive strategy, allows the participant to comment if this were the case and to ensure that meaning making is understood and the big picture is not lost in the analysis of the data.

Considering Alternative Schemes for Data Analysis.

The analytic scheme chosen for this study was constructive grounded theory and followed the model promoted by Charmaz and Gibbs (Gibbs, 2010b; Gibbs, 2013; Charmaz, 2014; Gibbs, 2010a). The scheme chosen rests also on the basic tenets of grounded theory as revised by Corbin (Corbin and

Strauss, 2008) as the most relevant context for delivering grounded theory in the contemporary workplace. Other schemes were considered as described below.

The data collected from interviews with women holding the top posts in the UK in 2017 and 2018 will arise through conversation and listening to their stories. Therefore, conversation analysis and discourse analysis were considered as possible approaches to analyse the data. Conversation analysis focuses on the 'talk', the words people are using and the patterns of verbal actions (Greatbatch and Clark, 2012; Silverman, 2013) but this study does not assume CEO's and senior executives are part of a cultural group in this way. In fact, some may not be British, and means of expression may vary according to the organisation to which the woman belongs or the country or location in which they lived or spent their early years. Data analysis for this study will consider the views, concepts, ideas, and stories primarily for their content and meaning making rather than for the way they are expressed. *"The limit of conversation analysis in the context of management research is that it does not encompass management activities that are not primarily accomplished through talk-in-interaction"* (Greatbatch and Clark, 2012, p. 455). This does not mean that the 'tone of the conversation' such as defensiveness or sadness will not be noted but this is likely to be through fieldwork notes and plays no direct part in conversation analysis.

In this study I seek the meanings made by the women and not the language used to make the meanings, therefore discourse analysis is also not appropriate as a tool for analysing the data collected from the interviews. Discourse analysis is described as *"the process of social construction (i.e. meaning making) through the study of language and language used"* (Oswick, 2012, p. 473). Discourse analysis studies language at the level of the statement rather than the prevalence of words or patterns of word and therefore is better fitted to this study than conversation analysis to better understand organisational phenomena (Oswick, 2012). This is likely to be successful if participants are likely to be using the same language common to one organisation and location. This does not apply to women holding posts across the UK and the fact that all participants will belong to different organisations.

The process of obtaining the data includes more than one semi structured interview with the same participant, and part of the purpose of the second interview is to share with the participant my interpretation, as the researcher, of what had been said, my understanding of the themes which arose in the first interview and also, importantly, to share and discuss themes which arose in interviews with other participants. The data analysis scheme must therefore accommodate early cross comparison of data gathered from different participants. Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) is widely used in research studies of small groups and follows the view which has congruency with this study that *"there is nothing more fundamental than experience and the primary concern is*

uncovering/expressing/illuminating individual subjective experience" Eatough and Smith cited in Rose (Rose, 2015, p. 81). However, IPA does not move to a comparison of individual cases until late in the process of data analysis (Rose, 2015; King, 2012) and therefore was not accorded further consideration in this case.

The first part of the first interview with each participant was unstructured and they were invited to reflect on their career path to date in order to allow me to identify, without prompt, moments and tipping points they considered important. They were invited to tell their story. This part of the interview was a narrative not a conversation and therefore narrative analysis was considered as an analytic scheme over all. There was a good fit with the analytic scheme sought in that the spoken text involved a series of events which were described throughout each interview and the narrative was *"the central means through which people construct, describe and understand their experiences"* (Maitlis, 2012, p. 492). Thematic narrative analysis, structural narrative analysis and performance analysis were explored. The latter brought a powerful dimension to the analysis and I considered if a combination of performance narrative and grounded theory data analysis might be applied. Performance analysis has regard for the audience and the narrator in the telling of the story, and in fact during the semi-structured part of the interviews as well as the unstructured part of the first interview it was anticipated that an element of performing was in play. *"Clearly, they were telling me their stories, doing so at a particular time in their lives and in a way they understood as appropriate to a research interview for a study on …"* (Maitlis, 2012, p. 505). Further investigation of narrative analysis identified a possible difficulty in reducing the data. There were no concept or thematic coding guidelines, choices had to be made by the researcher and the rigour of grounded theory concept and thematic coding was absent. I considered that the 'performance' element of the data analysis could be captured in fieldwork notes and therefore narrative analysis was not included in the analytic scheme for this research study.

Template analysis is increasing with regard to data arising from a number of methodological positions including constructivism (King, 2012). Template analysis can be presented and used in the form of a list, a grid or a graphic such as a mind map and is similar to the coding activity in grounded theory analysis and can be applied to fieldwork notes as well as interview transcriptions. King (2012) describes template analysis as a technical aid rather than a method of data analysis. Template analysis was an option for the data analysis for this study, but I considered that the rigour, the transparency and the established advantage of grounded theory would include all aspects of a template analysis tool and add more in terms of nuance, deeper interrogation the data, and the identification of dissident data, outliers, or exceptions

Summary

This section describes the decisions made to arrive at a scheme which was chosen because it provides an opportunity for contributing new knowledge and demonstrates the rigour required within a context of interpretation and understanding. *"Qualitative analysis is many things, but it is not a process that can be rigidly codified... and the researcher has to feel a way through"* (Corbin and Strauss, 2008, p. 16). An intuitive sense of what is going on is required. The development of concepts grounded in analysis of the data also requires the location of the experience (the interview) in a larger context, a description of the changing forms of action, interaction and emotions in play and it requires that the researcher looks for consequences (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). From this basis the choice of grounded theory was explored, and the contemporary version of constructivist grounded theory applied.

8.5 Software

I carefully considered the use of software to assist in the analysis and validation of the data. I was conscious that qualitative research is often described as messy, lacking rigour, shaky or unsystematic (Myers, 2009; Sinkovics and Alfoldi, 2012; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012) and that use of software can assist in meeting this challenge. The transcripts were prepared in a format to be able to migrate data to NVivo software if needed. However, as I began the analysis I considered that 12 participants, albeit 24 transcripts and towards 1000 pages of data, did not necessarily merit the use of software to assist the initial coding and analysis. The use of line by line coding as applied in constructive grounded theory analysis, an example can be seen at Appendix 6, I considered provided of itself a very satisfactory level of interrogation of the data and enabled the analysis in this study to proceed with due rigour without the use of software assistance.

8.6 Summary: Research Methods and Research Design

This section considers several data analysis schemes relevant to data gathered from interviews with women occupying top posts in the public and the private sector in the contemporary workplace. A thorough exploration of available options was undertaken and the challenges which are presented in analysing data collected using an abductive research enquiry positioned in a social constructivist paradigm with an interpretive epistemology were considered. A version of grounded theory, constructivist grounded theory, was chosen for this research. This choice met my requirement for presenting findings from rigorous and transparent data analysis without loss of the big picture, the flow or the meaning making. This process allows concepts and themes to emerge from the data and for the women interviewed to participate in the identification of the themes arising and the interpretation made as part of the data gathered. Constructivist grounded theory will allow the

challenges presented in analysis of data during a qualitative research enquiry generally, and this study in particular, to be acknowledged and met as well as possible.

CHAPTER 9: MEETING THE CHALLENGE OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

9.1 Introduction

I aim above all to produce good quality research. There are some criteria which may be employed to this end and there is an extensive flow of recent academic literature and debate on the subject of assessing qualitative research (Symon and Cassell, 2012). Silverman (Silverman, 2013, p. 279) stresses that *"quality research is not a soft option. Such research demands theoretical sophistication and methodological rigour".*

The phenomenon which is the subject of this research enquiry, persisting gender imbalance on executive boards in the UK and the subsequent negative impact on business efficiency, is a subject of popular, political as well as academic debate summarised in the Hampton-Alexander Reviews commissioned by The Department for Business Energy and Industrial Strategy from 2016 (Hampton and Alexander, 2016). The government has addressed the issue of assessing qualitative research, on this and other matters, both in an effort to understand how they might assess what may be relied upon and also, I suspect, about what they might in the future fund. The Cabinet commissioned research into this matter in 2003. The criteria which emerged are explored in this section relevant to the context within which the debate about quality criteria for qualitative enquiry is taking place. The qualitative criteria which I have adopted for this research study are explained.

9.2 The 'Criteriology' Debate

Quantitative research rests generally on reliability and validity to assure its quality. Qualitative research is more difficult to assure in that elements of subjectivity, interpretation, fluidity and flexibility are integral to this method of social enquiry. Imposing some quality criteria offers guidelines for practice, enables researchers from different areas of qualitative research to learn from each other and may persuade other scholars that the work is valuable and worthy of publication (Symon and Cassell, 2012).

Almost three decades ago criteria were proposed by Guba and Lincoln (Guba and Lincoln, 1989); credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Together these criteria sought a quality of qualitative research characterised by reflexivity, the inclusion of cases which did not fit, a research process which was continually developing and refining, and member checking. Qualitative research should, they felt, provide enough detail of specific cases so that the reader can judge if their situation is informed by the findings and clarity about where the data came from and how it was transferred into findings. The criteria were drawn up to parallel the quality criteria of positivism which were

internal validity, generalisability, reliability and objectivity, and were subject to challenge for this reason. The search for quality criteria for qualitative analysis is not new.

It has been argued more recently that it is possible to identify 'universal' quality criteria in spite of the diversity of qualitative research and a set of 8 end goals were produced as criteria for the Cabinet Office (Spencer, Ritchie and Dillon, 2003). This set of end goals were practical, demonstrating the need for rigour and transparency. The criteriology debate includes those who wish criteria lists to be paradigm specific, and in some cases discipline specific. Lists could be unwieldy and impractical such as the contingent criteriology list produced by Johnson (Johnson et al., 2006) which had at least 18 assessment criteria and the equivalent number of questions to be asked in relation to each criterion.

The Cabinet commissioned research (Spencer, Ritchie and Dillon, 2003) produced a series of questions to be asked of qualitative research to assess its quality. Symon and Cassell (Symon and Cassell, 2012) note that the list was deliberately accessible, explicit and practicable, probably because it was produced for lay people (government ministers and civil servants) not academics . The key elements are summarised in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Criteria for Assessing Qualitative Research

QUESTIONS	APPRAISAL QUALITY INDICATORS
Convincing argument for different features of design	Appropriate research design?
Recording methods? Field note or transcription conventions?	Reliable data?
Discussion of models employed?	Clear theoretical assumptions?
Discussion of strengths and weaknesses of process? Data and methods? Documentation of changes made to the research design?	Adequate documentation of research?
Are the findings supported by data? Clarity of links between data, interpretations and conclusions?	How credible are the findings?
Evidence for wider inference?	Can the findings be generalised?

(Source: This table is adapted from a summary of Spencer et al., 2003 in Silverman, 2013, p. 306)

Symon and Cassell (ibid) highlighted criteria which were being adopted in practice by qualitative management research. This was explored by 45 management scholars and practitioners (all researchers). The summary was similarly accessible and practicable and is at Table 5.

Table 5: Summary of Derived Criteria from Management Scholars and Practitioners

(Source: Symon and Cassell, Qualitative Organizational Research, 2012, p. 214)

9.3 Quality Criteria.

Some challenges query whether the construction of quality criteria for qualitative research is valid at all, on the basis that quality criteria enact power relationships and will subjugate subjective qualitative research (Johnson et al., 2006). Others challenge the move towards more general universal quality criteria as described above by seeking criteria which are deployed so they fit the researcher's methodology and discipline and therefore propose a draw down depending on the individual research methodology from 4 sets of criteria related to ontological and epistemological commitments, and 4 sets for different paradigms. Some have devised different lists for different disciplines, such as psychology, and others are method specific, for example for research processes such as interviews. Others still, promote criteria for different analytical processes such as narrative analysis or grounded theory. In general debate centres on whether criteria should be abstract and universal or a pragmatic determination of criteria about the use intended for the research (Symon and Cassell, 2012).

Lists in themselves, have been criticised because, it can be argued, they are set with the expectation that research will conform to one or another of the lists, and this restricts the flexibility, subjectivity and relativity of qualitative enquiry (ibid). There are challenges to the quality of qualitative enquiry if issues of anecdotalism, reliability, the use of deviant cases, and the problem of retrospective accounts are not addressed as part of the research method (Silverman, 2013). Silverman (ibid) advocates the establishment of a well-articulated analytic scheme and a model of research consistency. The emphasis is on consistency and applicability. " *Constant self-criticism can lead to methodological paralysis"* (Silverman, 2013, p. 322).

9.4 Quality Assurance: The Quality Criteria to be Applied in this Research Study.

Since my aim is to deliver a research study which is considered to be a good quality qualitative enquiry, and to contribute to understanding of the phenomenon of gender imbalance at the executive level in public and private sector business, I aim to apply criteria which may be considered generally to achieve academic acceptance and also to position the research for professional and political acceptance. I

follow generally the criteria of (Spencer, Ritchie and Dillon, 2003). My commitment is to the specific quality criteria therefore which requires the:

Establishment of a research design which is appropriate to the purpose, aims and motivation for this research

Clarity about the research methods and consistency in applying the ontological and epistemological assumptions underlying the chosen social constructivist paradigm

Transparent data collection and recording methods, including reference to exceptional cases

Adequate documentation of the research process including changes made to the research design

Ensuring that the findings are supported by data, and that interpretations are clearly linked to data gathered.

Commitments to achieve research standards with regard to participants and my role as researcher are described below. These two areas of criteria together demonstrate my commitment to quality in this qualitative social enquiry.

In summary, there is extensive debate about the quality criteria which may be applied to a qualitative enquiry to achieve both academic and political ideas of 'good quality qualitative research'. Many sets of criteria are impracticable and unwieldy, and some are very general and lack specificity. My purpose is to achieve good quality research and to this end I have committed to applying a set of general but practical criteria overall and to a specific reflexive process described below.

9.5 Reflexivity

Reflexivity has been established as part of qualitative research for several decades and is an important element of the debate about the nature of knowledge, and also part of seeking to acknowledge the role of the researcher thus extending the 'knowing', the extended epistemology (Clarke, Broussine and Watts, 2015; Haynes, 2012). It is also a tool increasingly employed by qualitative researchers in the bid to demonstrate that their research is trustworthy (Finlay, 2003). Some go further and suggest that not only the motivation, social background, assumptions and positioning of the researcher are important but also the emotions of the researcher should be taken into account (Clarke, Broussine and Watts, 2015)

There is a distinction between reflexivity and reflection. Reflection tends to refer to the observation and appraisal by the researcher of his/her own practice whereas reflexology involves thinking about the researcher's own experiences and ways of 'doing' and is thought to be more complex (Haynes, 2012). In this study it is my intention to be both reflective and reflexive since the robustness and

credibility of the research relies on my interpretation of the data and on data collection through my interviews with selected participants.

This section explores the confusing array of definitions and versions of reflexivity (Finlay, 2003) and the critiques of this approach. I describe how a balance will be achieved between the views that all self-questioning is sometimes thought to refer to reflexivity and this is a mistake (Silverman, 2013); that much in reflexivity is self-indulgence or narcissism (Haynes, 2012); and the effort to adequately address my role as researcher. I explain how reflexivity is practiced during this research.

Critique of Reflexivity Practice and the Balance Advocated

The term reflexivity arises from ethno-methodology and particularly applies to that form of research and to action research (Silverman, 2013). The epistemological assumption for this study is interpretative and although the research data is collected by interview rather than through an action research method my interpretation, coding and identification of themes is subject to a critical review of the impact of my social and professional background, assumptions, positioning and behaviour throughout the research process. Finlay (2013) considers that *"reflexivity transfers a problem to an opportunity"* and this is the approach that I take (Finlay, 2003, p. prologue).

Some consider that the researcher approaching from a subjectivist ontological assumption will as part of reflexive practice automatically question the reality presented, question the knowledge that reality is socially constructed and accept that the interpretative activity will actively create realities (Haynes, 2012). Haynes (2012) criticises those who she describes as going beyond advocating reflexivity as a tool and tending to view reflexivity as a "*lived moral or ethical project"* examining not only the truth claims of others (the participants) but how the researcher constructs meaning (Haynes, 2012, p. 75; Cunliffe, 2003). This kind of approach has induced some to describe reflexivity as tending to narcissism and being used to promote one methodological approach over another (ibid). This prompts Haynes (2012) to suggest being careful that the analysis of reflexivity in a research project does not become more important than the research itself; that the discussion of reflexivity does not take place whilst being unreflexive; and she warns that confession (the views of the researcher) may well be an indulgence. *"Postmodern and ethno methodological approaches to reflexivity can be problematic in over prioritising language at the expense of coherent analyses of the researcher's subjectivity and the research topic"* (Gough, 2008, p. 22). Gough (2008) advocates that a balance between the extremes of reflexivity is necessary and that reflexivity may be important but not to the extent that the researcher and the research topic disappear from view.

From primarily an action research perspective (Clarke, Broussine and Watts, 2015) challenge the tendency that the researcher's experience, both factual and emotional can be consigned to a section at the back of the thesis and promote 'coming out' emotionally, underlining the view of those promoting reflexivity as integral to qualitative research. *"We are part of what we research"* (Clarke, Broussine and Watts, 2015, p. 4). Generally there is more interest and indeed critical study of emotions at play in the workplace (Brannon, 2015). This is particularly relevant to this thesis where reasons why women chose not to follow a career to the top post may be related to emotional preferences and choices, accounting for the persistence of the phenomenon of gender imbalance at senior executive levels which appears to be resistant to the removal or reduction of structural organisational barriers to progress.

My experience is that any interview is an emotional experience for both the participant and the interviewer and this should be recorded as well as the textual content of the encounter. A fully reflexive account of the research process would acknowledge the importance of emotional dynamics in understanding the relationship between the researcher and the researched (Brannon, 2015). Brannon (ibid) identifies some issues which impact on the research process such as the status of the researcher including physical body image, gender, age, class, sexuality and power relationship which in this case can refer both to the interview and the interpretation. In other words, the issues are *"who do we feel and think we are"* and *"who do others feel and think we are"* (Brannon, 2015, p. 36).

Recording of these issues in this thesis will go some way towards negating the view of Clarke and Knight (Clarke and Knight, 2015) that academic institutions discourage reporting of the precarious and uncertain character of research and encourage instead depersonalised accounts of data collection and findings. Clark and Knight (ibid) recognise the issue of over-identification and approach of what might be considered the issue of professionalism. For researchers familiar with interviewing, for example, there is a reduced likelihood of the researcher projecting a high degree of self or felt emotion into the encounter. Nevertheless, awareness of these issues is important and should be recorded.

Haynes (Haynes, 2012) suggests several strategies for introducing reflexive awareness which incorporate reflective practice, to improve knowledge and inform 'the knowing'. These include noting the motivation for undertaking the research; the assumption the researcher brings to the research; and how the researcher is connected to the research. In addition, Haynes recommends: -

Recording the researcher's theoretical assumptions about the subject of the research, revisiting these throughout the process and considering if these have shifted

Recording any subsequent revision by the researcher of the research topics

Listening to audio recordings and noting if the interaction of the participant with the researcher has affected the process.

(This list is taken from a list produced by Haynes, 2012, p. 79)

The Application of Reflexivity in this Research Study

Whilst undertaking this research both as interviewer and the interpreter of data I made the decision to address reflexivity by:

Keeping fieldwork notes before and after every interview to record observations, incidents, conversations, emotions and responses. Noting the three factors Haynes suggests above, motivation, assumptions and connection to the research. At the beginning of the fieldwork notes I placed a sheet noting my status (in relation to the participants) a physical description, my gender, age, class and sexual orientation. An example of fieldwork notes can be seen at Appendix 7.

Keeping notes on listening to every audio tape after the interview to note how I affected the process. These notes were made at the top of every transcript.

Keeping notes on shifts of the research topics initially recorded in the participant sheet or the prompt sheet (Appendix 3 and 4).

Meeting with a member of my supervision team to evaluate parts of the process.

Initially I considered separate documents to include a diary and a separate note of my possible impact on the interview. During the pilot study I found it impractical to use so many documents and confined any comments to the fieldwork notes and to the transcripts.

Reflective and reflexive practice is integral to this research process. A balance was managed to ensure that an honest record of the outcomes of embedding reflexive awareness strategies into the research were made throughout the thesis but that the focus remained on the research topics and my interpretation and analysis.

9.6 Ethical Practice

A proposal for this study was submitted to the Oxford Brookes University Ethics Committee and approval for the study to begin was given in January 2016. I applied good standards of ethical research practice (Holt, 2012; Silverman, 2013; Bryman and Bell, 2015). Informed consent was ensured by providing a participant information sheet before the first interview for every participant and ensuring that consent was signed, usually in my presence, before the interview began. An example is at

Appendix 5. I avoided assuming that because the participants in this study were by definition intelligent (women holding posts at the top of UK organisations) and were therefore able to understand the study from the information provided, in every case I offered an opportunity for any further questions on their participation in the study and made sure there was enough silence to allow questions. Any questions were answered to the best of my ability at the outset.

Consistently, throughout the interviews, I ensured that I took time to listen, to create silences when participants could formulate questions and made explanations about the interview and the areas covered. In every case I asked if the transcript should be sent by email directly to the participant or, as was usual for emails to this group of women, to their PA's or executive assistants and I closely followed their instruction.

I explained very clearly to all participants that although they would not be identified in the research process, there was a risk because of their high profile or the high profile of their organisation that they could be identified by some of the findings by their colleagues in the organisation or other organisations, or the press. The participants showed interest in many cases about who the other participants were or who I might interview who may support some of their views. On no occasion did I identify other participants in this way.

In the second part of the interview when I asked questions relating to their domestic circumstances, I drew their attention again to the fact that they were at liberty not to respond if they did not wish to do so. Also, where participants avoided discussion of their personal circumstances either as part of a reflective process of their own career path or in relation to, for example, how they managed or encouraged other women who may be challenged by issues of work/life balance, I accepted this. If the participant sidestepped a prompt I moved on in the conversation respecting their privacy even though it may not have been explicitly stated as an issue. This occurred once or twice, and I was aware of the skill of senior executives at sidestepping questions they did not wish to answer, and did not challenge this.

All data and associated papers were kept throughout in a secure cabinet and research data was saved on a separate hard drive and secured separately from my other business or private data.

I did not anticipate or experience any risks to myself beyond those encountered in ordinary day to day business or private life.

9.7 Summary: Meeting the Challenge of Qualitative Research

This chapter describes the methods and research design applied to this research project. They are guided by the methodology and research strategy described in Chapter Eight. This chapter argues the case for a purposive sample, the collection of data by unstructured and semi-structured interview techniques and a constructivist grounded theory analytic scheme for data analysis. I describe in this chapter the approach I established to ensure the research is of good quality, trustworthy and of value. The quality criteria which underpinned the conduct of this research study are explained together with the standards applied for the practice of reflexivity which were integrated with ethical consideration and practice.

PART FOUR: FINDINGS

CHAPTER TEN: THE CONTEXT

10.1 Introduction

The purpose of this research is to explore the gender imbalance of executives at the top of organisations in the UK which compromises business efficiency sought in the contemporary socio-political and economic context (section 1.1). Part Three describes the methodology within which this research is positioned, and the research design and methods employed. Part Four describes the findings which emerge from the data gathered. This chapter describes the context in which the findings are presented and some of the practicalities and challenges of undertaking this contemporary research study. I explain the impact of the social, economic and political context in which I undertook the research. This chapter also describes the participant group, profiles the women who participated, and discusses the challenges of anonymity encountered. I summarise the way analytical tools, such as constructive grounded theory, described in Chapter Eight, are applied to the data and the way in which the findings are presented. I explain the use of In-vivo codes to describe the findings.

10.2 The Social, Political and Economic Context

The research question explored in this study remained throughout the period of the study a subject of raised political interest. The Review by Lord Davies, commissioned by the government, on gender balance on FTSE boards produced its concluding report at the outset of this research in 2015 (Davies, 2015). The Hampton–Alexander Review also supported by the government to further investigate gender balance on boards published its 2016 and 2017 reports during the period of data collection (Hampton and Alexander, 2016; Hampton, 2017). These reports were published together with publications of associated academic and other interests which meant that political interest in this subject was continually at a raised level (Sealy, Doldor and Vinnicombe, 2016; Jewell and Bazeley, 2018). The fact that this was on going before and during the collection of data for this research study with associated press interest (Mills, 2018), ensured that women coming forward to be part of this project were aware that this was a 'hot' topic. The high profile of the research agenda influenced, for some, their decision to agree to participate and this was referred to in some interviews. All were aware of the views of politicians and sections of the press on this subject and were familiar with public discussion on how this phenomenon could be addressed. It was not necessary to introduce the subject to any of the participants as the study was conducted alongside a very public debate on the matter. Aside from the issues of timing and availability, generally my request for women leaders to participate

in this research was seen by them as an opportunity to reflect and contribute to the ongoing national, and international, conversation.

In addition to public discussion of the research topic, data was collected for this research in a period soon after the referendum decision that the UK would leave the European Union, and during and after a general election which returned a minority government. The impact of the economic, social and political environment at the time of this study was significant. Some difficulties arose when identifying participants and collecting data in the context of political and economic turmoil. This is discussed in section 8.2 and I do not repeat this here except to explain that the intended space of 2 weeks between interviews was sometimes not a possibility as senior executives' timetables were changed at short notice as a result of the Brexit vote. The furore which followed the referendum decision also impacted on the content of data collected and featured in several of the interviews either directly or indirectly. It is important to note this aspect of the context for the interviews at the outset and to be aware that some of the issues raised in the research enquiry were those being discussed simultaneously in public forums and on which many participants held strong views. For one participant, her organisation changed their trading currency during this period for example, and others were involved in structuring an organisational response during a period of unexpected volatility. One participant was not able to fulfil the agreement she had made to participate due to business merger and consequent travel to Australia but nevertheless took time to ensure participation was passed to another FTSE 100 board member. The impact of the referendum and the following political volatility was most evident in the private sector but was also referred to, often indirectly, in interviews with participants in the public sector, such as references made to changed economic forecasts.

The research took place within a period of economic uncertainty which followed from the economic 'crash' of 2008 and the subsequent period of austerity. This was further complicated by the referendum decision and the exacerbated economic uncertainty which that brought, together with the arrival of a minority government. The economic landscape was accepted as difficult by all participants and all were impacted by this context. Participants from the public sector were most affected and refer to budget constraints in describing their reality and how they were working within this, but some private sector participants also referred to financial constraints. None of the participants indicated that economic difficulties were likely to be short lived and the findings in the research were drawn from data which accepted this reality as the context for plans going forward, including any steps taken or planned to improve gender balance at the top of organisations. This was a significant factor for example in discussion about investment in management development opportunities.

During the period of interviews and particularly towards the end of the data collection period the cultural and social context of women in the workplace was publicly highlighted. Initially issues relating to the pay gap between genders had a public platform and latterly a culture was exposed which had allowed sexual harassment, bullying and bias to flourish first in the film industry and later in other organisations. The exposure about sexual harassment had been prominent in the press (Shugerman, 2017). Some of these issues were highlighted by participants in the data gathered, often identifying issues in advance of the publicity which was to come later. Where these issues were documented in the data they are reported in the findings and it is important to be cognisant that the context in which these issues were able to be publicly expressed appeared during the period of this research.

10.3 The Participant Group

The participants in this research study consisted of 12 female executive leaders who were holding or who had recently held executive board posts or the equivalent in their organisations. All were the most senior women in their organisation or UK division. The population from which the participants could be drawn was small, there are not many women in senior posts at this level, and because of their national profile as one of a small group, most were well known, some were household names, and all were known to the press. Some had been awarded honours and titles in recognition of their services to the nation.

This research project listens to the lived experience of this small group of women whose career path has taken them to executive positions of influence at the top of the public and the private sectors. The research design is ontologically subjective and seeks to understand the participants' experience, their reality, as they present it. I do not seek to generalise from this small group to the wider group of female executives holding top positions either in the presentation of the findings or in Part Five, the discussion and conclusions. It was always a risk in undertaking the study that by following an abductive logic of enquiry (section 7.3) with a small group, that there may be no common themes arising and this may have resulted in 12 different lived experiences. In fact, there were many common themes and the data was rich and rewarding.

The workplace, especially in the context described above, was fast moving and the participants in this study evidenced this. Two of the participants had retired within weeks from the senior executive posts they occupied, and one moved during the study from one FTSE 100 board post to another. The participants all described long career paths. Some had held top posts in different sectors and several in different organisations. One participant had resigned a previous FTSE executive post, and since interview has taken up a post out of the UK. I include in this analysis all the data which refers to the

lived experience of the participants including their reflections on posts previously held and posts held currently. The data has been enriched by experiences and reflections of the participants across a number of organisations and sectors in which they have worked, although the participant group itself is small.

Anonymity

All potential participants had been provided with a Participant Information sheet (Appendix 3) and I discussed this with them fully at the beginning of the first interview and all signed the consent sheet. I discuss this in relation to the ethical approach to this study in section 9.6 but refer to it again here as anonymity was a critical issue for some participants and impacted on how the findings could be presented. The participant information sheet explained that every effort would be taken to ensure that anonymity was maintained but that there was a risk that some participants may nevertheless be identified. For some there was no concern if they were identified and some had experience of successfully managing their press profile for many years. For others maintaining anonymity wherever possible was very important. Often a further discussion took place on this at the beginning of the second interview when the participant was in possession of the first transcript and it was obvious that if some of the content was reported directly this would immediately identify them or their organisation. Concerns were highest in the public sector. This is discussed further in section 15.2 in relation to managing the press. I undertook to secure participant's anonymity to the very best of my ability. I further undertook to forward a draft of any parts of this thesis in advance of submission, to any participant, if I was unsure if they might be identified by what was written. For one participant I further undertook to give advance notice if I was to speak about this research in any context, such as at a conference. This she felt would give her time to prepare in case she was identified by the press. I considered it was a privilege to speak with the participants in this study for an extended period, to listen to their lived experience and to hear their reflections on the research topics. I valued enormously the trust placed in me and I have done all I can to honour that trust in this document and to maintain the anonymity of the participant group. This has meant that the description of the findings of this research may be presented in more general terms than I would have wished, and on occasion I have changed facts marginally to preserve meaning and at the same time reduce the risk of identification. In order that I present the data as the lived experience of the participants, I make extensive use of quotes, because in my opinion these women best speak for themselves. For reasons of anonymity none of the quotations are attributable. Occasionally I have attributed a quote to an organisation or a sector in order to illuminate difference or congruity, but I have only done this where I am confident the speaker cannot be identified.

Accountability

Management responsibility, accountability and business reach is the most variable factor in the profile of the participant group. For one participant there is no direct responsibility for staff at all, for another there is daily responsibility for 16,000 employees albeit through a management hierarchy. For some there is management responsibility for an organisation in a small geographical area, for another there is responsibility for an operational network across more than 20 countries. For some participants the responsibility is strategic and national, for others it is operational and local, for some international.

Most of the participant group were either directly accountable to a board and shareholders, or to locally elected councillors or to parliament. In some cases boards met on another continent. Many of those in public service organisations also talked of duty and responsibility to the community or to the British people. None of the participants were accountable in the sense of daily oversight.

As referred to above some participants have worked in top posts in more than one area. The areas of operation represented by the participants include asset management, banking, the NHS, police services, financial services, technology, legal services, telecommunications, higher education, the civil service, local government, the armed services, and insurance. Of the participant group 7 women have responsibility for organisations which deliver services in the UK, and 5 women work with organisations delivering services internationally. All the women in the group, except two, travel internationally, regularly, in connection with their work.

Diversity

The selection of participants is described in section 8.2. I used purposive sampling which aligns with the aims of the research project to listen to the lived experience of women in top jobs in the UK in both the public and the private sector and across a diverse range of organisations. The size of the sample did not allow for selection on the basis of individual diversity but the participant group which emerged presented diversity in the areas of age, sexual orientation, marital status, education, and social background. The participants included women in their forties, fifties and sixties. Most were in their fifties as might be anticipated by their seniority, but the other decades were represented also. Most participants were heterosexual, but the group also included a married gay woman. Most of the participant group were married but the group also included one member who was twice divorced and is now single, another who has a long-term partner and one member of the group who is married for the second time. None were widows. Between them the group had 25 children, including step-children. There was little diversity in terms of education; most were graduates, though not all. There was a diversity of social background. Some of the participants came from a background where parents

were professionals or had experienced university, others did not, and they were the first of the family to go to university. For the participant sub group who had professional parents few of those professionals were the mothers. All the women in the study were white British although not all were from families who were of UK origin. Table 6 below summarises some key characteristics of the participant group.

Table 6: Summary of Participant Profiles.

CHARACTERISTIC	COMMON PROFILE	EXCEPTIONS
Job Status	Executive Board Member / CEO/ or equivalent	Global Division General Manager
Honours	No common profile	6 national honours; 6 no national honours
Age	Aged 50's	40's and 60's
Business Area	No common profile	Asset Management; Banking; NHS; Legal Services; Financial Services; Technology; Police Services; Telecommunications; Civil Service; Local Government; Insurance; Armed Services; Higher Education
Business Reach	No common profile	5 executive's responsibility for Global Services; 4 UK wide responsibility; 3 responsible for a small geographical area of the UK only
Management Responsibility	No common profile	Range from zero management responsibility to 16,000 employees
Education	University Graduates	One non-graduate
Accountability	Board and shareholders/elected national or local politicians	Another Global Executive, non-UK based
Marital Status	Married	Divorced; remarried; long term partner
Family	Children	One no children
Sexual Orientation	Heterosexual	Gay
Family work background	Professional families	Non-professional families;
Nationality	White British	

In summary, the participant group was diverse in terms of the range of organisations represented and the business areas in which female leaders operated, as intended in the purposive sample sought. Within that sought-after range of lived experience, the participant group reflected an extreme range of management responsibilities, and locality of operation or business reach. Diversity within the participant group was not sought due to the small size of the sample but there was a satisfactory degree of diversity which emerged within the group around age, marital status, family background, education and sexual orientation. However, there was a lack of a lack of diversity within the sample around race and culture which reflects the population from which this sample was sought.

10.4 Presenting the Findings

Constructive grounded theory was chosen as the tool to analyse the data. This involved line by line coding of the transcripts with the aim of introducing a degree of rigour to the process. This was done across all 24 transcripts, each of which represented over 850 lines of data, using initial codes described by gerunds, an example of initial coding is at Appendix 6. The initial codes were later grouped into

focused codes and then categories following the approach advocated by Charmaz (Gibbs, 2013; Thornberg and Charmaz, 2014; Charmaz, 2014). The data was rich, deep and extensive. There was a surprising degree of consensus around the emerging themes or categories across the participant group. Since the abductive logic of enquiry was followed I was able to work with the participants in their second interview to review emerging themes both from their own interviews and also those emerging from interviews with other participants. I used the word 'themes' rather than 'categories' to work with participants as this was familiar narrative for them and enabled a relaxed review of the findings, and engagement in clarification and further reflection on the meaning of what was emerging.

In-vivo Codes

The participants in this study were able to express themselves with clarity and often with great perception. Understanding this indicated that given the consensus of emerging themes it was appropriate to use the descriptions of the emerging themes, concepts and categories which the participants used. Therefore, the findings of the data analysis are presented in the form of 'In-vivo' codes that is, words and phrases arising directly from the data. Under each theme, or finding, I present a further range of sub themes or focused codes, which were grouped in discussion by participants under the umbrella of each In-vivo code.

In presenting the findings I describe emerging themes as identified by analysis of the data. There is no interpretation by the researcher in the presentation of the findings. The meaning making is by the participants. The purpose of the research was to listen and I reflect this by presenting the findings largely in the words of the participants. Where I have analysed the data and identified themes I have checked with the participants through their second interviews that I have understood the meaning of their words sufficiently to group together emerging themes.

Although there was a surprising degree of consensus by participants about the key themes emerging from the data, there was in each case, in each category, some ambiguities which emerged and some contra-indications where views were expressed which were in opposition to the general trend. There were also some significant gaps, issues around what participants were not saying, which I identified in the description of each theme in the findings. For example, where no participant mentions salary or status as a motivator I refer to this.

The findings of this research study, the data analysis, is presented as 5 emerging themes represented by In-vivo codes and several sub themes or categories which cover a range of areas of data analysis grouped under the larger themes. Findings include, under all themes, those responses which are contraindicative. The In-vivo codes describe the findings which are grouped around 5 major emerging

themes 'The *Right to Do ......'*, *'Competent and Credible'*, *'Not Travelling Too Lightly'*, *'The Domestic Contract'* and *'Resilience'.* These are summarised in table 7.

Table 7: Thematic Presentation of the Findings

THEMES	SUB THEMES
The right to do	Birth Family
	Education and accelerated schemes
	What motivates
	Discovering capability
Competent and credible	Reputation management
	Coaches and mentors
	Sponsors
	Networks
	Social Media
Not travelling too lightly	Making and taking opportunities
	Seeking challenge
	Building confidence
	Broad as well as deep
	Board readiness
The domestic contract	Having it all
	Factors influencing domestic contracts
	Types of domestic contract
	Living with the domestic contract
	Partners
	Financial challenges
	Career breaks
	Constraints
Resilience	The press
	Resilience
	The pipeline

10.5 Summary: the Context in which the Findings are presented

The research was conducted at a time when business efficiency and the research topic, the persistence of gender imbalance at the top of UK organisations, had a high press profile due to the focus of both a coalition and then a minority government on this subject. The political perspective was of missed talent and compromised business efficiency as well as equal opportunities and diversity. The Referendum and the General Election took place just prior to this research study and impacted directly on participants due to pressure on top executives managing the volatile economic consequences of the after effects of the referendum and the previous years of economic strain. Towards the end of the data collection period the exposure of inappropriate behaviours towards women in the workplace raised public awareness of how some aspects of culture in the workplace impact on the choices women make. The context in which this study was conducted was fast moving and this influenced how and when the data collection took place and to some extent the content of the data in the highly charged context of reports by the press of the social, political and economic issues of recent years. The participants in the study were without exception great communicators, their contributions were

perceptive, personal, and incisive. The analysis of the data is presented using the words and phrases of those participants, as In-vivo codes. Part Four, the Findings, does not represent my interpretation of what emerged in the data, this follows in the Discussion at Part Five. Part Four represents the analysis of the data and provides for the opportunity for a number of realities do be described; the findings are ontologically subjective. I have wherever possible presented the findings using participants words. In many cases I could not interpret or present the lived experience better.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: THE RIGHT TO DO…

"I felt quite strongly that I had the right to do these things" Participant 2.

11.1 Introduction

This chapter presents findings which emerge in most cases from the unstructured part of the first interview with each participant where they were invited to reflect on their career path which had led to the top executive post which they now occupy or had until recently occupied. All participants had a different story to tell and started at different points but emphasis on key moments, tipping points, and emerging themes demonstrated a remarkable degree of congruence. This chapter describes the influence of the birth family on participants' self-belief, the role of accelerated workplace schemes in early career path development, and early career decisions and self-discovery about what motivates. This chapter also describes those themes which emerged about how early career challenge and reverses were understood and managed and the emergence of the 'right to do' in the context of self-confidence and emerging capability.

11.2 The Influence of Birth Family

References to early family life by participants of all ages were linked by them to the sector chosen for their careers. Several participants with parents who worked in the public sector recognised that this had influenced their choice of a public-sector career for themselves, directing career choices at critical moments.

> *"...so, I suppose in a sense, because both my parents worked as teachers there was something that drew me more to the public sector than the private sector."*

Overall, once the sector was chosen there was no change or even temporary transfer to other sectors amongst the participant group. For many holding top jobs in the private sector there was little indication in the data that a public-sector post was ever a career path consideration except perhaps after retirement. The public sector was seen by some participants in the private sector as a service, and value accorded in that light.

> *"I like the idea of giving back... I wouldn't see it as a career move... I have huge and immense respect for people in the public sector, because I do see them as doing a public service, bright smart people who could be in the private sector earning more money, are giving, there's no question."*

In the public sector similarly, some participants considered jobs in the private sector only after retirement and generally these were in consultancy.

Some participants spoke positively about the influence of parents in enabling confidence to grow and for them to go forward. One participant in the private sector spoke passionately of the influence of her father in establishing the assurance that as a woman she could do anything.

> *"...well I think going back to why I am like I am, why I have such incredible self-belief, I think it's partly because my father always told me that I could do anything I wanted in life."*

Mothers were influential in contrasting ways. For some for their fortitude, for example, for one participant where her father had died during her early years and the mother left with little financial resource had demonstrated the strength to bring the family through, establishing an appreciation of the resilience of women that this leader had drawn on throughout her career. For another participant the same experience, loss of the father, drove a determination never to be reliant on a partner and to seek financial and emotional independence. Other participants also spoke of not following the pattern set by mothers who were dependent on their partners.

For most participants, parental influence was positive and recognised. One participant referred on several occasions to the value set established by a mother figure in doing the 'right thing' and challenging where events were not acceptable. This established in her, a value set and identity which sustained direction across critical periods of challenge.

> *"I think the most important thing for me was the value set that was instilled into me as a kid. So, I had a mum who stood up for things she thought were right... so, I never shied away from saying... actually this is what I think."*

11.3 Education and Accelerated Schemes

One member of the participant group did not attend university, two members of the group graduated from Oxbridge and the rest attended a range of other universities in the UK. One participant was sponsored through university. Many of the women had degree qualifications which did not relate to their choice of first job. The choice of higher education institution and early career direction was often incidental depending on chance meetings, and arbitrary decisions. One participant describes choosing her Oxford College because it had the same name as her father; another explained meeting two guys at a rugby match, one of whom sent recruitment forms which set the direction of her career.

For those who were first in the family through university and for others without financial backing there were more serious considerations of gaining qualifications for a career which provided independence and financial security. For some the focus of many decisions was around becoming independent financially and independent of family. More than one participant later in their interviews referred to acquiring a professional qualification before progressing to a management career path as helpful, and

explained that it provided some status and a stable foundation. Accountancy and law were subjects studied with a view to early professional qualifications and a secure career.

> *"So, in deciding where to go I went into accountancy simply because it was flexible, and I assumed that I would have children at some point, take a career break and that would allow me options if I wanted to go part-time."*

Following university most of the participants in the sample were initially part of a graduate accelerated scheme of some kind and the non-graduate in the group also joined an accelerated training scheme in banking as a school leaver. The accelerated promotional schemes attracted both private and public-sector participants. Several participants described the challenge of accelerated schemes as well as the opportunities they offered. Participants described being *"one of a very small number on a high flyers scheme, not terribly popular with everybody else because of that"* and *"coming with an asterisk over your head".* This participant as well as being one of the few women on such a scheme felt this was a tough early road. One of the women leaders who was on an accelerated promotion scheme described those first few years as being "*really tough"* but also expressed understanding that *"this was a scheme which was about accelerated promotion"* and that she had therefore expected it to be tough. The outcome for all those who were part of an early accelerated entry or promotion scheme meant that very quickly these participants arrived in organisations at management level.

11.4 Identifying and Managing Challenges

All participants described a career path which was fast, upwardly mobile, and successful. A journey pursued by very bright and able individuals.

> *"I can remember looking at people who were assistant directors and who are just tiers below where I sit now and thinking 'Oh God they are brilliant' ... and you just move past them."*

It is in this context therefore that this section looks at the data which describes early challenges and how they are met. Not one participant described their journey as easy. This section considers findings which indicated that it was often in the early years of a career that some of the most difficult challenges were recognised and met successfully. Meeting challenges successfully often meant learning how to manage themselves in a workplace presenting such challenges.

Conscious Bias

An early understanding and experience of conscious and unconscious bias was described by some participants. Conscious bias was referred to most in the most traditionally structured services such as the armed services, legal services and police services, rather than more neoliberal organisations such as telecoms, banking and the civil service. In the armed services, for example, until recently some

posts were not open to women, and in legal services similarly there were certain kinds of work expected to be undertaken by women and some not. One participant experienced harsh overtly expressed bias where women were told they simply were not accepted as having a part to play, particularly by older employees. Conscious bias included a firearms officer getting fed up of being asked if she had brought her knitting, and deliberate exclusion of women from decision making.

> *"I know it sounds daft, but the conversations people had in toilets, that if you're the only woman you're not part of those conversations, which again separates you out, you're not part of the team… it can be really difficult".*

In the private sector one participant described the bias introduced by a quota system designed to promote more women. The outcome was that she was introduced following promotion as the senior manager's 'plus one'; the quota filled. It was accepted by most participants that some of their experiences of conscious bias are less likely to happen now because of new regulation and legislation with guidance such as the Equality Act 2010. One participant described how her professional status, as a lawyer, had often counteracted bias in a number of organisations, and she considered a professional qualification as great leveller.

Unconscious Bias

Some participants described themselves, as working with unconscious bias, allowing it to drift into working practice due to pressure. There was a view that there are more men than women in most workplaces at senior levels, and this can impact on introducing unconscious bias. One participant gives an example.

> *"I fear there is in all of us an unconscious bias that means if I have a job that I want doing, it may be quite a significant career-enhancing opportunity… I will give it to somebody like me that I know will get on and do it because they have always done things well in the past… I think a lot of that can act to the prejudice of women... career opportunities are given to mini-me's... don't just give the next job to Fred because Fred did a really good job last time. Think about Freda... look around. But you know what it's like, busy people give things to get it done, get it out of the way. I am troubled as to whether we have yet cracked work allocation, career-enhancing opportunities."*

An extension of workplace induced unconscious bias related to several participants' descriptions of elements in the promotion and appointment decision making process. Some participants recognised a subconscious tendency to appoint clones; the appointment of people with the same characteristics as those who have gone before, who are often men. This was seen by some women as a challenge to their identity often early in the career path, but also later at board level where they struggled to maintain their identity by being there and by being themselves.

> *"It's often the case with the woman that I want to be myself. If you want diversity to work, you need people to stay themselves... I think one of the problems at senior levels of companies, it's no good if you hire a woman that is identical to the guy that was there before except that she happens to be female. That's not diversity."*

Some participants described issues of promotion to do less with qualifications, jobs well done, as about those who look similar and appear familiar, to appointing panels and also those who think in a familiar way. The following is an example of not quite looking or thinking as expected, illustrating issues of cognitive diversity.

> *"I was quite a challenging appointment at the time because I didn't probably look like they expected a Dean to look. I didn't have quite the background they expected, but actually I think, well I know, some of them found it quite challenging."*

Workplace Culture

Different 'ways of working' were exemplified in several examples of the approach women take to a task such as focussing on outcomes, finding smart solutions, and often minimising the time taken to achieve the best outcome. Men were described as having more time, focusing on the process and appearing impressive. One participant explained the reality she works with in the following way.

> *"There are two ways to approach a [presentation]. You'll have a whole series of previous decisions and you could go through each one of them and then say 'and ultimately'... and it will look a terribly impressive piece of work... Another way to do it is to say, well the case of x in 2015 did all this work, and all I'm going to do is go to the case of x and extract the principles. The [presentation] won't look anywhere as incredibly learned because it'll be really quite short in comparison, and it'll just have the one case. But it'll be short, it'll be sensible. It'll be straight to the point. It'll be focused. I think that women are inclined to take the latter course, and some men may take the former."*

It was in the area of working practices and organisational culture, where women were described by some participants as appearing to challenge just by doing things differently, and in some instances removing themselves from a culture which does not respond to such challenge. Some participants described themselves and other women as sometimes moving to other organisations where they could better apply their working practice.

> *"Some environments tend to be heavy with a subset, it's not that they're men, but it's a particular subset of men, they tend to be competitive, alpha male, driven, so on and so forth... and therefore often, gross generalisation, there isn't as collegiate an environment because of the nature of these people. And generally, women are more collegiate. And they tend to go... and I've seen it several times... they almost tend to shrug and go 'I can't be bothered with all that'."*

One participant described the tasks given to men and women and their different way of *"playing the game".* She explained that in her lived experience because men and women don't play the game in

the same way women may lose the game or be perceived to lose the game. This was less to do with the outcome; women were described as possibly producing a faster outcome or a smarter solution but still being perceived of, as losing the game.

> *"Whatever it is, when the game is played, they may lose that game because they don't play the game in the same way. Or be perceived to lose, is the other thing. And often women I've seen get on with things in a quieter way, so because they're not shouting about it on the way through, they [women] are not going 'I've done this. I've now done this'... women tend to sigh 'well if they can't see what I'm doing I can't be bothered with that... I'm just getting on with it'."*

Merit and Potential

There was an issue particularly prevalent in the unprompted accounts participants gave of their early lived experience related to merit and potential.

> *"...we aren't often looking at our careers through the same lens as a guy will. Partly social conditioning, partly genetics, partly trying to balance different things."*

It was important for some participants when considering promotion to maintain a strong personal identity and not be persuaded to measure themselves against male expectations.

> *"It's very very recently I've worked out that actually the people defining merit are doing so in a very specific way, and you have to build a team of people with a variety of capabilities... not many CEO's really believe that or feel that."*

One participant considered measures of merit and potential as hard to find and hard to apply.

> *"...of course, in the appointments world we are all focused on evidence, of this, and of that. When you focus on evidence how do you have evidence of potential? It's much harder to prove and so, the man who has had all the advantages, he may have had a better education, he may have had the time to write text books, he may have had the time to write the very long and learned judgments. How do you compare to the woman who took a couple of years off to do childcare... When they come back how do we ensure that we assess their potential fairly and compare them to a man who has written text books, done all the big cases, without being unfair to the man."*

In the armed services the approach was different in that officer promotion after the early years was entirely on merit, and the measures of merit, which was all evidential, were known and recorded.

Learning to Challenge

For many participants there was an acute sense of managing their own behaviour to overcome, for example unconscious bias, around the management table. One participant described the lengths of preparation before senior meetings and then the care when speaking, making short but memorable

statements and the importance of demonstrating gravitas. Other participants describe carefully planning contributions to meetings, making decisions about what to say, when to challenge.

A common theme which emerged when participants described managing workplace challenge such as conscious and unconscious bias was a reluctance to rock the boat, and a conscious effort as a woman not to be disruptive, not to challenge directly, and to go with the flow whenever possible. Participants spoke of not wanting to stick out, be seen to be difficult.

> *"...men who may be difficult to work with get through the system just because they are thought of as able, whereas all a woman has got to do is appear to be slightly difficult, and it may be for many reasons, she may have good cause to be difficult, but she doesn't get through the system, she gets dismissed as not a team player."*

Several women described times when bias was not challenged and times when it was. Participants described times when they made they made the decision to 'go with the flow' and other times when they challenged the status quo.

> *"I was in a pay review with two guys… so we were talking about bonuses and we came to a girl on the team and they said well, we don't need to give her a bonus, because her husband works for Lehman brothers… and I said I cannot believe I am hearing you say that. They said don't be ridiculous we've got a limited amount of money, we've got to make it stretch, why does she need a bonus. I said well, look she's doing the same as this person over here who's getting a £30,000 bonus… the fact that he's a guy and she's a girl, it's irrelevant. And the fact that she's married to someone who's doing well, that's irrelevant... if I hadn't been in the room she wouldn't have got a bonus."*

> *"So, I went to my first unit and there was deployment, we were going out to [X country]… and my [boss] at the time said, well you won't be going because you're female. But he was wrong... I deployed… I was always well supported when I challenged."*

Occasionally participants described making the decision to challenge head-on, round the table, in a group whilst recognising that for most women and on most occasions the oblique approach, the quiet conversation, the quiet referral to a higher authority works best. It was recognised that sometimes more is required.

> *"...on the way to becoming leader I was described by somebody as too young. And then I looked round at the men, and the men who had held the same position, nobody had ever talked about their age, and I think in fact I wasn't young compared to the men. But they just saw this young woman and I took that head on by saying to people I understand there are references being made to my age, what is the point of it. Is it said that because I am too young that I can't do x or y?"*

Another theme addressed the challenge of invisibility and several participants describe their early management years tackling this. A phrase in the data which recurred often was 'working bloody hard' alongside a theme of being prepared at the outset of a career to volunteer for the unpopular job, the tedious job, to be 'willing and able' in a bid to become visible.

> *"I was just walking past [the CEO's] desk one day, he'd never spoken to me before, I'd only been at [the company] for six months, and he asked me to go and get something from the stock department. And we're on the fourth floor and the stock department was on the ground floor and we were a 60's building with a dodgy lift, so I ran as fast as I could down to the ground floor, got a piece of paper, ran upstairs as fast as I can, out of breath, and handed it to [the CEO]. He said no-one's ever done anything so fast for me ever, you'll work for me."*

She became a director of the company aged 28.

11.5 Discovering what Motivates

There was a remarkably high degree of congruence about motivating factors across the participant group. For many there were random choices of 'first jobs' but this changed, and a chosen career path in almost all cases was distinguishable by what participants came to understand they wanted from their working life. The factors which influenced the choice of direction were an increased awareness of which opportunities aligned with what mattered to them. What mattered to almost all participants was job satisfaction. None described themselves as seeking top jobs, high salaries or national recognition. Although high income was not a motivating issue for most participants at any stage, for several participants the issue of a steady income, a secure income, steered their direction at first job level. This, however, did not influence the substantive later decision, it rather constrained the options for some participants. Job satisfaction was paramount. For one participant only, the level of income offered influenced a job choice at a later stage in her career.

> *"of course, a happy by-product was that they kept offering me more money... when you think about it there comes a tipping point when you're thinking... this could be life changing in terms of home, education for my kids."*

For all others this was not mentioned in their discourse about their career choices. Job satisfaction remained the motivating factor.

The data also provides an opportunity to understand how participants each in their own way unpacked the general term 'job satisfaction'. Within that general parameter almost all pursued hard their individual interests in the direction of what they perceived would deliver the job satisfaction they sought. None of the participants described staying in any job which had ceased to provide the job

satisfaction they sought for more than a very short time. The following quotes provides an insight into how interests were individually different and within different sectors but all related to driving for job satisfaction.

> *"there's something about working in this organisation, the minute you... it's a fantastic pace, so you get kind of hooked a bit, the people, the clinicians."*

> *"I was just hooked on democracy and working with politicians, and just the variety of work... and after that my career advanced on a mixture of skill-based capability, I'm bright, I learn quickly and I'm interested in what I do."*

> *"...they put me in asset management as the first port of call and I, after 6 months, was supposed to then move to the banking division, and I said, I don't want to move, I want to stay in asset management and do it forever. And they said no, you can't do that it's most irregular you've got to complete the two-year course. And I said well if that's the case I'll leave because that's what I want to do. So, they said OK."*

For some participants a chosen early career took them into an area of work where they were still operating when they joined this research group. For them job satisfaction meant moving within one service, different posts, but the same organisation. Only one participant identified her career choice as coming before university, and she pursued that all of her working life. She describes it as delivering the job satisfaction that she had anticipated.

> *"...I intended to join [the organisation] from a very young age and never really swayed off it... never did it cross my mind that I did not have the opportunity to go and do the things that I wanted to go and do... I'm immensely proud of the organisation that I'm part of. It's very much part of my identity."*

As a group without exception these women executive leaders followed their chosen path towards their interests, and job satisfaction, with industry and drive.

Avoiding Boredom

There were other common influencing factors which drove these potential leaders forward. Many described themselves throughout their career as having a low boredom threshold which without exception they discovered fairly early on, and thus they shaped a career with movement and new challenges. In the data some participants verbalised their impatience with tasks which grew boring or repetitive, exemplified in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Illustrating the Boredom Factor.
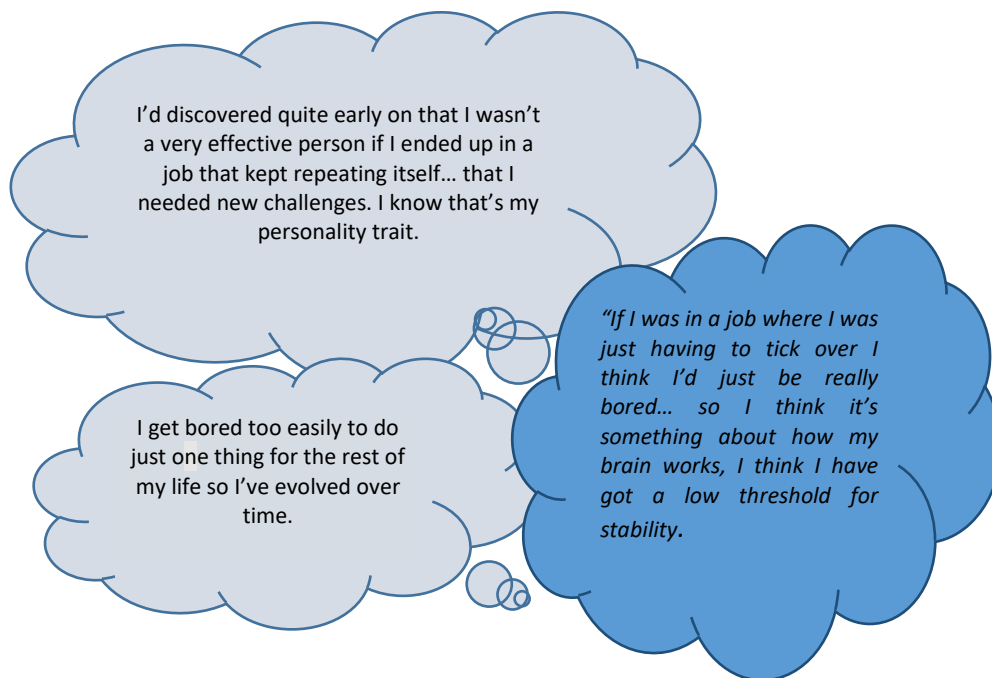
Curiosity

Alongside the search for job satisfaction and the avoidance of boredom was a recurring reference in the data to curiosity and a willingness to learn and re-learn.

> *"So… you're up to speed with new systems, new ways of doing things... I do read a lot, not so much for the day to day stuff but more about the themes of the workplace.",*

> *"...a lot of what I've done, I've chosen to do. I am a naturally curious person; I do read quite a lot."*

A Position of Influence

Many participants also described as part of their self-discovery a growing desire to influence and therefore to achieve some seniority. A banker recalls *"so, I needed to establish myself and by taking on a failing business no-one could deny that I was responsible".* It was also significant that participants generally were able to reflect on the self-realisation of what motivated and motivates them. This was a characteristic of all participants.

11.6 Discovering Capability

Many participants in both the public and the private sector described moments in time, tipping points, when they became aware that not only did they have the *'right to do…'* but also, the 'ability to do'. There was a remarkable congruence in accounts of this happening and in all cases this 'light bulb'

moment came when the participant was in a group setting in a position, to compare their abilities with peers and identify personal potential, as Figure 4 illustrates.

Figure 4: Light Bulb Moments

"I'm pretty much the only woman wherever I go... ....and then when you realise that actually they are talking rubbish, it makes it much easier to be confident...."

"having got to Oxford I think I acquired the confidence I could see around me, in those who had come from rather more privileged backgrounds and I developed confidence myself, began to think I might also be able to be a barrister."

"I think that was a key moment because then I was working with the management board, so with the [CEO], the deputy [CEO], it made me realise that there was nothing special about people at the top of the organisation....it gave me a lot of confidence at quite an early stage."

"I worked with the chief exec and he was the person who made me deputy chief exec. But I began to realise that actually I knew I could do the chief exec job ....."

"It wasn't until I became [a senior exec] and I went on a senior [leadership] course and I looked around and thought crikey, if these are the chiefs of the future then there's no reason why I can't do that."

There were some exceptions. One participant did not describe such a moment and her narrative described a high level of self-belief that she could do anything from first entry into the workplace. She was keen however to establish understanding that the journey was not easy, she describes the hard work, the bid to be noticed, but she was not burdened by a doubt of her capabilities. Other participants who did not record having such tipping points included those working in organisations, mostly in the public sector, where progression was more mapped out, and acquiring capability was a matter of gaining experience and confidence in other ways.

11.7 Summary: The Right to Do...

This chapter has explored those findings which offer a deeper understanding of the participant group and their interpretation of their early career journeys, key moments, tipping points and important events. This chapter identifies the way career choices were made, the importance of birth family in career orientation, and early learning of how to manage challenges in the workplace such as bias, invisibility, and identity. The participant group describes an accelerating pathway towards posts which provide job satisfaction, avoid boredom, encourage curiosity and provide potential for increasing influence. This chapter identifies an emerging theme of developing awareness of ability and capability,

alongside the right to do…… This chapter introduces the concept of self-confidence, the following chapter looks at competence and credibility.

CHAPTER TWELVE: COMPETENT AND CREDIBLE

"If I am competent and credible people can trust me" Participant 7.

12.1 Introduction

This chapter considers those findings which emerged from the data in relation to how each participant chose to develop their reputation, seeking in most cases to become known for their competence and credibility. Many participants had some difficulty in describing how their reputations were built and sustained and there was an associated sensitivity and reluctance to be seen to be ambitious or engaged in building a profile for personal rather than organisational gain. This chapter considers the importance these women leaders ascribed to a job well done, and the tools which were offered, chosen and valued to assist them to become known as both competent and credible in many areas. The range of views around the personal services of coaching and mentoring and the high importance placed on sponsors is described. This chapter also reports findings on the use of social media and data on networks. Without exception however, all the women executive leaders in this study unequivocally agreed that to achieve a top job, to promote themselves as competent and credible, they had to work very very hard.

"…I haven't found any short cuts in life yet… it's about good old fashioned hard work."

12.2 Reputation Management

Human capital was identified in the literature review as an asset which men and women can often offer equally to an appointing board (section 5.8). In the same section of the literature review reputational capital was identified as a further development of human capital where, in contrast to human capital, women may not offer a sufficiently high value at top appointment level. This chapter describes the lived experience of a small group of women leaders in top jobs and their views on reputation, being known, and the very strong theme which emerged of seeking to be known to have a reputation as '*competent and credible*'.

Ambition

The consideration of reputation building was the area in interviews which appeared to most cause participants to be sensitive, even uncomfortable, and for some the idea that they might be considered to be, or to have been, building personal reputations was a difficult area to discuss. It was linked by some in the data to mean they may appear ambitious and this seemed to be an unacceptable term for many except in the sense of seeking 'job satisfaction' which was discussed in Chapter Eleven. The examples below describe the struggle some participants evidenced in interviews, accepting that they may appear to be ambitious but reassuring themselves that they were not actually so.

> *"…so I would describe myself as not so much ambitious, and people wouldn't necessarily read that back if they saw me, I suspect, but I was always very conscientious, I always wanted people to be saying she's done a good job and all of that… rather than it was that I wanted to be the first one to do x, y, and z."*

Other participants also explained their lack of ambition, appearances of ambition, by focusing on their lack of plan to achieve top posts.

> *"…and you might not believe this, and maybe I'm living in a self-delusional state, but I would say I have not been particularly ambitious… I've never had everything planned out."*

However, three participants described a clearly expressed ambition to become as senior as possible, to take a top job as soon as possible, and to do this by building a significant personal profile.

> *"…Well, I will try and get to a top job to prove the [Smith] family can do it… "*

> *"…I wasn't ever conscious of my reputation. I was conscious of getting results. I think results drive reputation... and I thought in business it was perfectly acceptable to talk about those results; to talk about me."*

Synchronising Reputations

For most of the group the data on reputation building was linked often to a shared over-riding focus on preserving, extending and highlighting the reputation of the organisation to which they belonged. For some a considerable effort was described as going into synchronising personal reputation with that of the organisation. The examples below illustrate consistency in this approach across organisations and sectors.

> *"…No, I've always made sure it [the reputation of the organisation and my reputation] is absolutely in line … and I've always weighed up when I've got involved in things what I would bring back to the [organisation]"* (Higher Education).

> *"I would say our reputation is absolutely central to everything that we do... it's not right up in front in [my] mind, this is building my profile, but its building a network for [the company] that's why I'm doing it "* (Telecoms).

> *"…you need to know what you stand for as an individual and what your own purpose is. And of course, I would say this, but I think that has to marry with the organisation anyway for you to be effective"* (Insurance).

There were indications in the data of an awareness that self-promotion, the building of personal rather than organisational profile had implications for tenure. Where personal reputation took the credit for company improvements or organisational turnaround, tenure appeared to be considered more limited. Many sought a reputation for loyalty, whilst being aware that there were some constraints on the personal reputation which might have been built had not the focus on the reputation of the

organisation been paramount, and that tension was carefully managed. Where this was managed well by the participant their tenure appeared to be considered by them to be more assured.

In spite of tension and sensitivity around organisations' reputations and personal profiles, without exception, participants evidenced a shared and strong desire to build a sound and increasingly well-known reputation for themselves within and outside their organisations for having a high degree of competency and credibility. It emerged that doing a good job was important but also that there was more to reputation and swift progress and promotion, which related to being credible, demonstrating successful handling of the job and the challenge of the task; adding value, and making a difference. In all cases participants spoke of wanting to be known as someone who delivers, the person who gets results and in one case the person who leaves a legacy of *"job done"* behind. The outcome for many was that this approach enhanced their career path and accelerated progress. Many participants refer to their intentions with clarity, stating *"I've always operated on the basis of wanting to be competent and credible"*.

Participants described their career path in relation to acquiring a range of competencies at an increasingly high level. Chapter Thirteen describes data indicating a strong theme which emerged linking achieving competencies to developing high order confidence. This chapter looks at how women in top jobs achieved the competencies they sought, the careful acquiring of a range of skills, and the drive and energy devoted to the use of available management development tools, including coaching and mentoring.

12.3 Coaches and Mentors

The overwhelming theme emerging from the data on coaching and mentoring was one of confusion. The term was used interchangeably by many participants. Some provided very clear definitions of coaching and mentoring to which they were committed, which were different to equally clear definitions provided by others. An example of confusion is below.

> *"…we were trying to mentor a coaching style of leadership."*

The data identifies several examples of participants referring to informal mentoring and coaching which in most cases meant unfunded, non-contractual, and unmonitored but valued advice relationships. Informal mentoring and coaching was also referred to alongside relationships with network members, previous colleagues, and occasionally mentors who were sponsors. Four participants said that they had no experience of formal coaches or mentors although one of these consistently referred to informal mentors.

> *"...then [Robert] mentored me for quite a few years and that was quite useful... he introduced me to some people, he was a really good sounding board in terms of looking for opportunities [for me]."*

One participant, working at international and national level in the private sector, was opposed to the use of coaches and mentors. She considered the need for coaching and mentoring indicated a lack of leadership potential. This participant also considered that great leaders were born and not made, that leadership skills could not be learned.

> *"...If I think if someone feels they need a mentor, then maybe they're not leadership material... I think it [great leadership] is something people naturally have. It can't be taught, to be a leader, it can't be taught to be an entrepreneur. You just either are, or you are not."*

Three participants with no personal experience of coaching held top posts in the public sector. One had never been offered a coach or mentor and the others had been offered a coach once but had not taken it up. These women however, spoke of the value of both coaching and mentoring, often as a confusing muddle, in their particular professions, and they were active in setting up for example, internal mentoring programmes.

Most participants in this study were, for the most part, of an age where until towards the end of their journey to top posts, they described the use of coaching and mentoring as not being common. I introduce the findings in this section because although late personal experience may be the case, most participants had in fact invested significant time in coaching and mentoring opportunities later in their career and, given their positions of influence, the views of this group of leaders on supporting, or not, the introduction of coaching and mentoring opportunities for other members of the workforce, and for women in particular, is relevant to this study.

Coaching

All four participants who had never had a coach or mentor had used networks, sponsors and other sources of support within their organisations in the place of coaches. In the public sector budgetary considerations were a factor in deciding not to take up the one coaching opportunity they had been offered.

"I think coaching is only offered in the [organisation] for the most senior [people] and only a handful... It's very expensive."

"Five years ago, I had a conversation with a coach in [a city] with a view to her coaching me, but in the end, we never got round to it, partly because it was going to be expensive and it was going to be tricky about who was going to pay, so no."

Table 7 summarises the use of coaches by the participants in this study, illustrating the lack of clarity amongst most participants in regard to the definition of coaching and mentoring, and the clear link between sustained coaching and adequate funding, in that all 8 of the participants using a coach were funded to do so.

Table 8: Coaching Experience

	NO. OF PARTICIPANTS
Described using a Coach	8
Described never using a Coach	4
Mentor/Coach term used interchangeably	11
Long term coaching relationship	2
Short term coach support	6
Self-selected and sustained coaching relationship	8
Allocated and sustained	0
Funded	8

Coaching experience was similar across public and private sectors. For most of the participant group coaching was considered alongside other opportunities for self-development; no participant identified this as their priority support system. For most participants, coaches were not long term and were used at moments of transition, before for advice, and during to assist in achieving a good entry to a more senior post, as the following examples describe.

"...I tend to have a coach at points of transition in my career... I thought , hmm, this is quite a big transition, I need somebody outside the organisation… and at that point I didn't know whether I would be, I might fail... so there was a bit about personal support."

"when I became [very senior post]... I did actually use an external coach, I used the same person for a year, and then I have used her since at various points."

No participant who had experienced coaching considered that a line manager would be an appropriate coach although one of the public-sector participants who had not been offered formal coaching described line managers as the expected source of support in her organisation. Some participants were cautious about building long term relationships with coaches and raised issues of concern or caution about coaches becoming friends. In other cases however, participants referred easily to coaches as stepping into formal coaching roles at key moments of decision or transition and stepping back to friendship roles at other times.

Only two of the participants had accepted coaching to assist with perceived difficulties. One on a very short-term basis to assist with interview at board level on the advice of a sponsor. One other participant accepted coaching on a continuing and long-term basis to respond to concerns of the company about an area of management skills which were thought to be lacking, followership. She was later encouraged to leave that company. For all other participants, including the one who was allocated help for interview, coaching was entirely sought from a position of strength and not to address a perceived problem.

> *"I see a coach three times a year... why would you not want to ensure that your Chief Executive delivers the best [she] can... and that is based on a strength model rather than a deficit model."*

Some of the participant group had been allocated coaches during management development courses but none had sustained a relationship with an allocated coach in the longer term. Participants across public and private sectors reported that coaches which were self-selected and were external to the business were the most valuable to them.

> *"... I think a coach is somebody that's completely out of the NHS, who's obviously skilled in coaching skills. So, I always find with a coach you get value out of coaching because you've got somebody who isn't close to the business but can really help you to think differently."*

> *"...External [coaching] is good. Because often those coaches ask you very open questions because they don't understand the politics of the place... So, it stops your thinking being too limited... internally they may… think, well we can't ask her about that, because that [relocation] is not a possibility at the moment... so I think it makes it more open having an independent coach."*

For most participants the coaches were identified through previous knowledge of the person and experience of the individual at meetings or as members of their networks. For some others, particularly for those in traditionally managed organisations, participants accessed coaches from an approved bank of coaches available at executive level and often from within their profession.

Mentors

Most participants who used formal mentors reflected that they were generally internal, members of the same organisation, and were provided or used to assist with delivering a particular task and in most cases, they were short term relationships. They were not often named in the interviews and generally did not appear to feature in importance in the same way as coaches who were sought to assist at critical career moments. Most participants who used mentors reported that there was a better outcome when they had chosen the mentor.

> *"…I had one which was given to me by [a company] and that didn't work at all for me. I felt we didn't click and I do think you need to click. And I don't think she was doing other than going through the motions. And so, it wasn't a great experience."*

Where participants talked about informal mentors, dialogue was in warmer tones. There appeared to be no agreed role other than general support and these informal mentors appeared to fulfil unpaid coaching roles, unpaid sponsorship roles, friendship roles and to form part of a general support network around the participant most often in the early and middle stages of the career path. Only one participant spoke about a current informal mentor.

Sponsors

In contrast to the subject of coaches and mentors many participants raised the issue of sponsors without prompt, and often during the unstructured part of the interview when they were describing their personal career journey. Sponsors continued to be described as featuring throughout the career paths of most of the women leaders and several spoke of continuing to have a relationship with a sponsor whilst holding a top job. Where sponsors were referred to, they appeared to be of importance, they were spoken of with warmth, as key players in helping these women to acquire the competencies that they sought as well as offering career opportunities to build competencies, and to gain experience and skills. Sponsors were often referred to as 'opening doors' and 'providing opportunities'. Many referred to sponsors as being in positions of power. Of the 12 participants in the study 9 referred to sponsorship and sponsors as part of the regular business of managing talent. The following examples give an indication of the importance and the power accorded to sponsors.

> *"…well he'd been my sponsor really… I wouldn't have become a director at the age of 28 if it hadn't been for [him]... in large organisations you need a sponsor. Because otherwise, if you're just the girl in the corner working really hard, no-one's going to notice are they... I think I naturally knew I had to have a sponsor, even though no-one ever told me that."*

> *"…well, I think one of the reasons I progressed really fast was because I always made sure that I had a sponsor within the organisation who was very very senior and could make big decisions… that's why I got promoted so fast... and that's the way I work now, actually… I have the chairman of our business."*

> *"mentors give you loads of advice. Sponsors make things happen for you."*

The abductive research enquiry which I followed provided an opportunity for participants to be reflective, and to consider their career path in the light of some of the themes which had emerged. This reflective process was particularly evident with regard to sponsorship and some women on looking back were able to identify sponsorship activity and to see the help they had received in that light. In some cases where the word itself may not have been familiar in some settings, participants

nevertheless were able then to identify clearly where sponsorship activity had impacted on their careers. The reflective identification of a sponsor was most evident in the public sector.

> *"...but that particular person then did sponsor me, yeah, I suppose mentor, sponsor, but he always kept an eye out for me... he thought I was good, he was always on the lookout for bright people."*

Some participants in the private sector also were late in identifying the work of a sponsor.

> *"...It was really in retrospect that I realised I had a sponsor who was making those moves happen, which is a pretty key thing, and he never advertised it to me... there was someone who was just helping the career moves and making the opportunities fall open... and so, he's long retired but I still write to him and speak to him every year because he was surprisingly influential."*

None of the participants spoke of female sponsors. For most participants the sponsor was someone more senior and in the same organisation. However, as careers developed participants described sponsors who were part of a wider network of previous colleagues.

> *"...I also had a lot of sponsors. And so, the reason I had sponsors was that I did a really good job for them... I did a really good job for [Philip] when I was working for him at the bank... we stayed in touch... he asked me to come here... he supported me here, I've done a good job and he asked me to become [the most senior executive woman on the board in the organisation]."*

> *"...I do worry that women are told that they need to network, and they don't understand the importance of sponsorship."*

Most private sector participants referred easily to sponsors and sponsorship in the context of talent management. Some public-sector participants when reflecting on their career paths were less familiar with general use of the word 'sponsor' but appeared content to accept the concept of sponsoring activity. This often related to past colleagues seeking talent to meet specific challenges.

> *"I remember a very senior member of the [x party] taking me quietly into a corner and telling me that I needed to think again about an offer I'd been made to do a [senior] role... and I look back and think, what an enormous investment in me."*

One participant describes concerns which may account for the lack of identification of sponsors in the public sector, and she nails it firmly to talent management.

"...I have desperately tried to honour that model (sponsoring) in my own role. And part of the reason I think it's sometimes backed away from, is sponsoring people has to be distinguished from having favourites. So, when you start to be very senior and have the ability to influence people's careers, it has to be capable of being interpreted by people for what it is and not misinterpreted... so its talent-seeking not clique developing... sponsoring talent has been a passion and partly I'm sure because I was a recipient, benefitted."

Of the 3 participants who did not describe engaging with a sponsor one was in the private sector. This leader was unfamiliar with the term although she had worked on boards internationally and for a short time led a FTSE 100 company. My interpretation of the data after checking with her indicated there was no evidence of sponsorship in her case. This was unusual.

"...I don't really know what it is (sponsorship)... no-one lent me any money, no-one opened a door."

One public sector CEO did not recognise sponsorship in her organisation and preferred to consider appointments in her sector as seeking to meet the needs of the job in the best way. The armed services appeared to be more open minded about managing talent and described personal contact to encourage people to take opportunities when they occurred, but the term sponsorship was not used.

12.4 Networks

Networking was rarely an issue initiated by participants during their interviews but when raised by me discussion in most cases was energised, and participants had much to say. The range and spread of networking activity emerged as one of the key shared experiences of this group but also one of the most diverse and varied elements in the study. Activity ranged from occasional social internal networking with other professionals to a purposeful, focused industry in itself. The range is summarised at figure 5 which illustrates the high level of networking activity undertaken in external (out of the organisation) networks and the small overlap between work and social networks.

Figure 5: Networking Activity
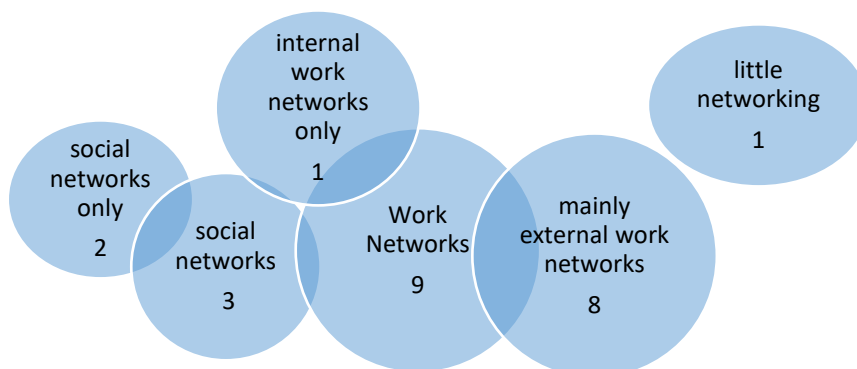
In the private sector most participants, and some in the public sector, described a focus on external networking which developed during their career. Internal professional networks were sought for support in early careers and to some extent these networks were retained as a source of support and often developed into friendships, but in later years external networks, outside the organisation, became much more important in terms of delivering organisational goals and creating opportunities for personal progress.

> *"...Okay, there are two sorts of networks. One are the internal networks, and then there's the external ones, and the more senior you get the more external ones matter... in terms of getting things done. Because you're much more outward facing, you're delivering with others, not just within your own organisation."*

For some the first opportunity to form useful external networks came through senior management development programmes, especially if these were interagency programmes or international programmes. All participants were prompted to discuss the role management development programmes had played in their career and although most acknowledged some value in terms of improving specific skills required for the job, often in the area of leadership skills, most value was accorded to opportunities to make relationships and form networks at senior levels across organisational boundaries.

> *"...for me I would say the biggest support with them (management development courses) has been the networks. And getting to know other people... [I] think genuinely at times I've learned a lot, but it's not just that it's the networking"* (Public Sector).

> *"I did one management development course with [X company]... three or four times where we went to different locations in the world and met up as teams. The great thing... you got a fantastic network... and I'm still in touch with them now"* (Private Sector).

There was some recognition consistent across several participants that at the most senior level external networking was an integral part of the job and an important function expected of senior executives delivering better outcomes and opportunities for the organisation. In some cases, women leaders spoke of the only way of achieving organisational outcomes at the most senior level was to be outward facing and to build relationships across sectors, organisations, countries, and this was achieved by developing an external and increasingly wide network of executive colleagues. This theme emerged across all sectors as illustrated below.

> *"So why wouldn't you network with… and join in things if you can find a really whizzo idea you can copy"* (Government)

> *"… of course, I know who knows B who knows C who knows D, and those contacts. And my job for [the company] is to be connected. And so, if I'm not very good at this, then I really don't have a job… "* (Financial Services).

For some the main purpose of networking was to become known, and to promote not only the organisations but primarily to identify personal support.

> *"…because what it takes to survive in [a FTSE company], and that would go for any corporates… you can only learn… by hearing, gathering other people's experiences. So, networking is a lot about what I can learn from other people, in doing that you are also getting yourself known."*

For many networking delivered advantages in terms of hearing new ideas, improving understanding and learning and re-learning different approaches to solutions.

There was reference in several cases to focused networking with a view to building good relationships, for personal profiling, and four participants specified focused working with the Head Hunter networks, thus opening the career opportunities for themselves which Head Hunters could offer.

> *"…I just met Head Hunters who introduced me to people and in the end, someone said, I'm going to introduce you to [CEO FTSE 100], but I invested heavily in meeting people to facilitate that process and in doing so I just found it incredibly rewarding."*

Not all participants valued networks highly. Two participants, one in the private sector, well known nationally and internationally, and one in the public sector, well known professionally and in receipt of national honours, described all the posts they accepted in later years as being offered by Head Hunters or sponsors but neither engaged in building work networks to achieve such opportunities. Another CEO described social networks which were valuable to her, with friends and other parents, but she did not value work networks.

For three participants the nature of their work and organisations were described as constraining external networking, these were in organisations which for reasons of independence and/or security did not encourage external networking. Although all three described socialising within their organisations and professions, this did not relate to purposeful networking activity towards organisational or personal achievements. Two other participants described an almost complete absence of networking activity early in their career due to decisions made on work life balance. There was no evidence to suggest that careers were damaged as a result of constrained networking activity due to family commitments, or a decision not to engage in work-based networking for other reasons.

12.5 Social Media

In general findings in this area described a relatively low level of engagement with social media. There were some exceptions. Two women leaders had positively chosen to use social media to engage with a workforce of many thousands, where organisational transformation was being undertaken, and this choice had been made in order to improve connections and thus performance. Both were in the public sector, and both organisations formally administered the Twitter or Blog accounts, but posts were made by the participants in this study. One participant tweeted to the workforce on a daily basis. Both women leaders used Twitter and Blogs to share good news, thus boosting morale and assisting the leaders to engage positively and be more visible. Bad news was not shared in this way.

> *"…well I'm Linked In but probably less [than Twitter] because Twitter is more visible within the organisation, and I often re-tweet and reply to staff. The great thing with social media is it doesn't respect hierarchy... Twitter is great because its only 140 characters! That only takes a microsecond to engage in."*

> *"…I did probably more social media in [the organisation] simply because it was an expanding business... I did regular blogs to staff and… we used things like video blogs as well as written blogs... so for key messages when you've got a lot of staff it's very difficult to get out to everyone at the same time… we did use things like tweets and other forms of social media to get messages out."*

Two other participants tweeted via a personal account on business and other matters on a very regular basis, but this was not common across the group. For the most part there was a reluctance to engage with social media and of those who did several described themselves as *"doing it badly"* or *"intending to improve in this area"*. The reasons for reluctance varied. For some their use of social media was determined by the organisation and much curtailed if not entirely discouraged for reasons of security or the necessary independence of the organisation. Those participants used social media very little, in one case not at all, and only for personal reasons. For some women there was the risk of attracting negative attention and raising personal risk. For all except one person there was caution about risking privacy and family information, and for this reason any activity in social media was related solely to professional or business matters

"…I'm not particularly digital. You're right we do blog for work, the communications office does it… but I don't tweet at all… I made a deliberate decision 4 years ago... and decided it was not for me. To be honest since then, the risks of women doing it as well are not to be underestimated."

"..I'm not on Facebook for a reason, that it's too public for me, and I know that no-one can go looking for a Facebook page [for me] and I see little point in using a pseudonym… my husband's on… and he monitors the kids and all that jazz… but I'm on Linked In... it's very for business, so I accept people and I post things there, and it's all for business… I think my organisation does need to feel comfortable with what I say if it's in a very public context."

Participants made choices between different web-based information sharing opportunities and these are summarised in Table 8. The summary does not indicate that these participants are representative of their organisations. Where participants have described engaging, or specifically not engaging, in a named web-based information opportunity this has been included in the summary. Where a participant did not refer to a particular option by name this has not been included in the summary.

Table 9: Use of Web-based Information Sharing Opportunities within the Participant Group

	PERSONAL USE ONLY	BUSINESS USE ONLY	ADMINISTERED AND POSTED BY THE ORGANISATION	ADMINISTERED BY THE ORGANISATION BUT PERSONAL POSTS	NOT USED
FACEBOOK	Armed Services Higher Education		Police Services Technology Armed Services	NHS	Legal Services Insurance
TWITTER	Technology	Technology	Police Services Civil Service Financial Services Higher Education Telecoms	NHS Civil Service Financial Services Higher Education	Legal Services Insurance
LINKED IN	Armed Services Telecoms Higher Education NHS Asset Management	Higher Education Asset Management Financial Services			Legal Services Insurance
BLOGS			Financial Services Police Services	Civil Service Financial Services	Legal Services Insurance Armed Services

Participants raised their own issues within the general context of social media and described personal activity as it appeared important to them. It is useful here however to consider some of the choices made by this group, and to describe emerging themes. There was an unexpected degree of consensus given the diversity of organisations.

Facebook was the least favoured by all participants. The two participants who report having a personal Facebook account also described themselves as not using it to post, generally making use to see what is going on in their local community and with friends. Others describe gaining this information vicariously through partners' accounts. Three organisations were described as having a Facebook page which was not managed by the participants in this study. Only one CEO placed posts on the organisation's Facebook page this was mostly left to communications staff in the organisation. Facebook was generally described as 'too public' and providing a target for women.

Twitter, as described above, was used to connect with a large workforce and in some cases with a wider public. Several organisations had a company or organisations' page and posts were made on behalf of the organisation. The importance of Twitter was found to be its immediacy, and the limited number of characters, hence speed of communication and minimum time consumed.

By far the largest social media engagement amongst the participant group related to Linked In. All accounts were personal as is the nature of Linked In and it was generally considered to have a business context and to be controllable. Several participants who had Linked In accounts were conscious that they were poorly maintained. Some participants used Linked In for personal information, but others also used their accounts to promote organisational information. Generally, participants referred to Linked In together with reputational management and networking.

There was not great deal of blogging activity described. Where it was used, it was used by a CEO to engage positively with a very large workforce. Other uses of blogging were described as undertaken by communication staff of organisations in order to protect individual members of staff whilst getting information out informally in this way.

Those who did not use social media at all included legal services for organisational independence reasons, and a participant who measured social media against other mechanisms for getting known and building a reputation. She considered that Linked In could be useful at lower levels in the organisation but not at senior levels.

"...look at it, what's the purpose? Do I think I will be entertained for other FTSE 100 boards? Yes. Do I think that any of the Head Hunters when they look for a [senior] position on a FTSE 100, or private equity, would have enough sight of me to do that? Yes. Do I think an absence of social media presence would hinder my selection? No. Do I think that that having been on two FTE 100 boards, now three, already now puts me in a good position for other [board] roles? Yes. Do I think tweeting has any benefit to that? No... How do I deploy to [a CEO presence]... do I think it's social media? No not really... If you know the Head Hunter network, you will be found."

12.6 Summary: Competent and Credible

This chapter considers the building of reputational capital and the choices participants made to achieve a reputation for competence and credibility. Findings indicated a level of ambiguity and tension between the development of personal and organisational reputations, and the effort of synchronising organisational and personal reputation building was highlighted. Nevertheless, the data shows a high level of personal drive and energy devoted to developing a reputation for competence and credibility and the use of some formal management development tools to achieve this. Exploration of the data indicates a level of confusion between coaching and mentoring. Coaching was highly regarded as a key tool to assist at moments of transition and transfer. Mentoring was less important at senior levels and management development courses mainly received accolades for providing networking opportunities. For this group of female leaders sponsorship was key. For most of the group this had promoted their success and was recognised as such. Networking was undertaken by some participants with focus and industry, and the data indicated that as women approached the most senior posts outward facing and external networks were of paramount importance. Some participants however, networked little or not at all and there was no evidence found that in this participant group this had constrained the progress of those individuals in reaching the most senior posts in their particular organisations. In this chapter I also explored the data with reference to social media and find that for most participants this is not a high-level activity or a high priority. The most focus is on improving performance in organisations and overall there was a reluctance within this group to promote themselves using social media as a business tool.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: NOT TRAVELLING TOO LIGHTLY

"...make sure you are not travelling too lightly" Participant 6

13.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter I described an emerging theme in the data which related to achieving a reputation for jobs well done and for delivering at a high level. The senior female executives holding top posts in the UK who participated in this study described how they achieved the competencies to enable them to be successful and the business tools which they deployed to be seen by others as credible across a range of skills and competencies. This chapter explores another theme which emerged about the energy which many participants described that they expended to ensure they were confident enough to progress further. Participant 6 describes "*not travelling too lightly*" in terms of *"being as good as you can possibly be"* and *"make sure you're learning and keeping it broad".* This chapter explores the understanding participants shared that to be competent and credible in achieving the task was not enough; that was to travel too lightly. The themes which emerged from the data in this regard were about building confidence through personal effort in continual learning, testing against challenge, and forging opportunities in the workplace to ensure readiness to take the top post.

13.2 Making and Taking Opportunities

All participants described early career paths where they took opportunities presented, if at all feasible, and proactively created opportunities for themselves where none were presented. This was partly because participants described themselves as intellectually curious about what they could do, and also because moving continually forward and not remaining in position long enough to be required to repeat tasks or become bored, was part of the mind-set of this group as recognised and described in Chapter Eleven. In the early years of their careers most participants described rapid career acceleration after graduation, often without a clear plan in mind.

> *"...when somebody came to me with an opportunity, I might have paused, I might have been quite anxious at times about doing it, but I always ended up doing it."*

This approach to embracing opportunities in all except for three cases led to a London based job where the chance of yet more opportunity was perceived to be located. One participant who moved to London for a top post after a substantial career elsewhere reflected *"London, a lot happens here."*

Most participants reflected that not having a plan and being flexible in terms of career, not looking in a specific direction, opened up the range of opportunity which might have been narrowed by a focused

plan. Some also spoke about continually keeping several options open and the advantage therefore of being able to take opportunities as they came up.

> *"so, when you say is there a clear path, no… but there are two or three options one's keeping open."*

One participant described her route taken towards senior posts which developed through following opportunities as they arose.

> *"I started off as a classic solicitor… [was] given the chance to do policy… increasingly considered myself a manager not a lawyer… they asked me to run some direct service organisations… I found myself running vehicle maintenance, school meals, and school cleaning… slightly later they asked me to run Treasurers… I got to be Deputy Chief Exec."*

This participant went on to lead national organisations and was in receipt of national honours in recognition of her service.

Several participants noted that as they became more senior, more opportunities revealed themselves and as they took those opportunities their career path opened up. Most participants reported that they were not aware of some possibilities early in their career and thus a specific plan was not possible. This was particularly evident from the data gathered from women in more hierarchical services such as the armed services and legal services.

Making Things Happen

Participants across both the public and the private sector in the unstructured part of the interviews described an energy or drive which went into making opportunities happen and at early moments in their careers opening their own doors. For some, opportunities were created and sought when there did not seem to be much progress open to them.

> *"…I didn't sit passively by and wait for it to happen… I'd go and have the conversation and then see where it took me. And so, then I had moved into a completely different area and had to learn some new skills both technical and I suppose personal… I managed to make my mark."*

> *"…I was working in a very large branch in [a city] and the big branch manager came… and I said Oh Mr [Jones] I'm thinking about my next steps, could I come and have a chat with you… and off I went to see him… and it was tea with china cups… I wasn't feeling particularly challenged. I was very honest about it. And he said do you want to go and work in London… and six weeks later I'd moved to London."*

In all cases there was evidence that the participant was doing a very good job at the level from which they wished to move on. In some cases, creating opportunities for themselves was prompted by discouragement in the workplace.

> *"I was told by a senior judge that I would never make it [to a senior post] doing crime in [one part of the country] which is what I was doing. So, I decided to prove him wrong... I chose posts which led to being noticed."*

Several participants spoke about making opportunities out of challenges which occurred in the workplace, particularly those who chose to move on when the job no longer delivered the job satisfaction which they wanted. This was referred to several times by participants in large public-sector organisations where re-structuring was common.

> *"…there are points of re-structuring that determined my career, to be honest. And I guess it's how you use those as an opportunity."*

Emotional Choices

Decisions about which opportunities participants took amongst those presented, and which opportunities they created were often related to 'liking' people or environments and choosing to work where there may be opportunity for further development. A key theme which emerged was that many choices were made around emotion and a feeling of what felt right. This applied to choosing a particular person to work for, as in the examples below.

> *"…and I think what drew me to that point to say yes... was really working for [Brian] because I respected him, I knew I'd learn a lot."*

> *"…I turned down [company X] the first time... the swing point has actually to be [Jonathan], who is the CEO... and he sat down in front of me and said... I think we'd have fun, go on. And I thought yes, this is going to be different."*

Choices were also made about 'liking' the atmosphere of the working environment.

> *"I don't really like the American approach to life and banking, so I chose the French."*

> *"I realised… that choosing people to work for who would help develop me, who might believe in me, might address some of the rougher edges, might be very very helpful."*

Setting Boundaries

From the beginning of most participants' career paths there was a significant focus on not necessarily seeking to take opportunities through which they progressed upwards but choosing opportunities to further their own professional interests and enthusiasms, and these included counter terrorism, asset management, democracy and politicians, mergers and acquisitions, setting up a new business and to be involved in research. Boundaries appeared to be set, and choices made within this parameter. Later in their careers boundaries still included participants' own areas of professional interest but moved to include, in some cases, location and domestic issues. In hierarchical services choices were more limited. In both the examples below the choices made refer to location.

"…if you want to get on the hamster wheel, chasing every job in the country and that suits you personally, fine. But draw your own boundaries, understand why you are drawing those boundaries and then sticking to the boundaries" (Police Services).

"...and I think a lot of people leave because they trip over that boundary of I'm prepared to, I'm no longer prepared to, and that's a natural thing... and I would feel comfortable saying if you want me to stay, [a location a long way from the family home] that's not going to work... If I was much more junior, that's a harder conversation to have" (Armed Services).

Tenure

Making and taking opportunities, and boundary setting also applied to terms of tenure. Decisions were made about when it was right to move on. Opportunities were increasingly accepted and rejected or sought in relation to tenure the more senior this group of women executives became. This was associated with wanting to be known for making a difference, staying long enough to make a difference, and also recognising when nothing more can be achieved for yourself and therefore making the decision to move on.

"…there was a major change of power… and if I'm honest I didn't like their value base very much… [I said to them] so how about I stay a year and then I'll go."

In local government a participant considered that it was difficult to occupy a post for less than three or four years at CEO level and to be able to demonstrate success; she considered that about five years was the right length of time. That participant also considered that it was important not to stay in jobs too long, and to move on as she did when she considered that for her she was no longer *"getting much back"* in spite of *"giving a lot"*; this being due to a change in the political landscape during her tenure. In the NHS similar views were held and the participant felt it was important to *"stick around long enough to show what you have achieved"*. This participant also described the importance of taking your own personal development seriously and recognising, for her, when the time came to make a change to a strategic post because of the relentless pressure in the acute sector. For this participant the length of tenure in senior posts was longer, often more than six or seven years.

Similar views were held in the private sector with one participant also advocating about four years in one post at a senior level. At board level she considered it may need to be longer to demonstrate what you can do. She considered that whatever the length of tenure it is important not to step away when things get tough. In her case she made a success of a very difficult board split and remarked that people noticed and that it was a time of *"demonstrable resilience"*. Others in the private sector echoed the experience of the participant with local government experience that there is a time to step away and this relates to the value the post is offering to the executive. In spite of huge reluctance on the part of a bank, to the extent of them not accepting the resignation, one participant explained I had to

say, *"I don't want to do this anymore, I'm leaving"* and she ceased to go to work there. This was in contrast to the only enforced ending of tenure where the participant noted that when the board decides "*we're done*", then in her view there was no negotiation to be had.

For some participants the issue of tenure is a lifetime decision and progression can only be within the one organisation. This applies in all aspects to the armed services and in many aspects to legal services and police services. For these professionals the decision to move on is determined by hierarchical constraints around promotion and consists of decision making around jobs available within the organisation, and in some cases around location.

13.3 Seeking Challenge

Without exception the participants in this study described a career path where they sought and chose opportunities which were sure to present them with a challenge. Some examples are at Figure 6. This was evident from the start of most careers and across all sectors.

Figure 6: Seeking Challenge

"I very nearly considered applying for the chief exec job there [where I was working]… [but]the challenge for me was (moving to another authority)."

"…the chance to play on a national stage is attractive and that's what moved me into the Civil Service."

"it's not a financial equation moving… that's not the driver… it's about being influential over something that's containable. Ten thousand people is not small, but you can put your arms around it."

"….most people I worked with… said I was completely mad… I had in my own mind the thought 'no, I need a change, I need to get a different perspective'."

Challenge

"…I needed to establish myself… by taking on a failing business and turning it around."

"I said 'I'm not giving up and I'm not coming home (from Australia)'."

"some of the work that I did I did in my holidays... and that was particularly in war torn areas… I did some teaching there."

Risk Taking

In the most structured and linear of organisations including legal and police services, the armed services and the NHS, participants made the most of opportunities which were available by seeking

challenging choices. For these participants and also for most others the decision to take a challenge often involved also taking a personal career risk.

> *"...so, you can make a preference for the jobs you want to do in a career, the career fields that you would go to and how demanding the jobs are... there was a choice… and I naturally went to those jobs that were quite demanding... it wasn't a master plan. So that was the element of choice of doing something that knowingly, if you do well you do great, if you don't its disproportionally painful I suppose in career terms."*

> *"...there were a number of people interested in taking me, and I'd learned a lot more about things that I didn't know and was curious about. And [I] went and took a risk and went into an area I knew nothing about which was in the capital markets area which was working with people on the trading floor."*

13.4 Building Confidence

The data indicates that achieving "not travelling too lightly" was much about making and taking the kind of opportunities which would give the participant confidence to go forward. Participants described one aspect of achieving confidence in their own competence and credibility through using business tools such as networking and coaching as described in Chapter Twelve, but there was also a strong theme which emerged about seeking opportunities which would give additional personal confidence to this group of fast travelling women leaders. With one exception, a leader who described herself as *"just having huge self-belief"* which she attributed to her upbringing, women in this group gained confidence by strategically placing themselves in positions, and taking jobs, which would contribute to that building of confidence as described in Figure 7. One participant described what the data indicated others also experienced. This was the need to feel confident before transitioning to the most senior posts and that involved seeking confidence from reassurance that others believed in them. She explained "... *now that I'm talking about it I realise that I progressively needed more reassurance… I feel like I was seeking more reassurance and support." Some* participants described beginning to build personal confidence early in their career including as early as at university. *"I think I portrayed someone who was confident, but I wasn't underneath, and I worked quite hard at developing that"*. For some their appearance was an issue about confidence which they had to learn to manage. One participant in higher education spoke about being small and managing comments at executive meetings on her size or losing weight. Another recalled that

"I remember feeling like a child at somebody's christening [an annual event where she was one of two women in a room of 500 men], and as I went into groups of these men, big men mainly, getting attention was really hard… and by the next year I had worked out two or three openings as I was going into a group… I learned quite early that because I was small didn't mean I couldn't be a bigger physical presence than I thought I was."

For some the struggle to be confident remains until the transition to the top post. From a FTSE 100 board position one participant explains *"It's not that I'm not confident when I walk into the office, it's whether you see yourself in that role. And I wouldn't want to be a weak CEO. I'd only want to be a good CEO and therefore do I see myself there? Whereas I think, gross generalisation, lots of guys always see themselves as being the best."*

The data evidences efforts in the case of most participants to strengthen personal confidence throughout their careers. Activities include participants ensuring they accrue sufficient experience to be confident in applying for the most senior posts, having the confidence in their ability to be successful operationally because they have sufficient experience, using experience gained in networks external to their organisation or profession before transitioning to a top post, and achieving excellent communication and performance skills. Figure 7 summarises some of the experience participants describe they engaged in to build personal confidence beyond competencies and skills associated with the organisations' task.

Figure 7: Building Personal Confidence

" I got elected on to the CBI [of the area], I became involved with the chambers and the [regional] Business organisation… and I joined the Association of Business Schools Council and that network was again very supportive."

Higher Education

"Before I went to [a large force]… [I had] a view of, if I can do this then I can go anywhere… it gives you… huge confidence. Not for one second did I think that operationally there would be anything that I wouldn't be able to deal with."

Police Services

"…so it's about gathering experience… I'm also not a very good public speaker and I thought it would really push me, and it did. So it was good at forcing me to build my confidence with people, with very bright people, and often quite aggressive people as well."

Telecoms

One top post holder in the public sector describes achieving personal confidence and what it meant in terms of leading at the highest level.

"…it [successful leadership] goes hand in hand with quite high levels of personal confidence. I don't need reflected applause to tell me I'm good. I am confident of my own judgment about when I am working well and less well."

13.5 Broad as Well as Deep

The strongest theme which emerged in relation to not travelling too lightly was that of participants ensuring that experience and learning was both broad and deep. All participants had a deep knowledge and understanding of their own area of work, but there was consensus on the importance of also making a broader offering to be successful in securing top posts. Figure 8 describes some of the comments made by participants reflecting on what had made a difference in their careers, what had contributed towards their success, and as a result the advice they give to others in the pipeline. The data reflects strong views on this and consensus across all sectors on the importance of not travelling too lightly in the sense of accruing breadth and depth of both learning and experience.

Figure 8: Broader and Wider

"Take on a project, don't get too comfortable."

"I worry about people who… only see up… you need to have that breadth of experience to participate in (CFO or CEO) conversations."

"Go and sit on a government working board, go and do shadowing, go on the top management programme."

"From time to time, get out of your comfort zone."

"Identify at an early stage who are the potential leaders, and yes, give them a broad experience."

Breadth and Depth

In the most hierarchical services where progress is narrowly defined there was still evidence in the data of a search for broadening experiences. One participant explains the meaning of not travelling too lightly in terms of how she considers merit in others approaching senior posts.

So, what have people done to grow their knowledge? How do you keep in touch with the state of the art? What's going on in other sectors… what are the ideas people are talking about… how are we bridging from research and the evidence into practice?"

Non-Executive Directors

Discussion on non-executive directors (NEDS) during this research study emerged almost solely in relation to broadening experience. The subject in all cases was discussed following a prompt by me, no-one raised the issue spontaneously. There were a range of views on whether this was a worthwhile activity or not. No participant sought a NED position as an end in its self, and all viewed a NED position as short term and transitory.

The most positive view of NED positions came from a private sector participant who had sought such a post to prepare her readiness for a FTSE 100 CEO position. She says

"I found it incredibly rewarding, even going for a NED, just because I was meeting lots of amazing people. And so, I learned the value of drawing off diverse skills of people and experiences."

One CEO in the public sector did encourage others to consider non-exec positions in community organisations or education organisations and had held such a post herself for a brief period but relinquished it when there appeared to be a conflict of interest. Another participant in the private sector was considering seeking a NED position to broaden her experience further. Generally, however, there was little interest in non-executive posts. The participant who was most positive and had experience of a NED position saw difficulties with the increased number of NEDs because she felt these were usually drawn from the Executive Committee (ExComm) roles in companies.

"…that's negative for long term development. It does not follow that if [we] get enough women round the board table that the ExComm [women] will automatically follow."

Another participant was more deeply negative about the concept of increased numbers of women on boards in the guise of NED's.

"I don't really agree with this whole 30% thing. Yes, it's great to have female non-executive directors but it's irrelevant in many ways. It's about having female CEOs and female Finance Directors and female COOs… that is what's important."

Learning and Re-learning

Generally, when the participant group in this research study referred to *"broadening",* the narrative was mostly linked to experience, as in Figure 8 above. However, *"not traveling too lightly"* also included a theme which emerged about constant learning. Several participants spoke about curiosity and their constant exploration of new ideas and about reading.

"…a lot of what I've done [learning] I've chosen to do. I'm a naturally curious person. I do read quite a lot… on holiday I have a long list of books… if you are curious about the world around you and you're curious about the organisation that you are working in, then I think you will be successful."

"Unless you're up to speed on new systems, new ways of organising teams and getting the best out of people you're not going to succeed… I do read a lot… not so much for the day-to-day stuff but more on the themes of the workplace."

Some participants described the desire to learn and re-learn much more about an attitude to leadership rather than about intellectual ability. One leader summarised this with regard to spotting high potential as *"some of that [potential] is about ability, but much of it is about attitude and aptitude, and I think a deep-seated desire to learn, actually".* One woman was more specific and expressed a view that was less about her own interests and learning but about learning in the areas that were, in her view, needed in the contemporary workplace.

"I think women have a responsibility, if they want the best jobs in the world to be able to do the hard things and digital transformation, innovating new stuff, that's really hard… you've got to have the skills that the world needs as women."

This was not a view that was held by other participants who generally viewed learning at this level as broader, more about leadership and workplace management, performance and efficiency than specific tasks such as digital transformation.

Balance and Caution.

There was a balance to be maintained the data indicated, between the advantages of broadening experience and learning and the danger of *"spreading oneself too thinly"*. One participant warns those in the pipeline not to:

"…distribute themselves too thinly so they don't ever get the expertise to do work at a particular level… you will never achieve promotion… unless you can show you can do the level of work at that level on an intellectual basis."

From one of the more traditionally hierarchical services there is support for broadening experience and learning but caution on moving too far from the primary focus on the day job.

"…breadth of experience is always good, and we have many jobs which are generalist jobs, and a portfolio is good for that but you need to make sure… you have the intellectual skills that show you are good enough to be [the top job]… it's that extra bit… dealing with complexity."

Not everyone is interested in in having broad experience notes one woman, but she also identifies the importance of some skills which need to be honed stressing that *"one thing that features strongly is that you need to be really good at communicating these days"*.

13.6 Board Readiness

Within the overall theme of *"not travelling too lightly"* there was a sub theme or category which emerged mostly, but not entirely, from the private sector about the particular learning and broadening experiences required to prepare for executive board posts and specifically for CEO roles in the private sector. The data indicated a perspective linked to the need to create a press profile alongside a professional profile and to become visible beyond the business area, sector, or profession which the participant occupied before attaining a CEO or equivalent post. Figure 9 indicates some of the practicalities involved in becoming board ready.

Figure 9: Board Readiness

"I've done enough sectorally to be of interest [as potential CEO]... I joined the board and the share price went up... and the other boards that I left the share price went down."

" it's not about building a social media profile... it's a press profile... it's an 'I'm leading the industry in a space'."

"[I need to]... build investor knowledge, a broader network and find some more expansive ways of moving out of my sector."

The data described views which linked board readiness, and in some cases public sector top post readiness, to how potential or the idea of a successful appointment was assessed. For some at the top of their organisations this was not a challenge they had had to address.

> *"I always struggle with this... women don't progress because they are women... and that we get overlooked all of the time because men are promoted on potential and women are promoted on achievement. I don't see any of that."*

For others there was some indication that at top levels it is little to do with achievement but more about perception and wider public view of potential.

> *"What I've learned is when you appoint someone on to a board... which is so public... you just want people to go yes, that's a really sensible move... the boards will know enough, it's the external perception [that counts]."*

One CFO noted that one chairman will phone another and ask, *"What's she like on a board?"*

In preparation for a board position, or a most senior executive position, the theme of not travelling too lightly, not only bringing skills in a narrow task orientated area, emerged again. Board members

amongst the participants reported that there were ways of gaining experience and skills relevant to transition to the top post.

> *"When you are on a board you are responsible for everything... being accountable for everything without being able to control it… I think you can only learn [that] by spending a lot of time around boards."*

> *"…most of what you learn you learn from watching others. And the best way to be effective around a board table is to watch lots of people round a board table... If you only do that in the organisation in which you are an executive you're only ever going to see one model... I've been on several regulated boards."*

13.7 Summary: Not Travelling Too Lightly

This chapter reports themes which emerged from the data describing an energy and effort most participants put into activity which built their personal confidence, alongside their skills and competencies, until and during their transition to top posts. There is a remarkable congruence between the lived experiences of most participants in their reflections on how they took opportunities which presented and how they created those which did not. Across the women in the participant group there were common themes describing factors which influenced how career decisions were made, including how important the 'feel' of an opportunity or new job was, how boundaries were set and how ideas about suitable tenure were established. Most women in the group described making choices which presented challenge. The opportunities for women in traditional hierarchical organisations, although more limited, reflected similar factors in choosing career options with regard to those jobs which were demanding and presented the most challenge. There was a very strong theme which emerged relating to *"not travelling too lightly"* in terms of ensuring work experience was broad as well as deep and this was linked by many participants to continual learning and re-learning. I describe findings in this chapter which relate to participants views on non-executive director positions on boards and the general views of those who reflected on this in regard to gaining broader experience, where the value of becoming a NED was not high. This was an issue which I found was raised mostly by private sector participants. This same sub group, private sector participants, also had some shared issues with regard to board readiness and where *"not travelling too lightly"* meant broader learning and learned awareness.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: THE DOMESTIC CONTRACT

"...start with understanding the contract you've got at home and then you can work"
Participant 10

14.1 Introduction

An analysis of the data in previous chapters in Part 4 has described themes which have emerged in relation to the workplace. This chapter considers findings from the data in relation to the participant group as mothers, wives and partners in the workplace and the emerging themes about how the domestic environment impacted on their careers and was managed. Women in this participant group describe the search for a domestic contract which works, why that is important and the domestic factors which they identify as most impacting on performance at work. Participants describe what is changing or has changed in society to assist or otherwise the management of work life balance. I describe emerging themes on the impact of financial pressures, options such as full-time and part-time work and how realistic these options have been for these women. In this chapter data is considered which identifies the range of domestic contracts deployed, and at the same time the congruencies which emerged between the personal contracts arrived at. I also report some of the lived experiences of this group of women as they told them to me. This chapter records some of the most heartfelt lived experiences of this participant group.

The impact of the type of organisation to which the participants belonged and themes which emerged relating to the way work life balance may be managed in different workplace settings is described in this chapter, and the opportunities and constraints in some highly traditional and hierarchical organisations.

The findings in this chapter refer mainly to those participants who have had children, and women who have reared children from a young age. The group in this category consists of ten of the twelve participants. The whole participant group includes two women who have either not had children or who have step children who they did not rear from a young age and their views are noted as experienced managers and observers of other women in the workforce, but their personal experience does not feature. One participant describes her experience as a single parent and this is recorded.

14.2 Having it All

There was an acceptance by almost all the participant group that the idea of 'having it all' in terms of an equal focus by the mother on both child rearing and on the career was not either possible or acceptable. The one participant who described herself as *"having it all"* also described extensive supportive networks which enabled her to feel that she had it all. Others described similar support

networks as an example of how it was *not* possible to focus equally on childcare and work, and the degree of delegation required. The following quotes, from police services, technology and insurance illustrate a common theme across several very different organisations and sectors.

> *"…If you think you can do the lion's share of the child rearing, shopping, cooking and cleaning and come to work you're living in lala land. You cannot do it... you cannot possibly do it all and come to work. The workplace can't take what's left from you doing 90% of the child rearing."*

> *"…I think we have to be realistic as women. You cannot do everything and nor can men… and so I don't think anyone has it all but as women I think you have to, I would say chose, and make choices."*

> *"You can't do 2 full-time jobs and expect to be successful at it."*

Several participants described the changes in society which in general they saw as slow but positive. However, they all acknowledged that there remains an attitude in society at this time which still anticipates the mother to be the lead person with regard to child rearing. One participant goes further and suggests that women may have changed their attitudes and although the domestic environment may not be entirely their realm, many may wish to take or retain the lead role.

> *"...[Society has] an implicit assumption that a woman is leading the domestic charge. And I think that is evolving over time. But that inflexibility absolutely is right because on the whole those women either want to be taking the lead role or are assumed and by default have taken the lead role at home."*

The domestic contracts described by this participant group reflect those where the woman holds the lead domestic and childcare role, and where that is delegated in part or in full elsewhere.

The participant group included women with children of primary school age, secondary school age, children at university, and some with grandchildren. Some participants had children in partnerships where both partners were working. None had children who were now under school age. All recognised generational changes which they observed had taken place in regard to the way society viewed the role of women at home and in the workplace. The group recognised advances across generations in legislation, employment options such as job share, technological opportunities, and attitude. The change in attitude appeared to be significant for this group. The quotations below illustrate that participants from public and private sectors both describe generational change as they experienced it.

> *"…I think the guys of today are much more hands-on when it comes to childcare and they will take a day off to take a child to a medical appointment. It was never contemplated that [Gordon] would take the day off... it was always me that did that"* (Asset Management).

> *"… I think when I look at the way in which my family set-up works, and my husband compared to now my daughter and son, I think my family rightly or wrongly were more dependent on the mother in the home... whereas when I look at the next generation, my children, it feels a much more equal set of responsibilities... so whether its easer for women going forward I don't know"* (Civil Service).

Whilst acknowledging there had been positive generational changes in both attitude and practical options there was a view expressed, mainly but not entirely in the public sector, that alongside recognising opportunities available to women in the workforce there are checks and balances to be applied, and this has not changed and is unlikely to change in the future. Some women spoke as both managers and mothers about what having it all may mean.

> *"…we need to understand the options that we have available to us but if that requires me to go to an employment tribunal because I think we need to stand on principle on this, [I will], because otherwise there will be 50 people behind them saying, actually I don't want to work nights either... we do alternative working patterns, we do job share, but the strong point is we have to deliver a service to the public."*

I consider in more depth below that many of the options now available, such as part-time working, job share, nurseries, and extended maternity leave had little advantage to this group of women. For this group there was an understanding that having it all was not in fact an option for women in top jobs despite new opportunities and that understanding this constraint may impact on the choices women of the future make.

> *"…the technology has made changes possible and the next generation... there is a sense in which women are saying, do we want to make the choices our mothers made… I'm not going to do what you do… try and have a full-time career and have children."*

Understanding that it is not possible to have it all was firmly established. For all participants in this group this had meant choices between career and childcare and a primary focus on career was evident for most participants. Those choices which were taken were described as energy sapping, emotionally draining and painful for many in the participant group.

Breaching the stereotype

There was a significant consensus for all in this participant sub group (those with children) that choices had had to be made. For many to achieve a domestic contract which was workable and for them to deliver on those choices the stereotype of women in the lead at home had to be breached. The emotional energy which was involved in challenging the stereotype in the workplace and in society

appeared to be high and the battle continued throughout career paths followed. The following are examples of how some participants met challenge from society.

> "Socially we still have an assumption that the woman will be the person at home, and hormonally we all want it and so on and so forth... I think there is an exercise here in challenging that assumption."

> "Society tells you, you should feel guilty, particularly as a woman. I think men are starting to feel that sort of pressure, but certainly in my generation... I had to be quite single minded about it... you couldn't let all of that guilt... you couldn't let everybody else dictate their perception of you and even now I 'm sure people have perceptions of me, they possibly don't like some of it."

The NHS participant recalls the challenge from within the family.

> "...I remember my mother telling me I was completely stupid and bonkers; should never do it [work full-time] and stay at home with the children. And so, you do have some worries."

A participant in legal services describes an incident where facing the stereotype still recalled pain after many years.

> "One of my sons had a problem at school and the head teacher left the room leaving our file on the desk… it said 'working mother, query abused child'… and by abused they meant deprived because I was working... so the mental and physical pressures are enormous when you've got young children."

14.3 Factors Influencing the Domestic Contract

Once children arrived in the family the need for a successful domestic contract emerged very strongly. *"Primarily the contract gets complicated with children, that's what…"* said one participant. There were a range of factors which emerged from the data, driving the form of the domestic contract depending on family circumstances, the age of the children and the organisations in which the participants worked. One participant explained that she had seen forms of domestic contract from *"you're in the lead except for Thursday afternoons"* to *"I'm doing five years and he's doing five years"* and all other variants. For some participants determining the detail was important.

> "...we had a rule… we said, if [Jane, the nanny] is ever off sick [Peter, the husband] would have half a day off and then I would have half a day off."

The 'what if' scenario was generally covered but not always in as much detail.

It appeared to be important that the details of the domestic contract could change as circumstances changed. The civil service participant summarised the importance of flexibility.

> *"…my view is that everybody should be able to make decisions about quality of life, but they shouldn't ever feel that they can't reconsider those or make different decisions at different points. What I think you've got to do is to find what works for you and the family."*

In addition to flexibility over time there were other factors which influenced the shape of the contracts arrived at. For some participants the key issue was to obtain an arrangement where the children were cared for which avoided dependence on other members of the family. For some, families lived far away, and help was not possible but for others where informal support may have been an option the choice made across the entire group was to purchase childcare support and not to rely on family or friends even for a short period, except in an emergency. In most cases this decision related to having control and maximising independence. *"I didn't like doing it… I hated to ask someone for help"*, recalled the participant in financial services.

A further factor which influenced many was the desire to provide care for the children as though there was a parent there. Thus, the domestic contract involved, for all the participants in this group, having a carer based in the family home and the child or children not travelling for care elsewhere.

> *"If I am going to continue to work at this pace doing these things I need the infrastructure here [at home] to look like this… I don't want my children to have to do x just because I'm working so I will deal with it. It's important that I don't sound as though I outsourced parenting."*

The strongest theme was that of working very hard to establish an understanding and agreement between partners as to what the domestic contract actually was. *"Don't get me wrong, we of course had our moments, but I think basically we've reached a place where we both had a common understanding about what we were trying to do"*. The main factor here was reducing the unplanned, the unexpected, and potential chaos to a minimum. The theme of establishing an agreement, a domestic contract, and avoiding chaotic events at home was equally strong across all sectors.

> *"The question I ask younger women is 'do you understand the contract you have with your partner. How are the two of you going to manage that balance?'"*

> *"…you have to feel in control… if you've got a chaotic domestic life, you're not going to be able to do your job well, and then that's going to impact on your performance isn't it. I know I'm at my best when I've got a lot of stability at home… It doesn't take a lot does it, something happens and its obvious… it impacts on performance... you do have to have a degree of stability and organisation in your home life."*

14.4 Types of Domestic Contract

Purchased Childcare

Given the diverse range of home circumstances across the participant group there was a remarkable degree of consensus on what the shape of a workable domestic contract would be. For most in the participant group there appeared to be two main options during the time when the children were of school age, one was the purchase of services from a nanny with the intention that this was long term. By contrast for the single parent a nanny option was used but this was not consistent and family and other supports were also used intermittently. The second option applied to three participants where the husband or partner took the lead in childcare and was based entirely in the home. Table 10 summarises the headline arrangements in the participants' domestic contracts where there were school age children.

Table 10: Headline Domestic Contracts

PARTICIPANT	NANNY	OTHER FORMAL CHILDCARE	NUMBER OF CHILDREN	ROLE OF HUSBAND/PARTNER
A	No	No	1	Husband at home and childcare lead
B	Yes	No	2	Husband own business
C	Yes	No	5	Husband own business
D	Yes	No	3	Husband own business
E	Yes	No	3	Husband Business Career
F	Yes	No	2	Husband Own career
G	No	Nursery	1	Partner based at home
H	Yes	No	2	Husband own career
I	No	No	2	Husband at home and childcare lead

Delegation

The domestic contract rested on the successful management of the nanny and the ability to delegate.

> *I had friends who were calling nannies every two minutes, making all the food for the children the night before, not allowing the nanny to do terribly much, washing all the children's clothes and ironing them themselves... so I've always been good at delegating... it's difficult to be successful in your career if you can't make that separation."*

> *"...it wasn't as if I was trying to do quite a hard job and at the same time worry about what was happening to the kids because I actually had that degree of stability [long term nanny]... I think if I had not had that it [the children] would have been more constraining."*

Flexibility

There were several examples of the changing contract over time and the flexibility of all partners, mother nanny and father, in delivering workable arrangements within the broad decision to delegate much of the childcare by hiring a nanny. An example of the longitudinal changing face of domestic contracts was provided by the participant working in local government.

> *"My husband decided after only about two years in work that he wanted to do an MBA at [Y University]. I'd got a job at [X City] I'd been given a post of solicitor... but [X City] and [Y University] are quite a long way away and I wasn't ready for a long distance marriage... so I looked around for another local government job."*

And later in her career she reports *"...we've both managed careers and so we've learned to do that juggling... when I went to [D City], we very nearly moved the whole family and then we decided not to. So, for three years I was Monday to Friday in [D City]. I went up Monday and came back Friday."*

Location

Within the broad decision to purchase a nanny many participants agreed as part of their working arrangements to make decisions about their location. For a minority of participants, the family moved with the participant's job.

> *" ..we made some choices about the support that we had and I think that over the years we had a variety of arrangements, our kids were pretty resilient themselves... we moved to [X county] when I came here [London]... we had to work hard at getting them settled into new schools... they themselves grew up being pretty adaptable and resilient."*

For other participants the agreement was not to move location once the children arrived.

> *"...[Tom] and I both believed in the city and we encouraged each other... [Tom] and I made the decision that we were going to stay in London… so very unusually for two people who've climbed to the level that we did in the city, we've never lived abroad."*

> *"...it makes more sense this way round… we'll make sure we live in central London."*

Most participants were working in London when the children were of school age, but some who were not made the decision to maintain their location elsewhere.

The Nativity Play

Although minor in terms of time commitment the school nativity play, parents' evenings, and for some cricket teas, featured very large and were mentioned by several participants as an important measure of what the choices they had made meant for them. The choices were remembered as significant after many years. This was an area of childcare which appeared not to be able to be covered adequately by the nanny. The data indicates a mix of views, some describe easy decisions in terms of who was around and available and others were more strident in their views about how school events should be handled. Figure 10 illustrates examples of unprompted reflections of how chief executives who were mothers measured managing the school interface.

Figure 10: Work/School Interface

> "the key point is children always came first... who would want to be the child vhose mummy didn't come to the school play?"

> "…I did make the costumes for the nativity play and we did both go a lot, but again there was never any debate. So, when they were in secondary school and I was working away he pretty much went to all the parent's evenings… I think we saw family life as whose best at what at what time."

> "the pressure particularly at prep school to do the cricket teas and to do everything perfectly is massive… you just can't do it."

> "…of course, I had 'oh my God am I ever going to make it to sports day and nativity plays?'"

14.5 Living with a Domestic Contract

Participants described how they felt when decisions had been made, and the domestic contract was delivering as planned. Many described the emotional cost, and the loss they had experienced. The emotional cost crossed generations as the two shared experiences below illustrate.

"…any job worth doing, the work-life balance is likely to be horrific… It's tough going back when you've just had babies because it breaks your heart and you can't believe that anybody could look after your child and so you spend your time wondering whether they are going to choke because the nanny doesn't know… .you get over that and then you have the not being able to get to sports day, carol service, missing first steps, first words, you have all the first milestones that you bitterly regret and then looking back on it you suspect it was you who lost out rather than the children… but at the time you don't realise that, at the time you think it's all important their mother is there. There are the days when you used to drive through the rain and the snow and the hail to get home just to see the children before bath time knowing that male colleagues were just popping down the pub to avoid bath time… I realised we were going to be ok when one of my son's said to me 'give me £20 mum, I'm a deprived child'… I thought ok if we can joke about it that means it can't be bad."

The oldest participant

"…I did really struggle until very recently with the idea of working full-time. I felt the balance wasn't right with home, how much time they [the kids] were getting… [then I had] some kind of epiphany… 'well do you know what, I have to keep working, financially. I love what I do. Would I want to go down a couple of levels and find a part-time role because part-time jobs do not exist at this level? No because I wouldn't be happy working. I think it's better to be happy at home and happy working'. And I've just come to the realisation that actually, I've got great kids, they're not damaged by me working full-time and that I'm good... I think everyone's happy and it's working… I'll get in [the office] at 7.00 and I leave at quarter past 5.00. It means my face is then home at six o clock. But those aren't the hours I work. I do emails at 5.30am and from 10.00 at night… hours are becoming less relevant its more the predictability of your routine that allows you to take care of the family that is more of an issue."

The youngest participant

Most of the lived experiences gathered in this section were shared in the unstructured part of the first interview where participants reflected without prompt on their career path and where the impact of the domestic environment was often an emotional part of that reflection. The research design was chosen in order that I, as the researcher, was able to listen to what top female executives in the UK had to say. Some of the lived experiences described below are presented as they were shared. Discussion on the interpretation of what was said is in Part Five.

The lived experiences described in this section are unique but illustrative of a common struggle as the domestic contract agreed upon was delivered. These experiences run alongside career paths which were all successful, and movement towards top jobs was achieved. Some of the most difficult events occurred when the unplanned and unexpected turned up. Figure 11 describes two examples of such events in the data.

Figure 11: The Unexpected

> "One day I came home from court… Note on the table '[Arthur] is with friend x, [George] is with friend y and I've left, signed nanny."

> "…I can remember when [Toby] got chicken pox or measles… and it was on the Sunday and I thought I can't not go to work this week. So, I literally drove him all the way to Cumbria to my mum and dad's and dropped him off and drove back again [to London]."

Most of the lived experiences however describe the regular stress and everyday emotional pressures which participants experienced and wished to share in this research project. There was no difference evident in the data between sectors or generations. Figure 12 illustrates some of the data on this subject.

Figure 12: Regular Pressures

"It was definitely stressful, even just trying to manage work and a son. All that stress about going to pick him up from after school clubs, then all the nanny stuff… and particularly the people I was mixing with, all these yummy mummies. I just can't do all that."

"It is hard… you've got this career that you're managing, and you've got your home life that you are managing and sometimes they do get out of sequence. But the real question is how hard are you willing to work on both of them… actually that requires quite a lot of emotional energy."

"…three to ten… I think is the worst… and I was really lucky and got a couple of fantastic nannies… [but] they're just becoming little people and they want you, or you think they want you… you think they need you."

"…every day that's a good day I think I can manage it, then another day I think I can't… as the boys get a bit older I suspect they could manage it, or they'd understand it more… It's a different sort of need (as they grow older) Because it's something you can't do on the other end of Facetime or whatever."

"… [I] personally feel bad during school summer holidays… and I can't be around. Then I feel I'm very absent and I don't really like that."

Traditional Organisations

Participants who were part of highly structured and hierarchical organisations reflected on the additional pressures they experienced as a result of their work environment. The organisations where participants described additional struggles to manage the domestic and the work environment included police services, legal services and the armed services. The most extreme difficulty in coming to a workable domestic contract was in the armed services. This participant describes her environment in the following way.

> "[Armed] service is the readiness to go and do anything, anywhere at any time. So culturally it's absolutely fundamental. And a real struggle for men and women is at the point at which you're pulled away because of your family circumstances or whatever you feel is compromising your ability to do that... it wasn't until I had a family that it felt really really hard... I have to accept that [deployment for 6, 9, or 12 months] that's a possibility and that I'm prepared to do that, or I shouldn't be in the [service]. You have to plan for the unexpected, or live with the uncertainty which is quite wearing, or I guess, accept it."

For those in legal services and police services the struggle is with the hours rather than unpredictable lengthy absence.

"…it's the irregular work pattern… if you're a self-employed barrister you just never know when you are going to be in court, what time you have to set off to get there… you don't know when the jury's going to come back, you don't know whether the judge will want to sit late, want to sit early."

"...in the lower ranks the work, the hours are incredibly anti-social... it's not even consistent, and it's working weekends, it's working bank holidays, and then as you get more senior OK the basic hours are office hours, but you're frequently working weekends, you've got your phone on all the time, you get called."

The armed services participant describes the domestic contract as:

"…my husband has had a full career... and then left. And now he is the primary drop-off, pickup and that type of thing. And that was a conscious decision rather than… paying for help. We made the conscious decision that my husband... would dial up and dial down his work to accommodate the boys... he has absolutely moved location [within the UK]."

14.6 Partners

Some of the pressures and sacrifices towards the successful career paths of the participants were made by partners. All participants were asked as part of the semi-structured part of the interview, if they were agreeable, to comment on the role their husband or partner played in their successful career path and maintaining their positions in top posts. Generally there was a keenness to share the importance of the partner's role. Apart from the single parent and the family where there were no children, only one participant did not allocate a significant weight to the role played by the partner. Table 11 captures some of those participants who described their partners as absolutely essential to them doing their job; and in all cases this was about support up to the present day, and not solely in terms of assistance with children.

Table 11: The Essential Partner

AREA OF WORK	HOW IMPORTANT IS YOUR PARTNER?
Asset Management	*"very very very!"*
Higher Education	*"without my partner?... No, No, No you'd go mad."*
Financial Services	*"massively important… yes, massively."*
Armed Services	*"it [my husband's support] is fundamental… I couldn't do it without him or without his support."*

Other participants wished to share some of the ways in which partners and husbands were supportive. One CFO explained that her husband supported on every level.

> *"…so on an emotional level on a practical level… all of that. He is always supportive, always… [he will say] 'don't look so far ahead', 'just stop over thinking', 'why are you stressing about getting the on-line shopping done? Just leave it, I'll do it'… so on all those levels that he leans in."*

Other participants also described the fundamental nature of their partner's support, during the everyday as well as during a family crisis.

> *"…he was always there… there was always two of us… we shared what we had to do"* (NHS).

> *"…he's very supportive of my career and often to the extent that he's pushing me and saying 'don't be so stupid, of course you can do it, why are you doubting yourself… I see my peers in my social group where that doesn't happen, and you can't keep moving on and up without that… [Ben] doesn't just say to me he supports my career, he does it in practical ways. So, if he wasn't helping with the kids, and doing the parents evening when I'm in Shanghai or whatever it would fall down… and I would feel too bad to continue pursuing my career"* (Telecoms).

The Less than Essential Partner

For some participants the partner was less than essential, *"I'm afraid, much as I love my husband the burden fell on the mother".* The single parent in the study found the responsibility for a partner as well as children not something she wished to sustain and described survival without a partner as a bonus, *"…because I've got to worry about myself and my sons, and I haven't got somebody else who's being needy who I have to look after as well"*.

14.7 Financial Challenges

The issue of finance rarely came up without prompt except in the data related to domestic contracts. Participants tended to raise the issue themselves where finance was a pressure in relation to childcare; where it was not, the issue was discussed following a prompt during the second interview.

Most financial pressure was experienced at the beginning of a career where the participant was progressing very quickly. This appeared to be the time when the decision had been made to purchase the services of a nanny, but salary was not yet high. The participant in financial services describes her position as being concerned at the cost.

> *"…economically it didn't make much sense, but we had a nanny from day one… [we] couldn't afford a live-out nanny so we had them live in."*

The participant in telecoms described a similar decision coming about a decade after the previous participant had experienced problems. She explains

"It's [the cost of childcare] a huge issue. At various stages in my career... there were months when I could just pay for the childcare and I didn't have any money left over. And that's a real commitment because you're having time away from the children anyway, and then you're not making any money either and that's very tough."

She considers this to be a very contemporary issue. Although now in the most senior post in the UK in her organisations she says that looking at the women in her organisation

"...I know what I pay my nanny and I think crumbs that's really difficult to come to work when you're only taking a few hundred pounds home at the end of the month... but you've got to get through that in the early years to help your career moving forward. It's tough."

The early financial struggle appeared to be similar in both the private and the public sector, the difference appeared to be about the length of time that the financial pressure continued. A participant in the public sector explained her family considerations as:

"...spending a proportion of our money, quite a big proportion on childcare, we thought it was a good investment for later... so we took the decision to have a nanny in our own home because we both wanted to work but we wanted our children in their formative years to spend the same amount of time in a way as if one of us had been there... so, the cost for the first child is really quite high. Once you add two it gets more economic, once you add three its really good value. We decided early on that we also wanted to be a good employer so we tried to give our nanny (she worked for us for 9 years)... a pay rise every year when we got pay rises. We gave her redundancy when she left us and we helped her set up a pension so that she started to build up a pension from when she was 21... we paid her NI... both our careers could see an upward climb, that was just another decision about our life."

For others in the public sector the financial sacrifice appeared to be sustained for several years. The NHS participant reflects saying:

"...at the end of the day you just make choices... so if I were to say we've never been on a skiing holiday, so there are choices aren't there... so we would have a family holiday in the summer, we would have gone away at half term in the UK. Family holiday in France with the kids in the car and that would have been it."

This participant also reflects on women facing these challenges today and says:

"...they're so used to foreign travel and the things they like doing that if you try and keep doing all that and pay for a nanny and keep working, you kind of see it gets difficult."

For most participants the domestic contract included a partner/husband who also provided income. Participants in the public and the private sector acknowledge this clearly.

> *"It's [childcare] just a nightmare, as we all know... but at least because I was earning, and my husband was earning we could afford relatively good childcare... most of my income in the early days went on the nanny. I wasn't that high an earner when I had young children, but I was doing a job I considered worthwhile, so it was worth it"* (Legal Services).

> *"My partner does work, and he's got a very good job. And I say I need to work financially... I could stop working but our lifestyle would fundamentally change, the children would change schools, all of that. And I don't want to do that"* (Telecoms).

Where there was a partner either not earning, or not earning at a relatively high level, the struggle was more difficult.

> *"…we did only have my salary when I was a lecturer for a period of time so… without a doubt we didn't have much money… it was fine until something went wrong... the washing machine broke… and then the debts would go up and I'd get a loan to pay them off… that was quite stressful."*

For one CEO financial pressures never impacted on domestic contracts.

> *"Because I was on this fast track, [the CEO] made sure I was promoted every year and I was given more and more money. More than I could have imagined... he (my father) gave me shares in the family business and I used to get these huge dividends, so when I was at Oxford I was very rich for a student... luckily I'm not irresponsible."*

For participants who had to make childcare decisions much later in their career the financial pressures were not felt so greatly. A public-sector participant comments that although there is need for childcare, *"we're very lucky; we can financially afford to do that".* In this case the participant referred to the family being financially able to allow the husband to reduce work commitments and become the lead for childcare in the home.

14.8 Career Breaks

Part-time Working

For many of the participants in this study employment opportunities such as job share, and part-time working were not options for them. Most adhered to the view of the participant in Insurance who explained that *"the job won't change size and …you still have to manage the work life balance".* There appeared to be a view that this was not a viable option for women on a career path which was accelerating, and which would take them towards a top job. Job share was not mentioned by any participant.

Only one of the participants took up the part-time option, and this was for a short period (4 days per week) on returning to work after two short maternity leave periods. She was not able to manage a

staged return following a third child and after having returned to full-time work in order not to miss a promotion possibility she explains:

> "They told me I was not being considered for the role [because my boss was leaving earlier than anticipated] which was absolutely heart-breaking because I'd actually gone back to work full-time which I didn't want to do at that stage to get this."

In some workplaces the opportunity for part-time working is limited by the nature of the work. An example of the difficulties of trying to do part-time work in some organisational contexts is summarised by a participant in legal services. *"...it's really difficult being a barrister who is in court regularly, part-time because if you're in the middle of a trial you can't say 'I'm sorry I don't work on Fridays'… you'd end up with cases that just lasted for a day."*

Re-entry after a Career Break

Taking career breaks was an issue for most participants in the study in relation to maternity leave. No participant considered a career break for any other reason. For some participants the length of the career break was determined by unique circumstances. One female senior described an abrupt end to her maternity leave.

> ...when I had my second child... my boss rang and said, oh I've got this place at Harvard and I'm off... can you come back and run the [X Hospital]? We need you back sooner rather than later... I had a nanny… she stayed with me for 14 years… so I did come back."

Another reflecting on both the opportunity for part-time and the opportunity for an extended maternity break explains

> "...my partner had very little work quite often… I took a decision at that time that somebody needed to support the family, and I got on and did it."

Another explains why few options were available to her.

> "...anyway, I'm single. How could I have had a career break? I needed the money... I've got a bit of money from one of their fathers, but it was absolutely imperative for me to work."

Some participants described taking only a short maternity break because of the pattern they wished to establish at home, taking the long view of preserving a work life balance they had agreed on as part of the domestic contract.

"Having mum there all the time when they're used to mum being there part of the time, actually if you are not careful becomes a disruptor. So, I had relatively short (maternity) leaves."

"I wanted it to start as it was going to go on. So I didn't want to have a year at home of being a full-time mum... when that wasn't the way it was going to be... the job I was in at the time meant that I also had weekends... so it was manageable."

A minority of participants described their desire to return to work without regret at leaving a young child behind, having established childcare arrangements which were as they wished them to be.

"...there was never any disagreement between me and my husband about us potentially both pursuing our careers. So, it wasn't, I really want to go back to work and he didn't want me to. We both thought I should... I wanted to go back to work because I thought I could and I wanted to have both."

"I knew that I wanted to go back it would be simpler to stay in the business."

For many in the participant group the length of career breaks which were taken, and which were felt to be viable were often as a direct result of the issue of re-entry. There were no consistent views on this in terms of what was an acceptable length career break to take when associated with maternity leave. Some felt women should be able to re-negotiate a re-entry as and when it suited them and if they were successful this should not be a problem. However, all described any extended career break, whilst being possible, would significantly impact on career progress.

"Senior women who are highly valued can be confident about negotiating re-entry which suits what they want to do... that isn't to say it won't impact on your career... there is more a stigmatism around the pace of progress that can unfairly be applied to women sometimes."

Some participants held strong views themselves about women trying to take to take longer than a few months maternity leave. Towards, and definitely after, a year appeared to be considered a career break long enough to impact significantly on progress.

"I've seen a few people when they've been away for a year being disconnected when they come back… you can't expect things to stand still... You won't be on top of mind. It's not that anyone is trying to drive you out, but you are not on top of mind, you're not the person who has just delivered a fantastic project... and so it's harder. And particularly the first child might be ok, but if you have three or four children and take a year out, your career will be impacted of that there is no doubt."

"I think there's still a perception that if you decide to take time off, so I was told, if you get off a fast train don't be thinking you can get back on."

In the more highly regulated services the issue of re-entry was tied to issues of pension and penalty for extended career breaks, such as working in another sector.

> *"…being a police officer is governed by police regulations which have the power of statute… you wouldn't automatically be able to come back in (at the same rank)… it's a real barrier… we need to change that regulation… If you leave a pension scheme you can never get back in"*

For some professions practice in the workplace made re-entry easier such as for barristers, and for others such as solicitors, more difficult. For the legal profession this is also linked to the way work is allocated and reflects the example above where the participant warns that *"you will not be top of mind"* when you return.

> *"…I was terrified, it's a bit like being an actor, being a barrister, you're frightened that if you are away too long you won't be known when you come back. I think again, we are getting better at that… but my generation we were terrified that if we weren't seen we would never be briefed again."*

> *"...we've got barristers, clerks even if they are female, who seem to think if you're not seen in chambers you're not dedicated... there's still a desk mentality, put your jacket round your [chair]."*

For some who had not experienced difficulties themselves in returning after short maternity breaks, the issue was of concern regarding loss of talent. A participant with extensive international banking experience reflected on the loss.

> *"…one of the problems is trying to re-integrate women back into the workplace and acknowledge their past experience. A lot of women will leave at that level… and maybe never manage to get back up to that level. This is a huge wasted resource."*

She advocates specialist recruitment agencies for women returning to the financial and commercial sector after an extended career break. Another participant also considers that organisations could improve skills themselves in this area.

> *"I think people are not good at on boarding people into an organisation and so it's a very vulnerable time, that, whether I decide to come back or not… clearly a number never get back on trajectory."*

14.9 Constraints

The participants with children described domestic contracts which enabled them to manage the work life balance sufficiently well to achieve an accelerated career path to top jobs in several sectors. There were a number of areas however where constraints were described both for domestic and workplace elements of the arrangements which had been agreed. In the workplace many women described a reluctance over several years to engage in useful and important networking. *"I have two children... so in that formative period [about 10 years] I went home in the evenings to see the kids. Didn't go*

networking." This is referred to in section 12.5. This was considered an issue when children were small or in primary school, by several participants.

With regard to workplace location, constraints were strongly expressed by many participants across all sectors as applying during the time when they had school age children. One participant summarises;

> *"The thing is once they get into full-time education you're talking about uprooting every time your career path changes. So, there's a lot of personal decisions that have to be made with that. It just narrows what you can do; it doesn't stop you doing stuff... I can see a great job in Dubai but I'm not going to go for it because, well, my husband's got a job as well, but my children would all have to leave school."*

Others moved the location of their jobs nearer to home when children were small for example, *"I was drawn back to [part of London]... it was near home and it would be easier for me to see the kids at night".* Some describe not taking international opportunities for several years. *"It's the children... changing location is difficult, full stop". For* one participant the issue was that the domestic contract agreed meant the family would stay in a fixed location and the implication for her was that she may well be parted from them.

> *"The family won't move again... so if I go somewhere else I'll go on my own, I'll either be a weekly commuter or we'll have to make the decision to do something else. But I don't want to keep moving the family... I'm lucky that I'm at a level that it's a bit more predictable of where I'm going to be, the sort of things I can go and do. So, I, in my heart I can better manage it."*

Other constraints experienced by members of this participant group included self-imposed constraints on business travel.

> *"...to be honest the biggest issue for travelling for me with a young child was that I didn't like leaving him for prolonged periods of time. And if anything [was] beyond a week it would feel really difficult... so I tried to constrain the amount of time I was away rather than the travel itself."*

This was an issue reflected by several participants who had international travel as integral to their job. However, for some it was not an issue and the domestic contract worked to support the family during absence.

Although the constraints referred to had an impact on work life, it was not evident that other than possibly slowing progress for some women, *"...I think it [the child] delayed me in applying for senior posts, yes that would be fair...",* that this impacted in a major way on successful career paths.

14.10 Summary: the Domestic Contract

This chapter has considered issues of work life balance, expressed in the data, through the In-vivo code 'domestic contracts'. Emerging themes described the importance of establishing childcare, for all participants, in the home as though the parents were present, and achieving this by purchasing the services of a nanny in earlier years or the lead childcare position being transferred to the father. This chapter has described and framed the emotional impact on some of the women who delegated the lead care role to others and the difficulty in breaching a stereotype about the role of mothers in relation to work held by society and sometimes by close family. This chapter introduces the partners of many of the participants who provided the data and their value and role in enabling the rapid and successful career paths described in previous chapters to happen. Linked to the role of partners this chapter also raises issues identified in the data with regard to financial pressures. The pressure on most at the start of careers, and on some later who did not have the benefit of a dual income household. A very strong emerging theme was the acknowledgement of generational changes in how work and home life balances are agreed, and whether changes in workplace opportunities in terms of part-time working and career breaks were viable options for this group of women. The theme identified a mismatch between opportunities and reality in the workplace in terms of presenteeism, re-entry, and financial and promotional penalties of extended career breaks. There is also an emerging theme mostly in the public sector which sets opportunities against the requirements of an organisation in delivering a round the clock public service.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: RESILIENCE

"There's no doubt that to get to the top, you need resilience. And to stay at the top you need even more resilience" Participant 9

15.1 Introduction

Chapters Eleven to Thirteen report findings in the data describing how women leaders in this study experienced and managed the challenge of the workplace, and Chapter Fourteen describes their lived experiences related to their domestic environment and its impact on their career. The abductive enquiry offered the opportunity to listen and follow issues which were solely raised by the participant group and which were important to them, there was no prompt from myself as the researcher. Emerging themes included the impact of the print press, physical challenge and the resilience needed to meet these challenges. I also describe here findings in relation to the participants' views on the pipeline of female talent in their organisations, the choices they see that women in the workforce now are making and their increasing focus on role modelling, mentoring and support of other women.

15.2 The Press

Most of the participant group raised the issue of media exposure as an important factor in their career path and they spoke of the level of resilience required to meet this challenge. Most of the female executives in the group in speaking about 'the press' referred to the print press and in particular, although not exclusively to the Daily Mail. For those who had experienced a high degree of exposure in the press the impact on their careers was significant. Two participants had left, or were leaving, their jobs during the period of this study and negative press exposure was identified as a significant contributory factor. For three participants the likelihood of increased exposure to the press had contributed to their decision not to pursue some top posts or positions of influence. For all except one of the participants who commented on personal exposure in the British press the comments were negative. Participants recognised the vulnerability of women in this situation.

> *"There is a risk for public figures. It's not exclusively female... [but] I think there is a tendency for some parts of the media to be even more vitriolic against women than men."*

> *"I think the media go for women more than men and I think once they've got a back catalogue on you it's just effortless to write a story."*

One participant describes her experience as *"No-one likes negative exposure.........the British press is virulent. If you can't accept that...if you don't want to see yourself on the front page of the ...Mail.... then do something different."* Negative experiences were described by both the public and the private sector.

Two public sector executive leaders describe the impact on them. One participant was across the front page of the Daily Mail the day before I met her.

> *"If it's in the Daily Mail I know it's wrong….I've got to the stage now where I've just about had enough of it, I'm fed up of being in the national press…I'm fed up of the constant knocking of public servants…I've just about got to the stage where I've had enough. It's clearly time for me to leave…"*

This participant did retire within the year, after years of negative exposure directed at her personally and the service she led. She was recognised for a very successful career for which she received a national award. Another executive leader in the public sector explained:

> *"…I got to the point when I thought that when I was attached to a story the story was bigger than it would have been if I had not been there… the non-controversial became controversial because people like the Daily Mail could write a story."*

This leader was also in receipt of a national honour for services to the nation.

Experiences were equally acute in the private sector. One participant described an incident which occurred the week I first interviewed her.

> *"I've had to deal with lots of media explosions. Some of them completely invented by the press… a journalist misread some accounts and added three zeros to a number… shareholders in that business were concerned. They [the paper] apologised and printed an apology and corrected it online. But it was done, and it affects my reputation… but I'm used to dealing with these things now. It doesn't really faze me. It makes me angry. I got very angry."*

The participants above had sustained years of attack in the press. For others looking on there was caution in case they should also become a target, and this impacted directly on some of the career decisions they made. One woman describes caution in her organisation where women below board level were seen choosing to avoid some opportunities to raise their reputation because of the associated exposure to the press. Some participants describe talented women who avoid public events with high media coverage because they attract exposure to the press.

Other examples of caution in the face of potentially increased press exposure are more personal. One participant commented on her consideration of an offer of the most senior post in the UK. She says *"…two things… put me off. And the second thing was the media… media was an unattractive factor in considering the [top job]."* In legal services a participant described the negative impact of press reporting on the behaviours of herself and colleagues and as an example said

"She [a senior member of the profession] spoke out... and essentially she was just decried as a wild and wacky feminist. She got labelled because she was prepared to speak out. And therefore, I suspect a lot of other women just put their heads down."

It was recognised that the impact of social media and the press together raised a growing risk and the vulnerability of some women.

"In [the past] you could be a focus in Birmingham and it would only be Birmingham news. Nowadays we're Googled everywhere and literally every paper from the parish post to international news… so I think there's more of a problem in the modern social media world, worse that even it was before."

For some participants who took top posts and became of press interest because they were female, there was concern about the impact on family and also some shock for some at the time, that promotion to a top post could be described in the context not of merit but of gender. A participant in the armed services described breaking news as:

"…it makes me uncomfortable... but you know it's not about me... I was [working abroad] and I didn't know it [the promotion] was going to be in the paper. At the time I was, do you know that's not fair on my family, I'm over here, it's not about my gender. "

For some who had been subject to press exposure for many years there was an acceptance that if managed well by parents, children and other members of the family can adjust. The data included two comments by children shared by their mothers shown in Figure 13**.**

Figure 13: The Voice of the Child
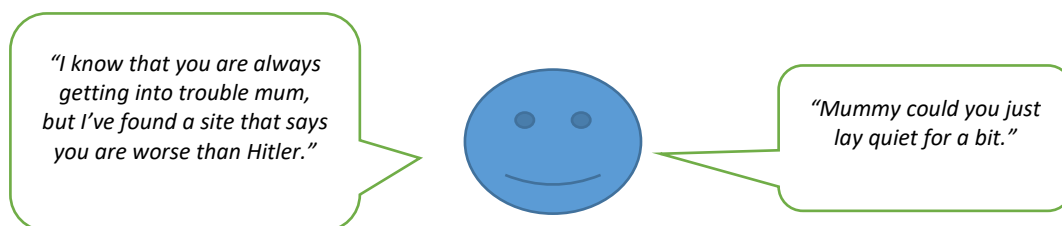
In the private sector a banker explains that one business issue she dealt with *"became a huge cause celebre, it was literally reported in every corner of the world".* She says that at that time, when the children were young:

"…I never showed them anything but what happened would be… the teacher would say to them oh I read about your mother in the newspaper or I saw your mother on Newsnight, or was it your mother on Chanel 4 news or whatever it was."

This participant explained that over the years the children grew used to it and she considered that it probably had little negative impact on them. A public-sector participant echoes that experience:

"the kids have grown up with mum in the public eye… so the good thing was that it was very normal for them to have this slightly notorious person… so the kids have been fantastic loving me as I am."

Another participant admits that "*I couldn't have managed my career if I had known it [press exposure] was damaging their [the children's] confidence as individuals".*

The participant group spontaneously provided a range of example scenarios to illustrate how arrangements were made for coping with press intrusion, how to manage print press interest and how to build resilience. This varied with the organisation. Several participants also spoke of working with television and on radio. Although this was described as 'tough' it was never described as intrusive as the relationship with the print press. For some participants their organisation managed the press to the extent that apart from planned statements and agreed interviews the female leader, alongside all other leaders in the organisation, would be unlikely to face the press on a regular or unplanned basis. Another explains that all contact with the media has to go through a particular channel in the organisation. She described never being door-stepped and the only impact of her renown as the top female post holder in her organisation was being recognised when taking her children to the local rugby club.

For some participants, for reasons of independence or security, direct contact with the press is avoided completely. This participant commented that this however, makes no difference to the print press. The participant describes the unexpectedness of exposure saying, "*about two weeks ago I hit the headlines three times in a week"* and then reflected that in her profession, for example *"…as a barrister in court you are always on the stage …… that can be a pretty public stage with the worlds press there following every witness…"* This participant was protected by the organisation but described herself as vulnerable through the performance element of her work.

Two participants running large public-sector organisations report their approach to managing the press as being open and transparent as possible in what they describe as a political world. One explained that *"what has given me my cover here... is that I took the organisation over when it was in a really difficult place and we're making improvements".* She describes her approach as:

> *"... my philosophy has never been to hide from the media. So, I don't put myself out, but I will know for example the health editor of the [X press]. I know the guy that leads BBC London for health. The news is out there in an instant. You just have to be part of it and manage as best you can."*

On the basis of improvements and a planned approach this well-known CEO says, *"I suppose I've not been in a position in my career where I feel I have had any very critical negative media comments about me as a person… they haven't been on my doorstep."*

Another senior leader in the public sector however had suffered from extensive press intrusion. She describes building resilience to this pressure through strong supportive relationships across several sectors, good support from personal work teams, the building up of a strong skill and integrity base, and not staying in a job too long.

> *" Try to build up a team so that it [press attack] is less personalised and you are not always fronting the bad news… they get that you are being well supported… it would be hard to maintain your resilience without strong support from the team."*

Another Chief Officer also described the importance of support from colleagues in the face of the latest inaccurate attack by the Daily Mail where they had connected with her to say "w*e know this isn't you".* One woman explained that her lived experience of being in the eye of the press for many years was strange. She said *"...it's difficult to live with. I feel that there's my public persona over there which is a different person, it's like having an out of body experience".*

This participant goes on to say that she has learned to manage this experience over the years.

> *"I've become less sensitive. Years ago, I would have been in floods of tears, I would have been distraught, now I know these things happen and it doesn't really matter, it's not true anyway, so what's the problem."*

Another described learned resilience as *"There is something about my personality which is, 'you will not do this to me. I will make my own choices, don't think you are going to put me in a position where I am going to do X or Y or Z'."*

There were contrary views of relationships with the press. For example one participant described the difficult choices which had to be made as she approached the top job in the company. An excellent professional record had already taken her to executive FTSE board status, but she recognised that this may not be enough to succeed to the CEO post in a listed company. At that point when the public, and the non-specialists needed to be aware of her capability she considered that maybe what was needed was a press profile.

> *"It's not about being found. The Head Hunters, if you know the Head Hunter network, you'll be found. That's not the problem. The question is what do you need to exhibit, how do they identify it and what's the perception of whether you're going to lead. And some people are quite good at building a profile, and I don't really think it's a social media profile, it's a press profile… I certainly think I would benefit from having a media presence. Yes, almost certainly."*

Some participants reflected that the impact of adverse press exposure, the hounding of talented senior women such as described above until they leave their career can mean a loss of talent in the longer term to business and the community. The impact of press exposure also brings with it a reluctance to use talent to the full. One participant described her position as

> *"…now I'm cautious… I'm refusing roles because whilst me being on the board doesn't attract much attention, me leading a board would... I would bring all this (press) baggage."*

In summary, senior executive women in this study reflected that, the result of choices made by those impacted by fear of negative press exposure means there is a considerable loss of talent and shortening of tenure at the top levels in the UK, at board level or the equivalent in the public sector.

15.3 Building Resilience

With two exceptions the participant group used the word *"resilience"* at least more than once to describe their sustained progress towards top jobs and retaining their positions at the top. One participant did not use the word but on reflection said this was so integral to the culture of her organisation, *"one of our pillars"*, that she did not think to mention it but describes the strain.

> *"I'm very resilient and I'm physically very tough… it's all resilience isn't it. In the jobs where I have been required to be…literally physically strong I've had to work really hard to sustain it. Really hard."*

Participants described building resilience in a range of areas including managing childcare, managing men in the workplace, managing the physical demands of the job, managing bias and challenge, and managing the press. One participant defined resilience as *"having to withstand pressure, withstand loneliness, withstand managing a family, a business…."* All recognised that becoming resilient was a key factor in following a successful career path to the top and then maintaining that position. There were a range of ways in which participants described building resilience, but two themes emerged strongly.

Physicality

Many participants described physical and mental manifestations of pressure and stress, and there were some extreme descriptions of what happened before resilience was established

"... when I went on the [X FTSE 100] board, I was, I did it for eight or nine weeks and lost the feeling in my toes. Ended up in an MRI scan, really quite extreme, and I just, I'd overcooked it. It wasn't anything fundamental I just over did it. And I think you learn, that the thing I have found... is the link between the mind and body, using mindfulness. I walk a lot now... because it never goes away... it's always there."

"There have been periods of my resilience being tested to the very limit, and whether it's a combination of simply too much to do, that's part inflicted... I haven't done a very good job of managing myself at times... and came close to the edge of, can I do this anymore."

There was a remarkable congruence across the group around the use of physical activity to build resilience. Figure 14 captures some of the range of physical activities rigorously pursued and recommended by the participant group working in all sectors and a range of organisations.

Figure 14: Building Resilience
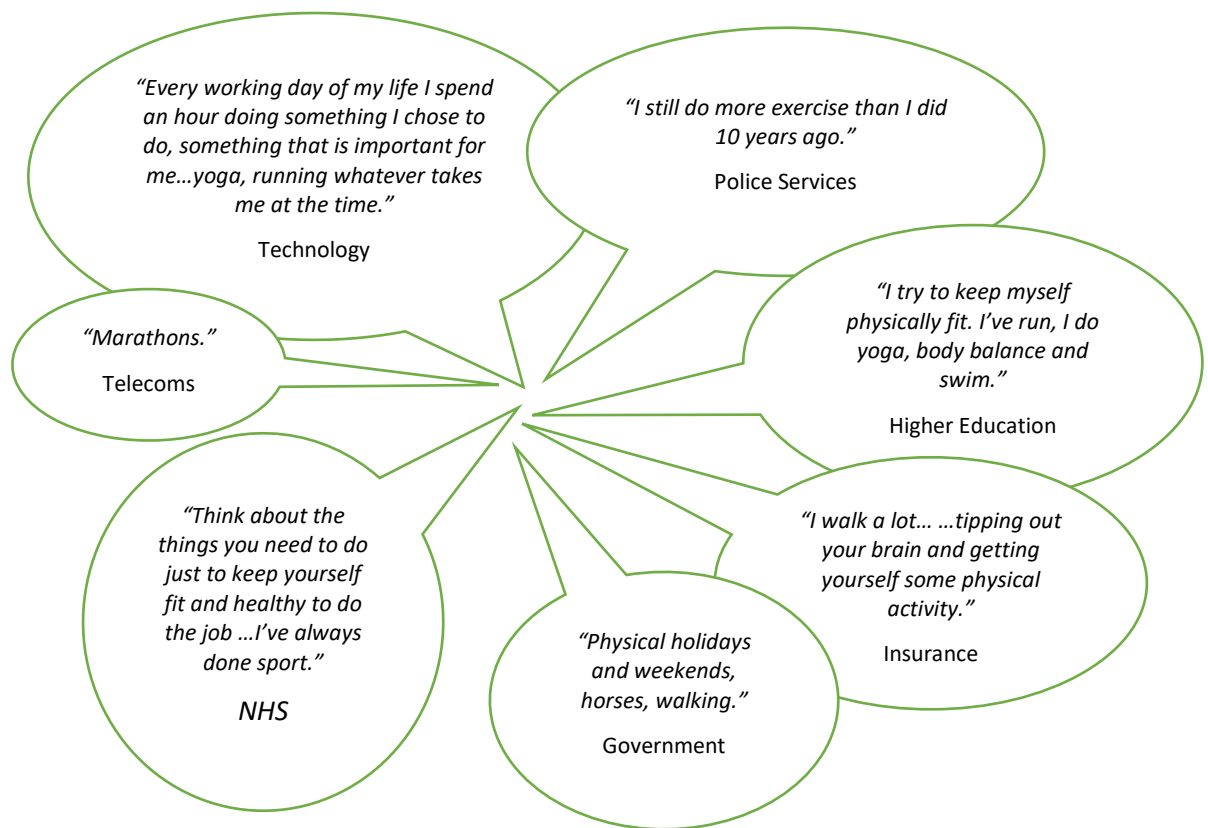
Family Support

A strong theme emerging from the data related to the important element of family in enabling resilience to be built and to be maintained. More than half of the participant group referred to the

quality of supportive family relationships and this linked in many cases to enabling a full life outside the workplace with positive impact on resilience in the job.

> *"What's helped me was having a family life… you're able to step out and be mum and nobody worried whether you were an important person in the NHS because you were just getting on with life."*

Part of the emerging theme from the data which related to building resilience and the importance of family, linked to an ability to be able to engage and disengage across family and work life; to be able to cut off very quickly. One participant recalled staff talking about taking days during a holiday to unwind. *"I unwind between the office and the tube station",* she said. The value of developing an ability to engage and re-engage was further explained by a participant as, *"when I've dealt with it I re-engage very quickly with whatever domestic thing I'm doing. I can remember taking phone calls sitting down on the snow on the piste."*

Women executives in the study were keen to offer practical advice and wisdom on managing at the highest level in the workplace. Such advice in proactively building resilience included *"know which battles to fight"*, *"weigh in the balance your responsibility to the organisation and your responsibility to yourself"*, *"allow conversation in the workplace about caring responsibilities"*, *"allow colleagues, both male and female, to give support"*, *"know you are doing the right thing"*, and most commonly mentioned was *"have confidence in your own judgment".* Some participants talked of keeping a sense of perspective. One top post holder explained *"I think that because I had a traumatic upbringing with a father dying and some of the other things I think I can keep things in perspective".*

15.4 The Pipeline

The purpose of pursuing an abductive research enquiry and a subjective ontology was to ensure that I was able to listen to women in the participant group, hear their realities and lived experiences, and what they wanted to say on the research topic. In almost all cases, whilst discussing the importance of resilience the women in the group, moved from describing building personal resilience and their own career paths to women in the workforce who may be the leaders of the future, the pipeline. An emerging theme was the developing focus on helping those in the workforce to build resilience. There were common themes raised by several leaders of concern about the pipeline. In all cases the pipeline was discussed in relation to securing the best talent at the top of organisations. The issue of balanced gender in relation to the issue of equal rights was not raised by this group.

For some women there was recognition that in their organisation the pipeline was poor. This was referred to as being a hidden issue because of heightened press interest in the few women who

achieved top posts. It was considered that the impression given by the press that there are increasing numbers of women at the top in all sectors is inaccurate.

> *"...the supply line is quite narrow. You can get a false impression because a few very senior people are women. So, women have got to the top, but have they got to the top in numbers? No."*

> *"My generation of women are running out of time... there are one or two [women in the pipeline] but not enough in my opinion. I think we could end up with a gap if we are not careful... it's just a generational thing... some generations you get a few highly ambitious people who will fight their way through… we do have some able women... at the moment there aren't that many women in the pipeline."*

In some organisations such as the armed services the participant described a position where not all roles were previously open for women in all services although this changed towards the end of 2018. This had impacted on an already uneven although improved gender balanced pipeline to the top, where more women can demonstrate merit as required in the progression process. In some organisations such as higher education and the NHS the reverse is true, and the pipeline for women is described as much improved, so much so that some participants report that the issue of gender was not the significant factor in the pipeline.

> *"The pipeline for women … it doesn't stand out as a major issue to be honest... it [the NHS] has changed dramatically... Also [there are] a large number of female Chief Execs in Trusts… there are more women applying when you come to advertise for a Chief Exec"* (NHS).

> *"BME is a bigger worry for our pipeline currently. Is there a point when this [women in the pipeline] starts to reverse, we just need to keep an eye on that… We have to have the best talent…"* (Higher Education).

There was a consensus that the purpose of improving or maintaining an improved gender pipeline was a responsibility held by senior executive leaders in order to retain and gather the best talent for their organisation. In this context some participants shared their thoughts on the longer-term possibility of retaining and improving the contribution of women to the talent pool and I record some of those views here as an indication of the level of concern expressed by some of the participant group.

> *"People drop out in their thirties and one reason is practicalities and childcare, and once you've dropped out for five years it's difficult to re-engage… the support networks in the organisation are not there... there is a practical issue about companies supporting at that point so that talented women don't come off the trajectory... and for others who leave at that stage I think it is about disillusionment and culture."*

For some there was a recognition that there may never be many women in their organisation because of the nature of the job.
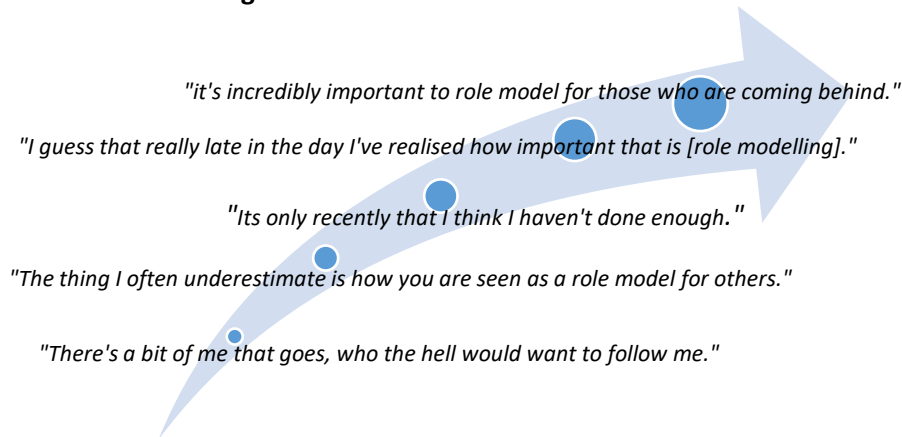
> *"...the core of [the service] is still the 24-hour response to emergences. Dealing with some really high-risk people at times, putting yourself in jeopardy... I can think of a whole host of reasons why women wouldn't want to do it. If you're not resilient you're not going to survive as a woman. You won't survive it as a guy, but particularly as a woman you won't survive it."*

There was also some recognition that younger women may be making different decisions. One participant describes the top of organisations in the private sector as, *"not a glass ceiling it's a kind of glass sludge. So, it just gets stickier and stickier".* There was a degree of resilience required to manage the 'sludge' which some women appeared not to wish to attempt. Another describes a *"marzipan layer... below the board level where you will find some reasonably senior women, but they don't want to put their heads above the parapet and go for jobs".* There was some evidence in the data of views that some progress could continue to be made in improving the pipeline for some women, but that it may be sensible to question whether major and sustained long-term improvement could be made.

> *"The bigger question for women in their 20's and30's (is) whether they want to do this sort of thing because it's quite unforgiving in terms of impact on you personally... talking to young women... many have turned round and said to their mum's who are in my sort of position, I'm not going to do what you do."*

Nevertheless, in spite of such concerns all the women in the group saw themselves as responsible for improving the talent pool and seeking, developing and retaining talented women. All in the participant group described a significant focus and level of activity by themselves in their roles as top female post holders, towards improving gender balance in the pipeline. For those organisations where there was not felt to be an issue of oncoming female executives, those in top posts nevertheless described themselves as engaging in improving or maintaining the pipeline of female talent. For a few participants this activity focused on women as part of a wider remit which included BME groups, people from less privileged backgrounds and LGBT groups. For most women leaders in this study however their focus was on other high potential women in the workplace and how they might assist them to progress. A strong concept in this regard concerned role modelling. Some women in the group described themselves as coming to recognise that whether they liked it or not, by virtue of the senior executive post they held, they were role models. For some this was an uncomfortable experience and they came late to this understanding. Figure 15 illustrates the slow learning for some in the participant group.

Figure 15: Role Modelling

"it's incredibly important to role model for those who are coming behind."

"I guess that really late in the day I've realised how important that is [role modelling]."

"Its only recently that I think I haven't done enough."

"The thing I often underestimate is how you are seen as a role model for others."

"There's a bit of me that goes, who the hell would want to follow me."

The developing importance of role modelling was described by one participant who reports on coming to this understanding after a struggle.

> *"…so now I think I have come to the realisation that it is not about me, it's about other people. Because otherwise I might not find it very comfortable or may not feel I am particularly worthy of it or whatever. The fact that it might help someone else, that's what's important."*

For several participants there was evidence in the data which suggested a variety of workplace behaviours which were employed to help those who looked to them as role models. One participant explains

> *"…part of my role is to help other women to see it's quite possible to take on these roles. I think that probably early in my career I would fire off emails late at night. I would do things that actually probably made some people feel they [executive board roles for women] weren't attainable… I've tried over the years to be much better at that, to be more disciplined... I don't want people to think you can only take on jobs if you work into the night and on holiday... otherwise you can come across as a female role model that's absolutely unobtainable to everyone else."*

One participant described leaving emails, unless mission critical, in the outbox until working hours, and setting in place a system in which emails to colleagues who were on holiday were deleted. Others were keen to press the importance of agreeing working hours which are relevant to each executive personally and role modelling flexibility. A participant on a FTSE board said

> *"I kind of like the culture of, you can do it when it suits you, and if people want to go home, put their kids to bed, have tea, do the bath and so on and so forth and come back on line at 9 o'clock, that's fine".*

This is echoed by the participant in the armed services who said

> *"if I'm honest I have always done what works for me… I'm going to be sending emails late at night. Nobody for a minute thinks they should be answering them at that time, and I'm really clear that's the way I operate… that's me saying, you find a way that works for you."*

Others focused on modelling an open attitude to feedback.

> *"Any sensible person is going to retain a really open attitude to what other people feedback."*

One participant expands on this theme focusing on *"listening to people… leadership skills… a round-the-table way of working".* The increased element of listening as part of a pattern of leadership modelling was repeated in various forms through the participant group. The participant in financial services describes her own development in this area explaining:

> *"…as I've got older I've got better at listening and I've got better at giving other people space… one of the challenges of leadership I think is that actually giving people space to grow… you should be working your way out of a job. Weak leaders hold on to talent… strong leaders make sure that talent develops."*

With reference to any kind of role modelling one participant describes practical difficulties in a global company. She explains that in telecoms, in her lived experience, women are so under-represented, that it would be difficult for women in the workforce, in senior management positions in her company, to actually find a woman who might have a positive impact on your career. She says that to work close enough to another woman to experience role modelling would be quite exceptional. From a social perspective she explains further that it is hard in a global company for women of a similar senior executive status to bump into one another in a social context, this would be rare. Some barriers to role modelling on a personal and a leadership basis were described as currently very difficult for some women in the pipeline often due to location but also due to there being few women in the workplace at board or equivalent levels.

Mentoring Others

Mentoring for the women in the participants group is discussed in section 12.3. In this section I consider the findings related to the participants mentoring of others. As in their own mentoring experiences, although women in this study are engaged in mentoring others it is unclear how this activity is defined. All the women in the participant group, except for one, spoke of engaging in mentoring other women in the workforce. The exception was a participant who reached out to other women only through personal sponsoring. She explained that she had no confidence that mentoring on an individual basis was useful. Therefore, her activity was focused entirely on spotting talent and bringing it forward through sponsoring individuals which she did extensively across a number of companies. There was no evidence that any of the leaders who did describe themselves as mentoring

other women had been trained in mentoring; all described the activity as 'informal mentoring'. There was no evidence from the data that informal mentoring meant other than unpaid and non-contractual mentoring. One participant spoke of only offering short term mentoring and requiring some agreement up front on what desired outcomes might be. This was an exception. Other participants indicated informal meetings with no formal agenda.

The range of activity in the data which was considered to be 'informal mentoring' was wide. Table 12 below illustrates some of the activities described as informal mentoring to illustrate the range. The table captures where participants have described informal one to one mentoring and also mentoring as part of organisational schemes.

Table 12: Activities Described as Informal Mentoring

PARTICIPANT	PERSONAL MENTORING	ORGANISATIONAL MENTORING
A	Cognitive diversity important. Mentoring personally those (including men and BMA leaders) who have got something to offer to the organisation.	Previously part of the organisation's women's mentoring scheme.
B	25 mentees; giving advice on business.	Every week talking to some young women about business; part of 'speakers for schools'.
C	Mentors women regularly including how to deal with sexism appropriately. Talks about her areas of failure as well as success.	
D	Informal mentoring with lots of people (men and women) responding to their failures as well as successes. Actively supporting women identified as having talent.	
E	Equally working with men and women.	Targeted interventions specifically BME individuals, both men and women.
F	Mentoring individually on an informal basis, career advice, and advice on managing failure as well as success. Looking for talent. Mentoring the white boy from the sink estate as well as the privileged female.	Developing a mentoring programme for the organisation. Leading mini job application workshops.
G	Volunteered as a coach/mentor for a previous organisation.	
H	Mentors a lot of people. Often a mutuality of relationship. Active mentoring for other women in the pipeline.	
I	Personally, available to mentor across the whole grade spectrum informally. Time limited mentoring because more demand than could be managed. Mentors senior people looking to move to the top jobs.	Mentors through the formal networks in the organisation. Time limited because of huge demand.
J	Tries to encourage women coming through the pipeline.	

Some participants in describing mentoring described personal support such as *"I think it's important that people can just off load. So, people cry in my office all the time... because they can't cry in the office next door… I do a lot of that".* There was no evidence that a large number of the participant group emotionally supported or mentored in this way. The data did not indicate that the informal mentoring such as described by the participants in Table 12 was other than internal to the organisations led by the women in the group, other than where it is referred to in the table.

15.5 Summary: Resilience

This chapter describes data which the participant group chose to raise as important. The major emerging themes related to the development of resilience and the focus on activity engaged in to improve both their own resilience and the resilience of other women in the workforce, thus retaining and improving talent which women brought to the table. The chapter illustrates how resilience was built, when resilience failed, and also a secondary theme about the pipeline of talent, how this varied across organisations and how it was viewed in the long and short term by participants. Role modelling and mentoring were activities described by most participants as significant factors in their focus on improving talent and building resilience. This chapter includes some of the deeply felt concerns and fears of some participants about possible long-term lack of progress towards gender balance in their sectors and the impact of the print press on choices women appear to be taking in the current working environment.

PART FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: DISCUSSION

> *"It's still disappointing when you see how young women view their ambitions... to be a CEO it's really hard work and you really have to want to do it. For women... that can be a problem"*
>
> *Moya Greene, previously CEO Royal Mail in The Guardian 28 October 2014*

16.1 Introduction

The participant group in this study are powerful women who wished to contribute to the subject of this research. They had much to say and as Chapters Ten to Fifteen illustrate there was consensus on several emerging themes. In this research I have used methodology and method, abductive enquiry and interview, best suited to explore a puzzle, the phenomenon of persistent very slow progress towards executive gender balance at the top of UK organisations in most of the public and all of the private sector (Jewell and Bazeley, 2018; Doldor, Sealy and Vinnicombe, 2018). I have listened to women in top jobs describing their lived experience and I have presented the findings through the voices of those women. The findings in Chapters Ten to Fifteen present emerging themes, note dissonance and record organisational difference and similarity. Those chapters reflect the ontological assumption of this study (Duberley, Johnson and Cassell, 2012), that as researcher I listened to the realities of the women interviewed, their lived experience. In this study I report findings reflecting the relative importance which issues were accorded by the women in the group. This chapter seeks to reflect the epistemological assumption which underpins this study (Johnson and Duberley, 2000) and moves to an interpretation and discussion of those findings. I am mindful that any imposed structure for this discussion is artificial. In reality the emergent themes overlap and intersect, and in addition there was a clear indication that slow progress towards gender balance at the most senior level in all sectors lay in the multiplicity and complexity of factors which interact. However, the cyclical iterative approach of abductive research enquiry provided me with the opportunity to test my interpretation of the data through the second interviews with participants, and this has assisted me in presenting this discussion with some confidence of my interpretation in relation to the group in this study.

The presentation of the findings was structured according to In-vivo themes identified in the data, which were meaningful to the senior women I interviewed, and I use their words (Gibbs, 2013). My research objectives are to contribute to knowledge and practice and I return to these specifically in Chapter Seventeen. In this chapter I structure discussion by bringing those emergent themes in the data into, first a consideration of findings related to the research topics which arose from the review

of literature, and then to a discuss findings which I consider contribute to knowledge and practice which emerged from the data analysis directly.

The research topics which emerged from the literature review were incorporated into the participant interview prompt sheets (Appendix 4) and the participant information sheet (Appendix 3). Thus there was an opportunity for all participants to consider each research topic and also in the second interview to consider emerging themes and my interpretation of the data with regard to these topics.

The three research topics were identified through the review of literature (section 6.2) and these shape my presentation of part of this discussion. In summary these are:

> *Organisational Structures.* The structures of organisations which form the contemporary workplace and their impact on the advancement of women

> *Managing Talent.* Government focus in the UK has been predicated on the view that the larger the women's talent pool, the more extensive the women's pipeline and the more likely it is that women will move into the most senior executive roles. This topic also raises the issue of the impact of management interventions such as coaching on talent management.

> *Recruitment and Reputation.* Factors which influence recruitment to top posts and any importance accorded by women at senior executive levels to building personal reputational capital in addition to human capital as they approach senior executive positions.

As referred to above, this discussion also includes findings which emerged solely from the data and not from the review of literature. Therefore, in this chapter I consider major intersectional themes; the domestic contract, the impact of the print press, and the impact of the complexity of interaction between factors found.

The findings refer to the group of senior executive women who participated in this study and are not intended to represent the views of all women holding top posts in the UK, nor do these senior executive women necessarily reflect the views of their organisations although in Chapter Seventeen I further discuss the issue of representativeness in relation to the high congruency of the findings. The research study is about individual lived experience and it is exploratory. The ontological assumption is subjective, and the epistemological assumption interpretive, therefore this discussion accepts that the realities described by the participants are their realities and I seek to interpret their lived experience within this understanding. Although I do not seek to posit hypotheses or present theories based on the analysis of data in this study, as referred to above the degree of congruence between the

participants across several themes is high and makes a powerful statement about the views of some women at the top in both the public and the private sector in the contemporary workplace. Therefore, I discuss findings indicative of emerging themes which may be relevant to a larger cohort and thus may contribute to the extant body of knowledge and to practice.

There is a degree of congruence in some of the data which appears to be linked to workplace. This discussion indicates that there are themes which emerge in this study about the nature of some organisations, or groups of organisations, and their impact on the participants' career pathways to the top which may be indicative of organisations more generally. I link participants to their organisations in the findings from the data, Chapters Ten to Fifteen, where in describing some emerging themes and in this discussion the sector or organisation type is relevant. In other cases, congruence or dissonance around emerging themes is not linked to particular workplaces.

16.2 Organisational Structures

The literature review indicated that by the 21st century the workplace had changed or was changing significantly for many organisations and this was labelled by some as the development of a neoliberal workplace (Williams, 2013). In most corporate environments and in some public-sector work environments published literature indicated a shift towards flatter structures, project driven developments and the building of personal portfolios in place of hierarchical structures and traditional linear progression (Crowley and Hodson, 2014). In the public sector this change together with improved knowledge management capacity using the internet, resulted for many organisations in an imposition of targets and monitoring referred to in some academic literature as performativity (Benko, Anderson and Vickberg, 2011; Ball, 2003). In both sectors where changes were experienced the literature review raised the issue of possible career advantage for women who might use the opportunities presented in the new workplace, such as increased part-time working, more mobility between organisations, personal portfolio building, and reduced expectations that career progression would necessarily be hierarchical and within one organisation, sector or location. The literature review also raised the issue of increased complexity and pressure to perform (Williams, 2013; Ball, 2003; Ladkin, 2010).

For the group of participants in this study the neoliberal workplace as described by Williams (2013) and Benko (2011) was not a new environment but was experienced as a long established common organisational structure in the contemporary workplace. Eight of the participants had worked in traditional structures early in their careers and now worked within a neoliberal workplace structure

but none referred to this kind of workplace as particularly significant positively or negatively in terms of their career progression.

There was an interface to be managed between the Ministry of Defence and the armed services where the MoD, as all government departments, follows a neoliberal approach valuing entrepreneurship and the armed services who are more traditional and minimise institutional deviation (McAvoy and Burgess, 2017). This research indicates that elements of a neoliberal organisation were present in the armed services, in that female officers could gather a significant personal profile to assist them to move towards the top within an institution that the participant described as traditional and hierarchical. McAvoy (2017) focused on high ranking officers and found that those women experienced barriers in reaching the top posts. This research indicates that the armed services was an enclosed institution for reasons of security and task, but also that the pace of change towards better gender balance at the top was improving although the pace was very slow.

For most participants the neoliberal workplace was much less significant than the overriding impact of the financial crash of 2008, resultant budgetary constraints, and limitations on growth and flexibility. There was no evidence of a 'splitting and blaming' culture described in literature amongst executive women in a neoliberal workplace (Baker and Kelan, 2018). Evidence of progress of women in higher education being damaged by the neoliberal organisation of higher education institutions was not seen in this study (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009). All except one of the participants in this study were of working or middle class birth family background, and all except one had passed through university as part of their career paths. This study supports statistical evidence of the progress of women generally towards improved gender balance in the higher education sector (Oakman, 2016).

All participants recognised that in most workplaces senior leaders would be expected to have a portfolio or personal profile of some significance, to transport such a portfolio between jobs and occasionally between sectors, and to work alongside consultants and specialists in an environment competitive for scarce resources, thus supporting neoliberal organisational elements Carter was describing in 2001 (Carter, 2001). Some elements, transporting a portfolio across sectors and organisations, were not evidenced to a high degree in the data in the armed services and were least evident in the judiciary, although participants working in legal services earlier in their careers had successfully transported portfolios across sectors.

Acceptance that the neoliberal workplace in different incarnations, depending on the organisation or sector, was here to stay was a common factor in this research study. In organisations which remained traditional during the period of change, and have not changed very much since, participants

understood and valued some of the concepts of the neoliberal workplace and described efforts seeking to free up rules and regulations, for example facilitating re-entry for staff who were seeking working experience elsewhere for a period, and in increasingly welcoming staff from other sectors into the workforce. This applied for example to police services, hitherto very traditional and still hierarchical but where there was recognition in this study of the advantage of personal portfolios for the most senior leaders. In this case a participant advised that the organisation needed to address legislative and regulatory constraints on re-entry to allow staff to move to other sectors and return to a similar level of post and pension, thus properly taking advantage of the opportunity to build personal portfolios and broadening their experience. In the NHS there was evidence in this study that a broad-based portfolio of experience is advantageous and women who expect to work from bottom to top of a health organisation in the traditional way are unlikely to be successful at senior levels where that broad-based experience and individual portfolio is sought especially for senior executive leaders delivering organisational transformation. Within the NHS unusually, there was opportunity to establish a broad personal portfolio without moving to other sectors if desired, because of the variety of clinical settings, commissioning, developmental and other sectors within the NHS umbrella. This supports extant research indicating that opportunity for women has improved in the NHS (Sealy, 2016).

There are examples currently reported of women accepting top jobs who have extensive individual portfolios, and this applies to organisations which are neoliberal but also those which have been described by participants as in the main traditional and hierarchical. For example, the present Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police (not a participant in this study) retired and worked in the Foreign Office before being appointed to her current post. The development of individual portfolios and movement between either parts of an organisation or between organisations, appear in this study to be facilitated by the a neoliberal workplace although it is such a familiar concept for most participants that no senior executive leader in this study specifically referred to organisational structure as a key factor in their career journey, positively or negatively.

In legal services the organisational structure is hierarchical and here neoliberal workplace opportunities for women to progress such as project work, individual portfolios demonstrating experience in other sectors, or the follow through of individual career plans are rare for both men and women. The reason lies primarily in the nature of the business, the need for extreme confidentiality and security to deliver the duty of care placed on this service. Nevertheless, advantages of a less traditional workplace are understood and in some areas such as diversity training there is some flexibility. For the armed services this study indicates there is no such flexibility. The service is enclosed

within its own institution for reasons of security, team bonding and operational expertise, and evidence from the data indicated that this is unlikely to change. This does not mean that within the institution that is the armed services, there are not opportunities for choices to be made which allow an individual profile to be developed but this is more concerned with the desire for challenge and broad experience amongst women who are successful in reaching top posts through an established hierarchy and unique merit-based system.

The participants in this study were all established and very successful leaders in either the neoliberal or in the traditional workplace environments they had chosen. Leadership skill sets were different for different organisations. Several participants had been successful leaders in a number of organisations before accepting the appointment to the top job which they now hold. Leading in a war zone, a court of law, marketing internationally through teams across 20 countries requires different skills and the participants in this study each demonstrated a high level of success in their field. Similarly, leadership skills in meeting challenges such as financial crises, failing hospitals, violence and terrorism or political volatility all require different skill sets demonstrated by the participants in this study. The literature review identifies the concept of a labyrinth exemplifying complexity in the workplace (McDonagh and Paris, 2012; Eagly and Carli, 2007) and where soft skills and transformational leadership skills are required, which they suggest, may more align with a female approach. This research supports the concept of complexity in the workplace but there was no evidence that soft skills or focused transformational leadership styles were evident or valued. Some participants in fact expressed reluctance to be viewed as leaders who constantly led structural change and transformation and resented the fashion for high value placed on examples of achieving change in interviews or on CVs. This was echoed by leaders who had, in fact, achieved significant transformational change as not a key approach to improving organisational targets or business outcomes. This view reflects some recent literature describing a reluctance by women recently to be seen with a particular skill set related to gender (Coleman, 2011). In both traditional, and contemporary neoliberal organisational structures, the participants had progressed on the basis of strong personal attributes, competence, capability, credibility and confidence rather than gendered attributes. They did not for example exemplify soft skills or transformational leadership styles. The data in this research identifies findings more akin to the review of literature which described leading in a complex environment unrelated to neoliberal or traditional structures but to descriptions of societal and geographical complexities generally. *"Today's leaders are taxed with guiding their organisation through contexts rife with complexity, ambiguity and unknowns"* suggests Ladkin (Ladkin and Taylor, 2010, p. 239). The specificity of demands on leadership is also described by Ladkin "as *a socially constructed phenomenon constituted by different people in particular circumstances"* (Ladkin, 2010, p. 2). A recent report considering authentic leadership

describes well the attributes presented by the leaders in this research study (Hannan, 2017). Hannan (ibid) describes self-awareness, relational transparency, an internalised moral perspective and balanced processing as important sub-dimensions of authentic leadership in 2017. This describes a shift which may be facilitated by a neoliberal workplace and personal portfolios of transportable skills, but also firmly reflects the findings in this study about the specificity of the leadership challenge and the personal attributes required to deliver flexibility across changing and complex challenges in all workplaces. The challenge leaders in this study identified at the most senior level was not so much about workplace environments as the challenge of leading at board level displaying outward facing skills and responsibility for an organisation whilst holding few direct management controls.

Neoliberalism in its broader sense is summarised in the literature review at section 5.3. Generally, this ideology refers to the promotion of a market economy and the neoliberal workplace described above is part of this direction of travel. In this study senior executive leaders did not refer to neoliberalism as an ideology at all or to its negative or positive impact on their careers. Often neoliberalism is considered to be responsible for maintaining disadvantage of the working class or the middle class and for failing to allow people to rise from poverty through education (Livesey, 2019). In this study this was not found to be the case. Of the participant group two described experiencing extreme financial struggle in their birth family, and all the participants except one described themselves as from working or middle-class backgrounds challenging the assumptions of Livesey (ibid).

The more important theme for this discussion was the importance for many of the participants at the outset of their careers of accelerated management schemes to take them quickly into the upper levels of management, or into officer class. This responded to the personal attributes of this cohort and their easy boredom, restless curiosity for knowledge, and search for challenge, identified in Chapters Eleven and Thirteen supporting recent literature suggesting that women can be found choosing 'precarious positions' or high risk leadership positions (Glass and Cook, 2016). I consider the use of accelerated schemes is an important finding. It linked to the statements made by participants of the importance of a professional qualification early in the career, often in law or finance. One member of the group, the most senior woman in the UK in her organisation, chose not to be university educated, and this has implications for others wishing to progress without graduate qualifications via accelerated schemes for high potential employees. The importance of accelerated schemes applied to both the public and the private sector and this finding offers a contrast to the assumptions of Livesey (2015) that a neoliberal workplace predicated on a neoliberal ideology would seek to prevent people with less economic capacity, lower class backgrounds or poorer educational backgrounds from rising to the top. In spite of dire predictions of anti-neoliberal ideologists this participant group of powerful women

succeeded from working and middle-class backgrounds, with or without degrees, and often used accelerated schemes to gain momentum in the early stages of their careers.

Although neoliberal and traditional workplace structures were not found in this research to be cited by participants as creating advantage or barriers to career progression most participants had met the challenge of career breaks and inadequate re-entry practice by not taking long maternity breaks and not attempting to return to flexible hours or part-time working (section 14.8). In the USA career breaks or 'off-ramping' was a matter of concern and linked to a significant loss of capable women in the workforce such that a task force which included Lehman Brothers, Goldman Sachs and Ernst and Young was appointed to look into the issue (Hewlett and Luce, 2005). The task force found a significant loss of talent amongst women of all ages and at all stages in the workforce, due to off-ramping and of these many never returned either to the company they left or to the post they left, or to a full-time post at all. Particularly impacted were women 41-55 who off-ramped for caring reasons and were described as the sandwich generation caring for both elderly family members and children. The task force found that 93% women who off-ramped wished to return for financial, independence and altruistic reasons, but only 74% of that group actually returned and only 40% returned to an equivalent position. Similar issues were found to apply in 2010 except that the recession provided additional inducement to leave with tempting financial packages as workforces downsized and the work life balance did not swing in favour of returning for many senior executive women or partners in some firms (Anderson, Vinnicombe and Singh, 2010).

The USA study by Hewlett and Luce (2005) was revisited in 2010 to capture the impact of the recession (Hewlett, Sherbin and Forster, 2010). The number of off-rampers had reduced marginally, in part perhaps due to the new job shortage, but the most important change was that there had been a 28% increase in professional women with non-working husbands. This research found high levels of congruence between successful women in top posts and partner support. In general this research study reflects published literature in that only one participant returned after maternity leave to a part-time post and this arrangement ended when a promotional vacancy arose soon after her return which did not carry the opportunity to work part-time. For the rest of the group who had children, most took a short maternity leave and did not consider part-time or flexible working arrangements as an option for themselves. In this study most participants returned to the company, level and post they had left and legislation assisted in recognising this right through the Gender Equality Duty which became part of the Equality Act 2010 (Government Equalities Office and Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2010), whereas in the USA (Hewlett and Luce, 2005) few women wished to return to previous companies or posts, creating concerns about general unhappiness with the job before off-ramping. In

this study it was recognised that long career breaks can increase significant disconnect and reputational capital loss. This reflects some recent literature describing an increasing intent amongst women to integrate professional and social life, not to operate in two separate domains (Powell, 2019; Cheung and Halpern, 2010). For some organisations such as the police, regulations prevent return to a post of the same rank and pension, and in legal services where presenteeism was found to play a part in reputation building, absence meant a fight to regain a presence and a place in the hierarchy.

Summary: Organisational Structures

Exploration of the research topic considering the impact of workplace structures on the career paths of the women in this study indicates an established neoliberal workplace by 2017/18 such as Williams was describing as bringing change in 2013 (Williams, 2013). Most senior executive women worked within this structure, but none accorded opportunities for themselves as due to that workplace structure. Some of the advantages of the contemporary workplace described in Williams (ibid) and Carter (Carter, 2001) did not apply to this group. Part-time working was not considered an option or a desirable opportunity for any of the participants and location was determined largely by business location especially for top post holders; they tended to be London based. There was little choice at this level. There is no evidence from the data to indicate that flatter structures had brought advantage for women. For most senior executive women business structures were shaped by the challenge of severe budgetary constraints and business challenge experienced since 2008. At the top of organisations all the women in this study carried an extensive personal portfolio, including those in traditional organisations. The contemporary workplace structure most impacted on flexibility and where that portfolio may be used. For those in traditional environments particularly in legal services and the armed services a portfolio was key to internal promotion but for all other women in the group there was freedom to transport personal portfolios across organisations. This opportunity had been taken during the earlier career paths of several participants but for those established in top posts there was evidence that they were established in particular sectors beyond a certain point in the career path and workplace flexibility relating to sector or location would not determine their career paths from this point. There is no evidence from this research that neoliberalism as a wider concept had constrained the progress of women in this group due to class or financial capacity to pay. The participant group in this study exemplified progress from working and middle-class back grounds through a range of higher educational experiences. This may relate to findings of exceptional characteristics of those occupying top jobs in this study and their management of any barriers in their way (Chapters Eleven and Thirteen) and I discuss this more fully below (section 16.4.2). The more important findings of this study relate to the importance of accelerated management schemes. In considering the research topic related to organisational structures few structural barriers were

evidenced in the data except for issues of re-entry. The post holders in the study had met this challenge by taking very short breaks. This may not be a method of resolving off- ramping for women in the workforce of the future. Improved on-boarding and contact maintenance during absence such as recommended in the USA (Hewlett and Luce, 2005) may need to be considered.

16.3 The Talent Pool

The review of literature identified a national and international effort to improve gender balance at the top of organisations. This drive has been led in the UK by the government in relation to improving numbers of women on boards commencing with the Davies Reports 2011-2015 (Davies, 2011) and the recent Hampton-Alexander Reports of 2016 – 2018 (Hampton and Alexander, 2016). Quotas and legislation have been avoided for political reasons including not wishing to conform to European Union directives. As revealed in the literature review little progress has been made in the UK corporate sector with regard to executive women, although there have been more female non-executive directors (36.5% of the total) which accounts for some positive headlines. The Hampton-Alexander Report of 2018 shows the number of women on boards in the FTSE 100 as 317 out of 1,051, of which 6 were CEOs and 26 were other executive directors such as CFOs. As the review of literature indicates there has been varied progress in the public sector (Table 2). Government initiatives have been largely devoted to pointing out the business advantages of better balanced gender boards and this research also enquires into the slow progress of women towards senior executive posts for business reasons. The female leaders who participated in this study were without exception focused on increasing the number of executive women at the top of organisations in the UK for talent management and business reasons. This study reflects the direction of government and business leaders who are exploring the phenomenon that this research explores through an extension of the diversity debate to a conversation about performance and productivity, as well as the bottom line (KPMG, 2014).

The government through the Hampton-Alexander Reviews now employs stick as well as carrot and has extended the counting of numbers and publication of figures on the basis that:

> *"What gets measured gets managed and what gets published gets managed even better"* Ministerial Forward to Hampton-Alexander Review (2017, p. 4).

The most recent initiative in the UK, the Hampton-Alexander Reviews (ibid), requires more metrics from more companies on gender balance and anticipates that publication of those failing to appoint more women to Executive Committees and Direct Reports as well as boards will shame companies into action. This has not worked so far. At 2018 there were just 6 female CEOs of FTSE 100 companies, a fall back from the figure of 7 which existed for a short time in 2017. The Hampton-Alexander

Review's recent introduction of counting women sitting on committees reporting directly to the board acknowledges that there is a pipeline to consider and that gender balance will not improve, and the positive impact on business will not improve as hoped, solely by increasing numbers of non-executive directors on boards. National attention has turned to the women's pipeline (Doldor, Sealy and Vinnicombe, 2018).

The Women's Pipeline

There is an assumption in some literature (KPMG, 2014) that the bigger the talent pool, the stronger the pipeline and the more likely it is that women will move to board positions. This assumption is further evidenced by the recent initiative by the Hampton-Alexander Reviews which now annually counts numbers of women at levels just below boards, the Direct Reports or ExComms (Executive Committees). However, the literature review indicated clearly that a large female workforce is not necessarily linked to women taking up top positions, and sometimes has the reverse effect (Hauser, 2014; Mandel and Semjonov, 2006). In some organisations an increase in the number of women in the pipeline can increase the number of women being appointed to top posts (Oakman, 2016), and participants from higher education and the NHS in this study indicated that gender balance at board level was not an issue any more, other diversity issues such as BME representation were more pressing (Sealy, 2016). Kellerman (Kellerman and Rhode, 2017) confirm that women are moving into higher education leadership positions but that an increased number of women in the pipeline will not necessarily impact on improving this further. Published NHS human resource evidence supports a positive link between workforce, pipeline and board gender balance in that there is a very large female workforce, a healthy gender balanced pipeline and the NHS is moving steadily towards gender balanced boards (Sealy, 2016). The position in higher education and the NHS however, is not replicated anywhere else across this research study. Findings on the pipeline at section 15.4 indicate that several other factors are present which may prevent a gender balanced pipeline translate into gender balanced executive boards.

Participants in the corporate sector described a cohort of able and capable women who choose not to take top posts. One participant describes a glass sludge just below board level where progress for everyone is sticky and difficult issues have to be negotiated to reach board level. She describes this issue from a perspective of having been a member of 3 different FTSE 100 boards, and she indicated that many women remain at that level by choice. Another participant spoke of the 'marzipan layer' of women below board level whom she describes as not prepared to raise their heads above the parapet. The perspective of participants in this research describing most organisations in their experience, is not about women failing to reach top posts but more about women choosing not to go there. Sir Philip

Hampton in the Hampton-Alexander Review of 2017 speaks of the *"glass ceiling"* as being most conspicuous at point of transition of senior executives on executive committees, to the board (Hampton, 2017, p. 5). His reference to a glass ceiling indicates a view that there is a barrier which could be removed, and he presents the barrier as lack of numbers of women in the pipeline. This study indicates that may not be the case and instead indicates that many women in the pipeline choose not to apply for top jobs, not that they do not have the skills, capability or resilience to do a top job well. Therefore the link between a large pipeline of women and more executive women on boards may be flawed, or at best only a partial explanation for persistent gender imbalance at the top of many organisations.

Eagly (Eagly and Carli, 2018) come to consider that improving the gender balance at the top of organisations may not be about barriers in the pipeline or in institutions. It may not be cured by subjecting women to a rigorous significant leadership curricula (Kellerman and Rhode, 2017). *"If everyone has misdiagnosed a problem then one is unlikely to prescribe an effective cure"* (Eagly and Carli, 2018, p. 14). The reasons for the decisions women make not to seek top posts are not known but this research indicates some issues which influence those decisions. One of these is that some women understand well the demands of the top job and chose not to subject themselves or their families to that pressure and exposure. There is a growing volume of senior women observing this trend.

> *"Top jobs still usually require people to work 24 hours a day, seven days a week and many women just don't want to do that"* Virginia Bottomley, previously Minister for Health now Chair of Odgers Berndtson, in 'Corporate Leadership Barometer', Odgers Berndtson, 2017.

> *"Where are the Chief Executives of the future going to come from when 38 to 48-year olds are missing from the full-time workforce?"* Alison Brittain FTSE CEO Whitbread Group in the Guardian May 2015.

A recent KPMG study considers it a myth that women "*Don't stick it out to the very top*" (KPMG, 2014, p. 7) and claims that as many men as women choose to opt out. Some of the language is pejorative indicting that women perhaps cannot stick it out, or that 'not sticking it out' is a sign of failure, whereas other data in the report talks of women positively choosing other options.

In legal services a participant in this study expressed real concern that there was no women's pipeline, no-one behind her. She described a significant gap in women ready to step into vacant top jobs in this sector. Another participant explained that the press will focus on any woman achieving a top job giving the impression that there is a change underway. In fact, she felt this was far from the case. In police

services one participant expressed concern that the pipeline was fragile, and again an unrealistic press coverage of women in top jobs in the service gave the impression that the pipeline was rich and well populated with women keen to reach top jobs. She felt this was far from the reality she observed. In central and local government participants talked less of immediate concern although progress towards gender parity at the top was slow, particularly in the civil service. Awareness of the fragility of the women's pipeline amongst all participants was illustrated by the increasing activity of all the women leaders in this study to engage themselves in mentoring, in some instances coaching, and sometimes in sponsoring selected women in the workforce. There was also a degree of role modelling happening to encourage women in the workforce to feel a top job was doable (section 15.5).

The number of women at the top in the UK is small. This research, together with an increasing number of women in posts of influence such as those quoted above, suggest that the women's pipeline is in difficulty. That this may not be all about increasing numbers of women at executive committee levels below corporate boards is an important finding in this research. Two examples in the public sector where a healthy pipeline does appear to lead to increased numbers of women applying for top posts are referred to above and they are exceptions in this study.

Although this research did not set out to explore issues of pipeline, or explore why the women's pipeline may be more fragile than number counting indicates, I did set out to identify emerging themes raised by the participants themselves. Several strong themes emerged from the data unprompted which may assist in understanding in some way the reason for the fragility of the women's pipeline, why capable women in senior positions chose not to seek top executive posts. These include the impact of the press and the nature of some jobs.

The Press

The impact of the press, in particular the print press, was one of the strongest themes to emerge during this research (section 15.2). The press was an issue commented on by most participants as impacting on their career in some way, and also in their experience, of impacting on other women in the workforce. I did not find a body of published literature on the press and top post holders, although recently some papers are emerging (Williams et al., 2019; Bell and Sinclair, 2016) but these have tended to focus on well-known names as a source for study. De Anca and Gabaldon however explored top female post holders and the press in Spain and found there was no impact by media activity on the appointment process but did find a high level of media visibility on executives once appointed, especially in regard to the one woman appointed during their study (de Anca and Gabaldon, 2014).

The findings of this research indicate that pressure from the print press has influenced some senior executive women in the participant group to shorten their tenure in top jobs (to retire early), to choose not to apply for the top job even when they are encouraged by peers to do so, and not to raise their profile through for example speaking at national or international conferences because of the personal press attention this will attract. This in all cases went far beyond a common concern that the description of the dress may take up more press inches than what was achieved or what was said. Many women in the study spoke of the impact of press intrusion including negative and inaccurate reporting, questioning of family, and constraints on how they were able to do their job. Consideration of how the press would behave had been an element of not pursuing some senior posts. Some participants indicated that in their view the print press was particularly virulent where women were in top jobs. The findings in Chapter Fifteen (section 15.2) report that women in the participant group have several ways of managing the press, and some organisations are better at protecting senior male and female executives than others, the armed services appear to be the best, but overall the data clearly indicates that the print press accounted for a loss of talent. I interpret the data as the print press becoming a key element influencing the level of transfer from the women's pipeline of senior executive committees (ExComms) and Direct Reports to the board, and on turnover and on tenure at the top of both the public and the private sectors. It also became apparent from the data that there was a considerable loss of female talent to business generally after women moved on from top posts especially if the print press had influenced the decision to go. I explored this interpretation of the data with the participant group who endorsed this understanding. There is no published research to indicate a gendered effect by the press, or in fact any significant impact by the press on executive appointments. The negative impact of the press was equally passionately felt by many participants in the public sector as well as the corporate sector. During this research I covered a number of topics and listened to many lived experiences. I consider that discussion of the impact of the print press on career paths, career decisions, and families was expressed with the most passion, and in some cases distress, than most other subjects in my interviews with this group of participants.

Chapter Fifteen also records findings, by contrast, about how some participants sought to use the press to create a profile which was described as 'board ready'. There was some recognition that in the world of talent management that progress upwards in the pipeline required a degree of profile beyond the credibility and capability already established within the sector. In the corporate sector, boards were said by participants to be keen to consider applications from those who had a national profile and one participant sought to attract a positive national press profile in preparation for a FTSE CEO post. There was therefore some element of ambiguity in the need to attract a positive national or

international profile assisted by the press, to draw the attention of the board, executive search firms and nomination committees.

The Nature of the Job

There were some jobs, mostly in the public sector, where participants indicated that the very nature of the job precluded interest from a wide population of women. This issue referred mainly to jobs which required a significant amount of physical and mental resilience over and above the human and reputational capital, capability and credibility of most women progressing towards senior executive levels. For police services and the armed services, the issue of high risk and personal jeopardy featured significantly. Much can still be improved and participants in these organisations identified many such supports including mentoring by senior women figures, but although some women will take the challenge many will not choose a career in these organisations because of the nature of the job. This means that the issue of improving the pipeline in these organisations has additional challenges. It was significant that where there were issues in organisations in this research of night work, frequent changes of location, or long periods spent away from the family, in respect of months and sometimes towards a year, then there were also additional issues for those organisations attempting to increase the number of women in the pipeline. In the armed services changes mean that from 2017 women have the opportunity to do most work in this sector, including service on the front line. It is not yet clear if this will make a positive difference to the numbers of women in that workforce, or if this will translate into a more gender balanced pipeline and possibly to more women taking top posts in this sector. I was not able to find any published literature relating to the nature of the job, location, or unpredictable change, as an aspect of gender balance at the top of organisations.

Coaching and Mentoring

The review of literature indicated an exceptional rise in the use of executive coaching (Carter, 2001; Sherman and Freas, 2004) and this is borne out by this research. Also borne out by this study is the lack of definition, clarity of purpose, quality standards and understanding of mentoring and coaching activity which was identified in the literature (Rose, 2015; Ariss, Cascio and Paauwe, 2014), as discussed at section 5.9. This research indicates, at section 12.3, a high level of confusion across most organisations at a very senior level about the differential purpose of mentoring and of coaching. Several participants strongly defined for themselves, and for their organisations, what mentoring might mean and what coaching might mean but the definition was far from consistent across organisations.

For most participants the data indicates that mentoring was of less significance to them and of less value throughout their career than coaching. It was considered largely to be an internal activity at a low to medium level in the organisation. Views on the value of investing in mentoring varied across organisations which were managed by the senior women in the study. The data however indicates a very different view towards mentoring in terms of activity undertaken by participants themselves to assist women coming through the organisation. The data analysis summarised at section 15.4 demonstrates that many participants had come late to acknowledging that this activity was important to others in the workforce. Table 12 summaries mentoring activity undertaken by participants themselves and also inadvertently illustrates the lack of clarity in the data about what mentoring is. None of the participants who described themselves as mentoring other women had had any training in mentoring and many referred to 'informal mentoring' in recognition of possibly inadequate labelling of their activity in supporting other women. There were no contracts, few targets set, and not often time limitation set.

By contrast most participants used the services of a coach and this was very important to them. The data indicates clearly that coaches allocated through management development courses at any level were not found to be useful and relationships were not sustained beyond the course. Although of much more importance to the women in this study than mentoring, coaching experiences evidenced the confusion and lack of quality standards and controls, issues highlighted in the literature review (Leonard-Cross, 2010). In this research coaches were used for short term focused activity, or long term general personal support, and all stages between. Coaches were sometimes sourced from professional banks of coaches approved by the organisation, from professional executive coaching organisations, or through personal professional or sector networks. Some coaches transitioned from being friends and colleagues to coaches and back again, as required.

There is no evidence that contracts, objectives, monitoring or success measures were much involved. Trust was high, and data security was not questioned by participants in this research. The major consistencies identified in the data are that most coaches chosen were independent of the organisation to which the women belonged, although often funded by the organisation, they were all chosen by the executive women themselves. For most women coaching was an experience sought from a position of positivity and looking forward. In only two instances was coaching at this level recommended for women leaders, to address a difficulty perceived by the board; in one case this was a successful intervention of a matter of a month; for the other the CEO moved from her position following feedback from a coach and other difficulties. For some public-sector organisations coaching was a budget issue and only limited funds were available. For a minority of participants coaching was

not part of the culture of the organisation and was only just beginning to have relevance for the women's pipeline. It was clear from the data that there was considerable investment in coaching for most women in top posts in both the public and private sector, but there was no evidence that the investment was assessed in terms of success factors intended or attained.

Summary: Managing Talent

This research found that expectations of an increase in the women's pipeline, more women at Direct Reports level in the corporate sector or executive committees in the public sector, and the board, could be flawed. Only two participants in the study describing their experience of the NHS and higher education, reported a direct link between a recently extended pipeline and applications for board positions. For all other participants, their lived experienced was of a high number of experienced and capable women sitting just below board level who chose proactively not to seek top posts. Factors influencing this position, the 'marzipan layer', included the impact of the print press. The print press was found not only to impact on the numbers of women in the pipeline seeking top posts, but also on tenure in top posts and lack of business talent available to the nation on retirement. The nature of the job including personal jeopardy and long periods away from home have always impacted on women coming into the pipeline in these organisations and this appears to continue. This research indicates however that all the participants expected to work long hours, to travel internationally and to be away from home for long periods, but the impact of personal jeopardy and lack of control over flexibility in managing the job and travel was a greater issue. Press coverage of women who do take top posts was thought by participants in this study to mask the fact that such women are few. In published literature the impact of management tools such as coaching and mentoring was raised in relation to improving the pipeline and I found in this research that executive coaching was valued, much used, and helped women in top jobs mainly to achieve success on transitioning to those posts. Mentoring was less valued at this level. Coaching and mentoring experience described a pattern of confusion, and a lack of standards and controls as identified in the literature review (Leonard-Cross, 2010; Thornton, 2010; Rose, 2015). This issue however appeared to be of little concern to women in this study who were using executive coaching.

16.4 Reputational Capital and Relational Capital

16.4.1 Reputational Capital

The review of literature suggested that although human capital, knowledge skills and experience, were often presented equally by both men and women at board level, reputational capital offered by applicants may make a significant difference in the final selection for senior executive board posts, especially for CEO posts (Singh, Terjesen and Vinnicombe, 2008). Singh and Thorenson (ibid)

considered reputation and status such as Oxbridge connections or listings in Who's Who but concluded that other factors were more likely to be of account and constitute a better understanding of reputational capital and why such low numbers of women were appointed to available executive posts in FTSE 100 companies each year of their study, 2001 – 2004. I have explored in this research whether there were such 'other' factors. In published literature an element of reputational capital is sometimes described as social capital (Doldor and Vinnicombe, 2015; Doldor et al., 2012) which refers mainly to networking and successful liaison with executive search firms through this means. I refer to networking below because the data indicates that this was a useful mechanism for some participants to extend their reputation. In this discussion of reputational capital, I refer to a wider understanding of the phrase to include as well as skills and competencies (human capital) and social capital (networking), a reputation for deeper and broader business knowledge and experience, successfully meeting challenge and out of sector experience. I explored the concept of reputational capital with the women in top jobs who participated in this study with reference to their current posts and also their reflections and observations related to previous posts.

The rise in importance of company reputation was identified in the review of literature as a critical factor in enhancing business effectiveness, and the importance of that reputation was in being perceived positively by external sources (Fombrun, 2005; Logsdon and Wood, 2002). Company reputation can be measured in various ways, such as share price, but other measures are becoming equally important. Corporate Social Responsibility is a factor in building company reputation (Brammer and Pavelin, 2004; Fombrun, 2005) and the reputation a CEO brings to the board is key (Bear, Rahman and Post, 2010). One participant in this research enquiry was on the board of a company doing well on the list published regularly by the Reputation Institute and for her, and her business, she said that reputation was everything.

Company or organisational reputation and personal reputation often exemplified a tension in the data. I interpret an emerging theme in this research as the personal conflict, the tightrope type pathway, some women were describing at board level between building a personal reputation which may be transportable across sectors and organisations, and loyalty to the company or organisation reputation. For the top post holders in this study there is some evidence that they had, and would still, sacrifice building personal reputational capital if this did not entirely align with the company or organisational remit. The findings show a degree of ambiguity when participants were asked to discuss reputation building and there was a significant element of verbally synchronising their reputation with that of the organisation (section 12.2). The phrase 'personal reputation' caused difficulties and the data shows it was a phrase often handled with care or translated into 'getting results' or

'demonstrating competence' by participants. Similarly, many participants in this group struggled with the word 'ambition', not liking to be seen as personally ambitious, and translating this into conscientiousness or seeking job satisfaction.

Nevertheless, it is evident from the data that for all participants, there were no exceptions, considerable time, energy and care was expended in building personal reputational capital which would take them forward on their career paths. This was evident, for example, in the way many participants described advising women in the pipeline not to 'travel too lightly' as reported in Chapter Fifteen, and to acquire experience and learning which was both broad and deep (section 13.5). The data indicates that women in the study advised others on the basis of personal experience to build their reputation beyond acquiring competencies linked to the current post or organisation. Where they described their own journey, they described making and taking opportunities and seeking challenge to personally progress and to build a strong reputation, or in the case of one participant a strong 'profile'.

Common targets emerged and were shared by all the women in the group, as they strove to be seen during their career journey as increasingly credible and able to deliver on tasks. This was described in this research data in the words of participants as building a reputation for 'competence and credibility'. Later in the career pathway building reputational capital for most participants took on an outward facing perspective, and participants spoke of continual learning, re-learning, and developing a reputation for having broad experience often through valued links with other organisations, and also a depth of understanding of place in terms of the organisation in a national or international setting, a strategic capability.

Commonly employed mechanisms emerged in the data which were used to build personal reputational capital beyond the company or organisations. These included networking and sponsorship but not generally the take up of non-executive director roles or through social media.

Networking

A high level of networking was undertaken by participants in this study. The focus of networking activity was described by participants as moving over time from internal to external networks and, as findings at section 12.5 show, networking for most of the women in the study who were already at a high level in the organisation occurred constantly and had also been a prime focus of activity before appointment to the most recent post. The aim of networking was about learning and becoming known outside the organisation or sector in which they were already reputed to be capable, skilled and successful. This finding supports published literature where the importance of women engaging in

networking was identified (KPMG, 2014) along with the importance of becoming known through networking to Head Hunters or executive search firms (Doldor et al., 2012). Doldor et al. (ibid) suggest that leveraging a reputation via networks is a key activity and this research supports that view. For many participants in both public and private sectors engaging with Head Hunters and investing in building reputational capital with this group was important. Networking in order to build a reputation that is board ready was an important factor in the corporate sector, being reputed to have extensive skills and experience by members of other boards and demonstrating through networking a high level of communication skills. For some public-sector participants networking, although undertaken positively, was seen as an extra activity rather than an intrinsic activity in becoming board ready. However, external networks were extensively used by most public sector participants in this study to consciously gather personal support, for learning, and at the same time become known outside the immediate organisation. This study indicates however that participants' decisions to consider a top post when offered were mostly influenced by emotional considerations such as 'liking' the company or responding to a request from a respected colleague. Almost all participants stressed the importance of networking to enhance the reputation of the company or organisation and only considered the activity as successful if those dual aims were well met.

Sponsors

Both public sector and private sector participants described the importance of sponsors and the growing use of sponsors as key to building reputational capital and enabling women to become visible. This research supports the review of published literature which described sponsorship as an important aspect of reputation management (KPMG, 2014; Hewlett et al., 2010; Robinson, 2016). Hewlett (ibid), the President of the Centre for Work Life Policy, reported sponsors as more effective than mentors. Sponsors were both men and women and were always senior. In a world where there were few women, male sponsors were the larger group. A participant in this study described sponsors as people with power who could make things happen. Most participants actively engaged in sponsoring others in the workforce, also with the aim of encouraging talent. Most participants referred to their support of women in the workforce in this way, but also of others such as BME members of the workforce, with the aim of gathering the best talent and introducing diversity at all levels. Sponsorship was an issue raised in the second interviews with most participants as it had emerged as a strong theme by several in their first interview. Most participants spoke positively about their sponsors especially in regard to opening doors and making opportunities for them and valued them highly. There was acknowledgment that this was a key tool in progressing quickly along a chosen career path, deemed by most of the participant group as more important than coaching, mentoring and networking. There was caution expressed by some participants working in public sector organisations and a distinction

carefully made between sponsorship and favouritism and there was a reflection of the tricky path in the corporate sector for sponsors and women being sponsored by older and more powerful men (Hewlett et al., 2010). More than 8 years on from Hewlett in the UK most of the women in this study talked easily and positively about sponsors and sponsoring. The exception in this research was the armed services where the term sponsorship was not used and support and encouragement were intended to come from senior officers; promotion was rigorously on merit.

Social Media

Much of the published literature researched social media in relation to company marketing opportunities (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010) or personal branding by companies of senior executives (Karaduman, 2013) to enhance the company image. Assessment of the risk appears to be measured in terms of risk to the reputation of the company (Pekka, 2010). This research reflects the trend in published literature which describes a low level of engagement by participants on a personal basis. Figure 8 illustrates the findings of this study that the administration of access to social media for most organisations is through direct posts by the organisation itself and in some cases with personal posts presented 'as though' directly from participants, but in fact placed by the organisation on their behalf, and controlled by the organisation in terms of frequency and content. Where there was personal use of social media it was mostly through Linked In and the women in this participant group for the most part accepted that their Linked In profiles were in the main poorly kept and not up to date. Most participants in this study were reluctant to use social media for personal communication often expressing a degree of incompetence, but also there was a strong feeling of risk both personal in terms of safety and professional in terms of risk to their reputation associated with private information becoming public. Facebook was avoided by most participants. A participant from the NHS used Twitter regularly posting personally with a view to communicating with an exceptionally large workforce of about 16,000 staff, and she described this as positive and successful. All tweets from her were positive and bad news was not communicated by this means. This was an unusual commitment to social media amongst this research group. None of the participants used social media to enhance their reputation directly. Some participants were adamantly against any use of social media for this purpose, others were more relaxed. For some participants the personal risk for any woman using social media was felt to have increased, and this was considered to particularly apply to women already in the public eye through their jobs status. Social media was not found to have been used by women in this study to leverage their reputational capital.

Non-Executive Directors

Experience as a non-executive director (NED) was raised by one participant only, as a positive tool in building reputational capital. This was with reference to her desire to experience other FTSE 100 boards before deciding on a move to a board of choice. She has now made the desired move and is no longer a NED. The literature review identified government initiatives (Davies, 2015; Hampton and Alexander, 2016) which focused on increasing numbers of NEDS appointed to FTSE 100 boards as evidence that there had been a significant advance towards gender balanced boards, resulting in more than 30% of female board members by 2018 being NEDs (Hampton, 2018, p. 44). The attitude to NED appointments in this research is significant. More than one senior woman in the participant group had a negative view of the role of NEDs in terms of influencing leadership of companies and organisations, some linked the rise in NED appointments with a negative view of 30% targets promoted by the 30% Club (KPMG, 2014, p. 1) as artificial and not fundamentally assisting women to progress to executive posts. Others said they would consider taking a NED role themselves as a waste of time. There appeared to be a disconnect between progress towards balanced gender executives, and women who wished to experience boards as NEDS. The women in the participant group valued NEDS on their own boards as extending viewpoint but separated this from the issue of gender balanced executive boards and leadership. This is a significant finding in assessing the success measures of initiatives to progress towards balanced gender boards so far where progress has relied on increasing numbers of NEDs. "*NEDs spend 21 days per year on company business whereas executive directors spend 220*" (Doldor et al., 2012, p. 33), thus indicating a significant difference in the capacity of NEDS to influence boards and executive decisions. The intentions and aims of gender balanced boards summarised in the introduction to this thesis (section 1.1) represent views identified in the literature review that a gender balanced board would enhance alignment with a diverse customer base, enhance economic and financial outcomes, attract executives from the largest possible talent pool and improve corporate governance and innovation. These are expressed differently in different research papers. In some, hoped for business outcomes are placed alongside hoped for diversity outcomes per se (KPMG, 2014, p. 24). The data in this research indicates evidence that neither of these aims is likely to be achieved by increasing the presence of NEDS at the top table. It is possible that only through improving gender balance at senor executive levels such as CFO, CEO and COO, might culture at the top shift towards inclusiveness and achieve the business objectives desired.

Summary: Reputational Capital

The data in this research indicates sensitivity around the concept of building personal reputational capital without confidence that this in no way conflicted with the organisation's reputation which was

considered paramount. However, the data shows that in fact all participants spent considerable energy in building personal portfolios and profiles, and thereby reputations. There was a high degree of consensus in the data about what was important, and participants shared this wisdom with women in the pipeline. Across the senior executive women in the research group there was investment in achieving a reputation for credibility and the competencies required to deliver within the organisation, but also and more importantly a wider and deeper reputation at a senior level demonstrating depth and breadth of experience, outward facing skills and continual learning. There were mechanisms employed with a high level of consistency to enhance reputations which included networking and the use of sponsors. This latter approach was assessed as the most important to the group as they moved towards top posts and the data indicates that this element was a fast-growing activity also orientated towards assisting women in the pipeline. Many in the participant group sponsored other women themselves. The opportunity presented by taking a NED post was not widely seen as a useful way of developing the required reputational capital for senior executive board positions, and social media was hardly ever used for this purpose.

16.4.2 Relational Capital

This section considers how women in this research study came to be appointed to the posts which they held. The importance of executive recruitment firms (ERF's) has been evidenced in published literature (Doldor et al., 2012) and this research study confirms that ERF's or Head Hunters (preferred words by participants in this study) play a part especially, but not exclusively, in the corporate sector. There are additional factors which equally influence successful recruitment to top posts for this participant group. Doldor (Doldor and Vinnicombe, 2015) reports human and social capital or networking to be key factors driving career paths which reach board level but considers that there must be 'other factors' which account for how women are recruited successfully. In this research I explored those 'other factors' in successful recruitment and also those factors which would persuade women in the pipeline or at Direct Report or ExComm level to choose to consider a top job. This research suggests that such factors may include elite characteristics and emotional choices. Women in this study who have chosen to take top posts display very similar characteristics, and recently published literature reports similar characteristics amongst senior executive women in the USA (Robinson, 2016). In addition, data in this research indicates emotional choice and relational capital to be a factor influencing whether or not women will step up to consider a top job and if so which posts might be considered.

Elite Characteristics

One of the strongest themes which emerged from this research relates to the characteristics which describe women in the participant group. The data illustrates traits which were not learned but which were part of the personality and make up of these women. I found that such traits ensured barriers and challenges were faced and well managed and determined choices made when opportunities presented. The data does not indicate in any way that participants in this study had not experienced discriminatory practices and barriers which other women had experienced. Chapter Eleven describes those character traits, and the subsequent challenges managed and overcome. Chapter Thirteen describes more fully the choices made to travel a career pathway to the top, driven by the same traits. A pattern emerged of a unique combination of traits which had taken these women to the top, and the degree of congruence between individuals in both the public sector and private sector, and across women in a range of organisations in both sectors was significant. It is also of significance that the findings in this study, that combination of strong personality traits, are strikingly similar to the combination found amongst a group of senior executive women in the USA (Robinson, 2016). Key amongst those characteristics or traits and common to almost all participants in this study were:

> Clarity about what matters: a high degree of focus on finding the right area personally in the career spectrum which unfolded in early years and making changes until the right post in the right area was found. Part of this search was to identify a job which would offer a high degree of job satisfaction. This trait often prompted later periods of extended tenure followed by changes of jobs within the chosen field seeking to influence 'what mattered'. This trait did not evidence any early defined long-term goals or ambitions but more a choice of an environment which was continually meaningful and delivered job satisfaction.

> Boredom and Curiosity: a low boredom threshold for this participant group was highlighted, even to the extent that repeating tasks was not acceptable, combined with a very high degree of curiosity about what was possible, how things could be done and improved upon. This trait drove the swift and upward movement of participants.

> Self-knowledge and Capability: this was a trait which signified early consciousness of personal high levels of ability. All the women in the study were highly intelligent and had a high level of communication skills. This data indicates that for most there was also a high level of leadership skill and emotional intelligence. These traits drove women forward successfully and with confidence.

It was this combination of traits which emerged from the data as inherent to almost all participants and which they retained through their career paths. It was this package of characteristics more than anything else which was found to indicate potential for top posts. Part of that potential was exemplified by the participants in their understanding of barriers to progress and in their early development of resilience and successful management of challenge in the workplace. The data

describes almost all participants successfully managing the challenge of bias and unconscious bias, workplace practices and cultures; understanding the way merit and potential might be perceived; and managing direct or indirect challenges to women in the workplace including invisibility. The findings indicate that the participants dealt with barriers and challenges in different ways, often determined by the organisational environment they were working in, but the combination of traits and strengths described above, achieved progress for all in spite of barriers and challenge which are well documented in literature (Sandberg, 2013; Doldor et al., 2012; KPMG, 2014).

The characteristics of this participant group drove the choices they made along career paths they had chosen. The findings show exceptional congruence between the group in how they took opportunities offered, and if they were not offered how they created opportunities for themselves and the way in which they constantly sought personal challenge.

Relational Capital

Relational Capital Theory has developed as a body of work in recent years exploring the concept of building relational capital which has been accorded increasing time and resource by business as part of asset building programs (Moran, 2005; Kale, Singh and Perimutter, 2000). Since 2005 there has been an increasing focus on informal as well as formal relationship building across the business network to achieve well-documented performance differentiation in global supply chains where relational capital concepts have been applied (Cousins, Hanfield and Lawson, 2006). This is not dissimilar from the development of reputational capital building across the business community which has increasingly recognized the value of informal as well as formal connections to boost reputation (section 5.8). However, whereas reputational capital theory has extended the concept towards consideration of the value an individual can offer in reputational capital value terms, particularly potential CEO's, a review of the literature of relational capital theory identifies only a continuing focus on improving business outcomes in the form of market, power and co-operation between firms, although the advantage of local knowledge and innovation is recognized (Capello and Faggian, 2005). Lin (Lin, 2017) examining theories of social capital as a whole moves to identify the individual as an important level in the analysis (Lin, 2017, p. 30) but reinforces findings that individuals invest only for information, influence, social credentials and re-enforcement for their organisation.

A review of relational capital theory literature indicates a focus on achieving company advantage; alliances are built through informal as well as formal relationships with the specific intention of achieving leverage through relational capital (Collins and Hit, 2006). The literature indicates that this applies across the range from global companies to family firms (Zahra, 2010). There is common

understanding and a firm assumption that generating goodwill is about alliances, to gain strategic advantage even at the level of family firms (Zahra, Ibid) and this is a position which has consolidated over the last two decades. There is increasing activity around building relational capital through informal connections in the last decade but the concept underlying is about gaining company advantage and ultimately improving business outcomes in a competitive environment. This research indicated that in both the public and the private sector a part of top post holder's activity is orientated to building relational capital, often through networking, for the organization (section 12.4) and this supports current relational capital theory.

However, this research extends the concept and the theory of relational capital and finds that there is an element of relationship building which is not orientated towards organizational outcomes but which is about building personal individual relational capital and which is of importance at the point of determining whether women chose to accept top posts, or not. This has theoretical and practical implications for organsiatons wishing to recruit women to top posts and for executive search firms. For companies and ESF's wishing to recruit women to top posts this may mean an account being taken of the high value of individual personal relational capital accorded by women at or approaching top posts, and how such women can be successfully targeted.

In this research in addition to the importance of length of tenure, resilience and success in previous posts the route to the top for the women in this research group also indicated a combination of being well-known through reputation and of building an extensive range of personal relationships; personal relational capital. The latter element was of importance. More than half of this participant group were approached personally by someone they knew and asked to consider a top post which they later accepted. In one case a personal approach meant a board post was accepted by the participant after she had previously rejected it and for another a personal approach meant accepting a CEO post reversing a decision made to retire. Relational capital worked both ways. The building of personal relationships emerged from the data as a key lever in becoming a candidate for a top post of the participant's choice. In this study senior executive women described an extensive and solid network of people they 'liked' and would work with. Most of the invitations for top posts came from colleagues or senior executives, who had previously worked with the participant and understood the skills and leadership potential on offer. Of the participant group most had not made an application for a post for many years; only two had been in competition for the post which they now held. Positive relationships had made them targets for job vacancies which arose. Many of the participants in this group were sought out by respected senior colleagues and encouraged to take a senior executive

position, or top job. Some were approached by a Head Hunter, but this was a minority group. This finding is contrary to the report commissioned for the EHRC from Cranfield University (Doldor et al., 2012) and the implication that executive search firms were always of critical importance.

For the participants in this study as well as the stock of positive relationships, their personal relational capital, another factor was at play and that was the emotional choices made. Several participants had made their choices on the basis of 'liking' the CEO or responding to a personal invitation by a CEO or Chairman who had hunted them out. Others, in both the public and the private sector referred to not intending to take a particular senior post but responding to a personal invitation to work with someone whom they knew and 'liked' and being persuaded on that basis to take the job offered. Several of the participants described arriving in their current posts after seeking or being given personal encouragement by sponsors or colleagues they respected and 'liked'. Doldor et al. (2015) made recommendations to improve ESF recruitment by including ESF's in assisting, for example in alerting boards or nomination committees to diversity and gender balance issues. In addition, this research finds that for the women in this participant group it is as much about the women choosing to allow themselves to be put forward for a top job as much as boards considering female candidates. Most participants identified a combination of personal approach and the vacancy presenting an opportunity to influence and offer the job satisfaction they desired, with people they liked. There was no evidence of driving ambition for executive posts at the top of organisations per se. Recruitment to top posts was successful for the women in this research group on the basis of personal individual relational capital as well as human, social and reputational capital.

For the some of the group appointment to one of the most senior posts in the organisation was a combination of personal relational capital, and confidence to put themselves forward for the post they now held. Participants spoke of having the confidence to *"put their hat in the ring"*. This latter judgment was often made after personal encouragement from a 'liked' or 'respected' individual in the more hierarchical or traditional workplaces. In both traditional and neoliberal workplaces as well as having built human and reputational capital, and in additional to making an emotional choice, the element of confidence also relied on relational capital. Having the 'right to do' is a strong theme in this research.

> "*I am starting to be convinced I have a right to the top table in business*", Emma Walmsley just
> before her appointment as CEO of a FTSE 100 company (Telegraph, 2016).

This research indicates that participants who were already in top posts allocated a considerable amount of time to building relational capital for the purposes of the organization and this supports

extant research and the current concept of relational capital theory. This study, however, adds to the concept and extends the theory of reputational capital theory by identifying the building of personal relational capital by participants in this study who may then be approached by someone with whom they had a strong and positive work personal relationship and which in turn determined whether or not they would accept a top post which was available to them. This has a significant implications for the meaning of relational capital theory and it relevance in the contemporary workplace.

Summary: Relational Capital

In considering recruitment to C-suite or senior executive posts at the top of organisations in the UK, findings in this research lead away from the concept of structural barriers to the appointment of women to top executive posts, and towards identifying which women are likely to choose to take up a top post in the first place, and then which factors might influence those choices. An important finding is that the participant group occupying top jobs in both the public and the private sector in this research shared a combination of elite traits which assisted them to successfully manage challenge and barriers in order to place themselves in jobs they had chosen, to rise relatively quickly to positions of influence, and then to make choices about which top jobs they would consider on the basis of positive personal relationships they had forged throughout their career. Choices made were influenced by personal approaches rather than Head Hunter recommendations to boards, and emotional choices were often made on the basis of personal relationships. This research indicates that a level of personal relational capital was a key influencing factor in addition to a combination of elite traits enabling women to be in a position to make those choices. Previous studies often focus on recruitment in the corporate sector. This research considers both the public and the private sector, with surprising confluence of factors influencing the choices of both cohorts of executive women.

16.5 Intersectional Themes.

This chapter has so far discussed the findings of this research in relation to the research topics arising from the literature review, the impact of organisational structures, management of talent, and reputational capital and recruitment. Where it is useful I have introduced into the discussion issues which arose relevant to those topics which were not found in the review of literature, but which emerged directly from the data such as the impact of the print press, elite characteristics and relational capital. However, there are some findings which intersect the research topics identified in the review of literature and which are strong themes in themselves such that I discuss them here separately. There was a significantly high degree of congruence in relation to how women in the study managed domestic pressures referred to by some of the participants as the 'domestic contract', and a pattern emerged both in terms of common perspectives and in terms of practicalities. I found a

change in expectations, a challenging of the stereotype and societal norms about responsibility for childcare, which indicated possible change ahead and this reflected generational difference beginning to be explored in published literature (Valerio, 2018; Marine and Martinez, 2018); a move towards capable women of different generations making different choices about where to work and how they might be prepared to manage work and home life challenges.

Having it All

A strong emergent theme from the data is a shared view of almost all the participant group that in 2018/19 women cannot 'have it all'. Having it all historically meant looking after children and family on a daily basis and successfully delivering the responsibilities of a top executive post (Hewlett, 2002). Only one participant differed and strongly expressed the view that she had it all, but she also described support from nannies, a housekeeper, a cleaner, a home secretary and an involved partner and I interpret this as difference of definition rather than an exception to the view of most participants. Her view reflects that of a few women at the top who achieve a high level of success in the work environment and claim equal success in childcare whilst having support to do this through a partner or nanny who in fact takes daily responsibility for childcare. One such is Helena Morrissey, previously CEO of Newton Asset Management (Mills, 2018), who is not a participant in this study. Most participants in this study described permanent support with childcare to be a strategy for managing home and work life balance rather than for having it all.

The findings in this research reflect published literature of recent years which has moved to transpose the real possibility of 'having it all' to the status of as an unattainable myth (Sandberg, 2013; Hewlett, 2002). It is notable that the KPMG report Cracking the Code (KPMG, 2014) which set about exploding several myths related to women's career paths to the top does not addresses the myth of 'having it all' athough the research explores whether women having a family are disadvantaged in the career path. The report finds that "*the overall [impact on] career path of having a family is less than people believe. Having a family slows women's career path down but is not significant in preventing them from getting to the top*" (KPMG, 2014, p. 9). The report does not consider the mechanisms employed to achieve re-entry to the workforce after maternity leave or how work life balance is managed to allow women to *"make up lost ground"* (ibid p9) and is contrary to international findings on the impact of children (Cheung and Halpern, 2010; Slaughter, 2013). The report notes that the research only took place with women who had re-entered the workforce after maternity leave and did not include the views of those who did not. This research study describes, in Chapter Fourteen, the financial and emotional struggle and the guilt experienced by some women in the participant group especially when their children were young or of school age. Hewlett et al. (2002) report on some of the negative

experiences associated with combining high level work and family in the USA. Men and women are compared. The report finds the facts bleak for women and recommends changes required through legislation and company practice. Hewlett et al. (2002) find that most (49%) of 40-year-old high achieving women in the USA are childless. That finding is not reflected in this research where one participant had step children who joined her family later at later school age, and another had no children, but the remaining members of the group had 22 children between them including two adopted children. The women in this research described 'managing it all' not 'having it all' and although, as Chapter Fourteen describes, there were indeed grim moments, the pattern of successfully managing work and home life balance had significant degrees of congruence which may have implications for both research and practice.

Managing it All

This research observed emerging themes which explores in some detail the implications of managing work life balance. There were several issues which were common across the participant group and these are described in detail at Chapter Fourteen. Most women in this study engaged private nannies to help with childcare, only two used state nursery provision. Where state provision was used there was also a partner who had taken the lead in childcare, who delivered and collected. None of the participants in any sector, all of whom were on a rapid career path when they had children, could guarantee regular hours, or availability for childcare during school holidays, and no state provision offered a solution or flexibility. Private schools were used frequently, and occasionally boarding schools. None of the participants used any facility provided by their organisation or the company.

Generally, use of private childcare was made when children were young and needed a nanny, and often neither parent was at that stage a high earner. There was one exception where the participant was from a wealthy background and cost was never an issue. Other participants described significant financial strain at this time, some describing the cost of childcare as an investment against long term success and several described making savings on holidays and lifestyle in the early years. This was the only issue which prompted women in this research study to raise the issue of money. It was not raised in relation to salary or choices made on the career path. All the women in the study had returned quickly to work after having a family and most had struggled but survived financial hardship to do so. No participant raised the issue of choice between family and career or of not returning to work due to financial problems in funding childcare but this research explored the issue with successful career women and not those who had made alternative choices.

For most women in the group support from a partner was described as essential both in the area of childcare and with regard to the job. Only one woman found a partner not be an asset of any kind in managing work-life balance and she became a single parent. The overall picture is of an established early plan to manage childcare in the absence of at least one, often two, parents or partners. The management plan, the domestic contract, for those who were successful was firm and clear, generally involving private nannies or a transfer of primary responsibility from mother to father. Most participants described equally firm arrangements for dealing with the inevitable crisis such as nanny departure, or sickness. None of the women in this study relied on extended family on a regular basis but some referred to using family or friends in a crisis.

Most women in this research study recognised that societal norms and their management plans were not in accord. Some described themselves as making arrangements which 'breached the stereotype'. (Section 14.3-14.5). For many the education system was the biggest challenge and the expectation of parental attendance at some events, such as the nativity play, was a time of particular pressure. Schools did not appear to offer any flexibility towards working mothers. One participant described experiencing extreme prejudice when she found she represented a breach of stereotype embedded in an educational establishment because she was a full-time working mother (section 14.2). The women in this study represented parental experience over a 20 year span. Emslie and Hurt (Emslie and Hurt, 2009) studied work life balance across all levels in an organisation focusing mainly on lower and mid-levels, and found gender embedded in the way men and women negotiated home and work life balance. The expectation was that women would take the lead responsibility, thus any departure from this norm was difficult and this study supports that finding. The women in this research study included women in their fifties which is comparable to the study of Emslie and Hunt (2009). A significant finding of this research is that work life balance issues continued on even when there were adult children and grandchildren, and women in this age group experienced expectations of society not only to care for children of any age, but also elderly family members. One participant in this research study referred to increasing responsibilities for elderly relatives as well as her adult children. There is no evidence from this study that the expectation of society that the mother takes the lead responsibility for childcare had significantly changed. There is no difference in the experience recorded for women in the public sector and women in the private sector, or between organisations.

There was a congruency shared by women in this research study who strove to 'manage it all', on which areas of activity were constrained by childcare or family responsibilities. Mostly affected were networking opportunities where more than half the participants with children reported that they did not engage in networking for family reasons either at all, or when the children were young. It is

possible that an increased use of sponsors, which is not reliant on evening meetings for success, is a more acceptable and manageable way for women to promote themselves rather than networking and may account for the rise in sponsoring activities in all sectors in recent years. Most women described themselves as also constrained by location at least when their children are of school age or younger and this may have reduced promotional opportunities earlier in their career paths. Apart from two women, one who lived away from home Monday to Friday to take a top job without disrupting the children and another who moved the entire family to her new work location, all others made compromises about which opportunities to take during their career according to location. Linked to this were requirements to travel and to be away from home. Many in the participant group described the disruption this created to home life and several limited overseas travel or lengthy periods of deployment away from home when children were younger. For one participant the issue of successful work life balance was described as unachievable should she be asked to relocate beyond a distance from which she could continue to live at home with the family.

Not Wanting it All

I have discussed the concerns of participants in this study regarding the fragile pipeline of women ready to move to top posts which was observed in most sectors (section 16.3). I also discussed above two issues which may impact on the decisions women make in regard to taking more senior posts, the print press and the nature of some jobs (section 16.3). Recent published literature has begun to consider wider issues which appear to impact on some women not choosing to take top jobs (Doldor, Sealy and Vinnicombe, 2018) or leaving top jobs early in their tenure. Women holding top posts in all sectors in this study spoke of other women perhaps not wanting to take the challenge which work at this level demands, and many participants wondered aloud in the recorded interviews whether women are reconsidering 'making the choices their mothers made'. Concern at this disjunction in pathways to the top is reflected in published literature where generational difference has been offered as a part explanation (Hewlett, Sherbin and Sumberg, 2009; Powell, 2019) of a landscape of talent management in transformation. Generation Y (typically aged 24-39 years) has arrived in the workplace and they are perceived to be different to Generation X (typically 36-56 years) but display similar characteristics to the Baby Boomer generation (now typically 57-73 years). Both cohorts, Generation Y and Boomers, are large, each twice the size of Generation X, and therefore have impact. Both Generation Y and Boomers are described by Hewlett, Sherbin and Sumberg (2009) as seeking out jobs where they can contribute to social change, have time to contribute to passions and hobbies, where they can work remotely, experience flexibility and where sabbatical leave is on offer. This relates to an open emphasis on family and simultaneously engagement with colleagues through deep relationships linking to the development of relational capital in this study. Family is very important.

Generation X now moving into the most senior executive posts were found to have different attributes, often described as the latchkey generation, before childcare was easily available to be purchased, and the first to experience maternal participation in the workplace at a higher level. Generation X are sometimes considered to over work, and a high level of divorce has been reported for this generation. Generation Y were found to choose Boomers to mentor or sponsor them in preference to Generation X colleagues (ibid). This generational disconnect raised in published literature is similar to an observed disconnect in the female pipeline at Direct Report and ExComm to board level in this study.

There is no evidence in this study that such extreme workplace changes were observed by the participants to have occurred or to be occurring in the UK as in the USA study (Hewlett, Sherbin and Sumberg, 2009) but such is the disconnect in the women's pipeline which was described by many participants, and which is now the subject of government and academic interest, that changed generational expectations and new demands of the workplace might be found to be underway also in the UK (Doldor, Sealy and Vinnicombe, 2018). This may respond at least in part to CEO's asking in this study and in published literature where the 40 year olds who will become the next generation of CEO's, CFO's and COO's are to be found (Valerio, 2018). It is possible that generational change is part of the answer to participants who asked in this study whether the next generation will want to make the same choices as their mothers. It is possible that women in the pipeline are not afraid to work hard, but that they want to work differently. In the US, companies competing for high calibre people are already looking at more flexible packages to offer and exploring this issue in more depth (ibid). The findings in this report and in this discussion describe what some women in Generation X and Generation Y may wish to see to encourage them to consider top posts.

16.6 No Magic Bullet

This discussion has referred to a variety of factors which the data identifies as influencing the slow progression of women to board posts in both the public and the private sector, in the areas of organisational impact, talent management, and recruitment. I have also referred to intersecting factors such as the press and the domestic contract. What emerges from interpretation of the findings is a career context for each individual participant of multiple factors influencing behaviours and a complexity of inter-relationships between those factors. From this research study I cannot identify one factor which has prevented the improved pace of women taking up posts at the top of organisations in the UK, and the sequitur that I cannot either, identify one factor which if addressed would on its own make a difference. I find there is no 'magic bullet' but the congruence of emergent themes in this study which are highly likely to be relevant to other groups of women (section 17.5)

indicate that there are a number of key factors which if approached, acknowledged and addressed *together* across a broad front, organisational, societal and personal, could drive change.

The participants in this study and other women in the contemporary workforce experience the impact of traditional or neoliberal organisational models which has been fully discussed at section 16.2. Structural factors may also be considered from a perspective of individual agency and organisational or social structures which illustrates the complexity of career progress to the top. The agency–structural debate in sociological or social science terms identifies a context where individual agency, or power, can be constrained by structures (Coburn, 2016; Tan, 2011). In the agency-structural debate, structure can mean the norms of organisational structures or those societal structural norms which govern expected behaviours.

This study did not indicate that structural barriers to the progress of women towards top posts remained, other than inflexibility during off ramping and re-entry (section 14.8 and 16.2), and the lack of more extensive positive interventions through accelerated management schemes (section 11.3 and 16.2). However there were significant structural constraints on choice and agency due to the organisational context in which participants worked, and this was most marked in the public sector and within that sector in the armed services, and in legal and police services. This study reflects theories which describe powerful structures which can be dominant and curtail individual power or agency, theories which describe individuals who demonstrate human agency as a primary factor in behaviour, and theories where there is a dialectical relationship between agency and structure (Tan, 2011). This study highlights the complexity of the agency-structural approach to power and behaviour and includes, for example, participants who lead where organisational structures dominate and could diminish individual agency such as the armed services or legal services (Lawrence, 2008; Rigby, Woulfin and Marz, 2016). Rigby et al (Ibid) refers mainly to Education Institutions, but the structure-agency debate is also reflected in legal and armed services. Here participants described clearly the limitations of the role they can play in the community and in business. This is in contrast to other women at the top where their role is to lead, demonstrate human autonomy over the power of the company or organisation, and they are successful in transforming structures, goals and outcomes (Scott, 2008). Section 16.4 reports findings on the tension between building personal reputations in the context of organisational reputations illustrating those agency-structural theories which present a continuing changing relationship between individual agency and structure (Tan, 2011). This research suggests that women in structures which are powerful and constraining as well as those in structures which have come to allow agency and structure to be more balanced, equally describe achieving power and influence through gaining top posts. At play in this complex area is the psychological

strength of the participants in achieving agency in whatever context they operated. Across all sectors this study recognises that choices were constrained by the structural context but that this was managed. Structural challenge came from highly institutional organisations, globally competitively challenged organisations, economically challenged organsiatons and organisations subject to critical corporate reputational constraints. The women at the top in this study achieved agency in all contexts.

In the study participants described their battles with social structures and societal norms (section 14.2 -14.5). Within this were a number of additional factors of varying influence such as partner support, income, location and the age of children when career opportunities presented (Chapter 15). Almost without exception there was a continual adjustment between societal structures and agency reflecting the current structure-agency debate as referred to by Martz, Kelchtermans and Dumay in Coburn 2016 (Coburn, 2016). As above various factors were at play and there was a complexity of interaction between factors which variously impacted on each individual. Also, as with regard to the organisational structural-agency debate, there was a significant impact of individual personality traits and strengths which led the group of achievers who were participants in this study to reach positions of influence at the top of organsiatons in spite of adverse societal structures and norms.

Although the emergent themes are consistent for most participants, some impact on some people more than others. The one consistent factor is that participants in this study belong to a group with elite characteristics (section16.4) and therefore a complexity of influencing factors, challenges, have been met and overcome by this group. The data is clear, the women in this study are in top posts, challenges have been met, but for each individual those complex factors which were and still are difficult to manage, varies. Resilience is huge (chapter 15) and indicative not only of choosing to take a top post, but also of retaining it.

The research design in this study allowed member checking of interpretation as well as the emergence of new factors influencing the pace of progress of women in the contemporary workforce in choosing to take top posts. There was consistency on the key themes which are summarised in the findings (Chapters 11 to 15), but no one theme emerged as a 'magic bullet'. There was a complexity of context and personality traits which indicated a number of key areas which I present as recommendations in Chapter 17; no one issue is supreme.

16.7 Summary of the Discussion

The research topics emerging from the literature survey were discussed with all participants and extant published literature is introduced in this chapter to explore further the findings where new

themes emerged from the data. I discuss findings of congruence with published literature and issues where there was divergence.

Through this exploratory research I found that a neoliberal workplace had become the norm in most sectors, with significant exceptions in the armed services and legal services in some part due to overbearing tradition but for the most part because of the overriding need to maintain independence, and also to maintain a high degree of confidentiality and thus safety and security, both for the services and for the nation. None of the women leaders in this study appeared to use the opportunities offered by neoliberal structures such as part-time working and extended maternity leave. All had extensive transportable portfolios of competence, credibility and broad and deep learning and experience. The more important impact on workplace structures was the financial crisis of 2008 and political volatility after the referendum. Contrary to expectations identified in some literature the participant group strongly demonstrated easy access to senior posts from working, middle class and non-graduate backgrounds. The most important assets for this participant group were accelerated management schemes. The most difficult structural barriers to be overcome were those related to re-entry after career breaks and a lack of on-boarding support and expertise. Both organisational structures and societal structures and agency struggles were managed such that in spite of some constraints over choice and opportunity women leaders in this study achieved agency sufficient to demonstrate the power and influence which they had sought.

Exploration of how talent was managed as experienced by the women in the study identified a fragile women's pipeline and significant under-confidence in many sectors that there were any women in the contemporary workforce who would wish to step into some top jobs. This reflects more recent findings in published research about intergenerational differences in expectations of what top jobs might offer and which organisations would be attractive to women. This research study identifies findings similar to those in the USA, which identified a combination of key characteristics in women who followed a pathway to the top, which has implications for which women in organisations might be sensible targets for recruitment strategies. This research identifies the importance of relational capital, how women make choices and the emotional element in those choices. Traditional mechanisms such as mentoring and management development programmes were found to have had little impact on this cohort of women during pathways to top jobs, although they accorded some value at middle management for some members of the workforce. Coaching was important, although almost entirely used by women in this study to prepare for a transition already achieved and for support after transitioning to a board position early in the appointment at a CEO level post. The research indicates a resoundingly high level of confusion between the terms coaching and mentoring,

and little evidence of outcome measures or standards employed. The impact of the print press was found to be a significant factor in choices women made about presenting for a top job, and about length of tenure. The impact of the press was found to be significant factor across all sectors. Women in legal services and the armed services were the best protected, although no participants escaped shock and distress on occasion. Women in the corporate sector were most exposed, although women in the civil service, local government and the police could also be hounded and vilified.

Reputational capital was highly sought but constrained in many organisations by the desire of the participants to synchronise with company reputational targets. To achieve a board ready reputation there was significant networking, including some focused networking with Head Hunters in the corporate sector. For women in both sectors relational capital was an important asset, and posts were accepted or declined on the basis of personal contacts, discussion and emotional choices. For almost all participants sponsors played a much greater part than any other factor in assisting career paths all along the way, opening doors, and supporting women also in the final step to board level executive posts. Neither NED posts nor the use of social media were valued by the women in this cohort as aids to reaching board posts or enhancing reputations.

There are implications for knowledge and for practice from all the findings discussed in this chapter, and these are addressed fully in Chapter Seventeen.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: CONCLUSIONS

17.1 Introduction

The research agenda for this thesis was to explore executive gender imbalance at the top of UK public and private sector organisations. To achieve this I undertook a critical review of the literature in Chapters Two to Four, considering the position in the UK and related worldwide trends, and in chapter Five I reviewed the literature which presented theoretical explanations for this phenomenon. I discovered that in spite of an extensive body of research into this subject and political and social initiatives to drive change, in practice almost nothing has changed. Executive gender imbalance in most top posts persists at a level consistent over at least the last decade. I conducted an abductive research study to enable me to listen to women in top jobs in the UK describing their lived experience, to discuss with them the themes which emerged from the study, and to explore the possibility of other factors hitherto not fully researched to explain this phenomenon. I interviewed 12 women holding, or who had recently held, top jobs in the UK public and private sectors and Chapters Ten to Fifteen describes the findings in the words of those participants. Chapter Sixteen discusses and interprets those findings in relation to extant research and current published literature, following the research topics which arose from the literature review and new themes which arose directly from the data.

The purpose of this chapter is to briefly review the objectives of the thesis and to outline the contribution this research makes to current knowledge, methodology and practice. I also make recommendations for further research recognising the limitations of this research study. This chapter concludes with a discussion on the issue of reflexivity with regard to this study, and my personal reflections on the subject of this research, women at the top.

17.2 Review of Research Aims and Objectives.

The overarching research aim was to investigate the persistence of executive gender imbalance at the top of public and private sector organisations in the context of the well published link to better business outcomes. My objectives were to contribute to the body of academic knowledge on this subject and to contribute to practice. I pursued this aim and these objectives by:

Critically reviewing literature in the UK and reviewing trends worldwide.

Using an abductive method of enquiry to investigate the phenomenon of persistent top executive gender imbalance, and to critically appraise its success as a methodology.

Listening to what participants had to say without interpretation, reporting on emerging congruent themes and outliers to the group.

Interpreting the findings from the study in relation to extant research and identifying any new factors emerging in relation to this phenomenon.

Critically considering the implications of this listening study for research and practice.

17.3 Objective One: Contribution to Research and Knowledge

17.3.1 Contribution to Methodology

Abductive Enquiry

The review of literature indicated that there has been little progress, if any, on improving the gender balance of executive leaders at the top of public and private sectors in the UK over many years in spite of the large body of academic research investigating the issue and theories presented to explain the persistence of this phenomenon. Improvement in executive gender balance at this level had not been achieved either, by contemporary political focus and action on the issues, or social pressures evidenced in a range of published popular literature. To address this puzzle, this impasse, I employed an abductive research enquiry model which enabled me to listen to the views of women in top posts. It was a research strategy ideally suited to exploring a puzzle and as a result this research yielded a number of new themes and concepts which contribute to knowledge. Themes which emerged could be further researched to understand this phenomenon better, and that understanding could drive change. I describe these in more detail at section 17.3.2. The abductive strategy includes the ability to follow the data generated by participants, change the direction of the research to follow new themes emerging, and importantly to check with participants that any interpretation I made of the data reflected their views. **I recommend that future research into apparent organisational impasse or puzzle considers an abductive research strategy as a key tool. I recommend this approach highly.**

Ontological and Epistemological Assumptions

I consider that for this research study the use of an abductive research enquiry was successful in identifying new emergent themes because the research strategy rested on a subjective ontological assumption that allowed the participants to describe their realities as they saw them and for those realities to be accepted. All participants' realities were different, their lives and workplaces were different, but this assumption allowed full and unchallenged expression of their lived experience. It allowed them to speak freely and for their views to be accepted. In this study also the abductive

enquiry rested on an interpretive epistemological assumption which allowed discussion within the participant group of emerging themes across the total data set and to member check those interpretations. Not all participants agreed with all emerging themes and all interpretations and the abductive enquiry encouraged the reporting of dissonance and outliers in the participant group as well as key themes which were strong. **I recommend that where research sets out to explore a puzzle, and where the participant group is small and intellectually able to participate in an iterative cyclical approach integral to this method of eliciting data and member checking interpretation, that the researcher considers a research paradigm which includes subjective ontological and interpretive epistemological assumptions***.*

Experienced Interviewing

Data collection was by interview. I discuss my impact on the research more fully in the reflexivity section below but here I stress the importance of experienced interviewing during this research study. It was important that as the researcher I listened to the participants, at the same time as prompting them on issues raised by other participants or where I wished to ensure that research topics I wanted to pursue were raised. Without exception the participants were highly intellectual, and had superior communication skills. They talked fast, considered issues quickly, moved from topic to topic, were challenging, and expected a similar level of communication and skill from the interviewer. The participants in this study were asked about a number of issues that they could skilfully have avoided answering in the detail in which they did, if they had less confidence in the interviewer. I was fortunate that in my work I have years of interview experience including working alongside the most senior executives in many areas of the workplace (section 8.3) and I was able in most cases to respond and collect the data I needed. **I recommend that if a research enquiry model, as in this case, rests on interview as a method of data collection that researchers with considerable experience and skill in interviewing at this level are sought.**

Age and Experience in Research Enquiry.

The participants in this study were at the top of their profession and their organisations. They had long experience of different workplaces. I found that it was helpful that I had age and experience to bring to the research study. I have worked in both the public and the private sector, and experienced most of the organisations that the participants belonged to. This assisted me in establishing a discourse with some common understanding of their working environments. This was especially clear to me when I interviewed the armed services participant, which was a workplace I have never experienced, and by contrast the interviews with her were limited by the need to explain some organisational issues and language which was not necessary in any other interview. **I highly**

recommend that academic researchers consider the value those who have spent years in business and/or public service can bring to research, when preparing for data collection in research studies of this kind.

Analytical Tools and Software Options

I consider that the rigour of applying constructive grounded theory analysis in this research study was positive (section 8.4). The tool allowed me to analyse the data and identify emerging themes with some confidence and discuss them as the data collection progressed. I made the decision not to use software to support the analysis further, although all transcripts had been prepared for on-boarding to Nvivo, because the participant group was small. I consider that 12 participants who, in this case, delivered over 1000 pages of data across two interviews each, is at the limit of what might be handled manually to achieve the best analysis. It may have been an advantage to me to use software to assist in managing the data but there was advantage also in working manually with the data and identifying tone and 'feeling the data' myself. **I recommend that researchers consider using software with relatively small groups if the pilot studies indicate that the data is likely to be dense and extensive in a particular research study.**

When to Undertake a Literature Review

In following a normal path to research I undertook most of the literature survey before considering my methodology and method of data analysis. I became aware that my decision to use grounded theory as an analytical tool might contravene a purist view of using that analytical tool which suggests that the literature survey should only take place after the data is collected, to avoid influencing the open mind of the researcher. I had already completed much of the literature survey and I made the decision nevertheless to apply a constructive grounded theory analytical tool for reasons of rigour appropriate to this study. I did desist from undertaking further survey of literature on management interventions which, by chance, I had not addressed when the data collection beganuntil the data collection period had ended. Therefore section 5.9 on interventions to prepare women for senior posts was not completed until after the data collection period had ended and it is influenced by the data with, for example, a focus on coaching and less on mentors because this was what emerged as a priority in the data. There was advantage in listening to the lived experience of women in top jobs, for example their experience of coaching mentoring and sponsorship, and then making a focused search of the literature, but there was also advantage in having reviewed literature before embarking on the interviews generally and using that survey of literature to identify some research topics, as the prompt sheet at Appendix 4 illustrates. Some of the data which arose, and which was the most powerful in raising new themes and issues for further investigation, had not appeared at all in the initial literature

survey. In these areas also I therefore reviewed literature entirely after the data collection. These elements of literature review are included in the discussion on those themes at Chapter Sixteen, for example in relation to the press, and do not feature at all in the initial literature survey in Chapters Three to Five. This research study therefore reflects several approaches. In abductive studies it is likely that data relating to new issues not previously considered will be revealed and some survey of the literature will inevitably therefore happen after data collection. In summary, there is advantage in listening to the data and then following it with a review of the relevant literature but also some advantage to a review of extant literature around the context generally in advance of the study. **I recommend flexibility in this regard, and the use of mixed methods with regard to literature reviews.**

17.3.2 Contribution to Theory

This section refines the discussion in Chapter Sixteen into two main issues which need further research to make a more substantive contribution to knowledge. I consider this study to have begun this research journey.

Public and Private Sectors

I undertook this research intending to include both public and private sectors to balance recent extant research which focused so much on the private sector, boards and FTSE companies. This worked well in that there was a significant degree of congruence between the two sectors and some knowledge emerged, such as issues around the domestic contract, the print press and sponsorship, which may be useful to share between sectors about executive advancement at the top of organisations. I made strenuous efforts to include the armed services as a participant in the public sector group because I found little extant literature on executive business and talent management which included the armed services. I believe that as a result of including both public and private sectors, and within that the police, legal and armed services that the data in this research is richer and knowledge significantly extended although numbers of participants in this study were small. **I recommend that further similar research is conducted which includes both public and private sectors focusing on all aspects of executive direction in the UK. I highly recommend that future research into business and talent management includes all three elements of the armed services.**

Reputational and Relational capital

Reputational capital was identified as a research topic following the review of literature and this study contributes to knowledge in identifying particular tensions relative to the reputation of the organisation and the participant (section 12.2). All participants described a high level of energy

expended over years to build reputational capital and this was specifically identified as necessary in preparing for top jobs and becoming board ready. Participants describe the need to be broad as well as deep (section 13.5) and refer to extensive multi-sector networking and out of sector experiences to achieve considerable reputational capital.

This research study also identifies an issue which describes the importance for women approaching or considering top jobs to have also built solid individual relational capital. The level of this activity varied across sectors and organisations. Approaches for top jobs were often described as coming informally from people who were well known to the participants and who were respected by them. Some participants recognised that relational capital, an extensive set of positive personal relationships, might be where understanding of their potential might sit. I found little research on individual relational capital and more is required to fully understand how this impacts on women, whether they are more likely to be sought out and offered top jobs if relational capital is high, and also whether women are more likely to accept top jobs if the approach comes from within their stock of valued relationships.

Further research is needed to explore if reputation building is also a key activity of men in the contemporary workplace. If they approach this through networking and profile/portfolio building as women in this study do and if they experience the same level of tension in a bid to avoid straying from the organisations' reputation targets as do most female executives in this research.

I recommend further research to explore more fully the issue of relational capital, to understand this phenomenon better, and to explore if this issue is equally pertinent to men as women in the workplace. Research might clarify if the informal emotional choices made by women when they decide to accept top jobs are linked to an understanding that extensive relational capital assists in presenting merit and potential to prospective employers.

17.4 Objective Two: Contribution to Practices which could Drive Change.

This section refers to the objective set in section 1.2 which includes a contribution to research regarding emerging themes which could influence practice. This section includes conclusions arising from the data about areas in which organisations or individuals, might drive desired change in practice such as better targeted executive recruitment, improved understanding of influences which could persuade women to take up top jobs, raised recognition of the role of sponsors on career paths of executive women, and the oncoming challenge of retaining the next generation of talented women. I also include in this section a contribution to practice such as accelerated management schemes, the

press, childcare and re-entry which rely on research identifying issues which require a change of policy, and law, as well as better practice in order to drive change.

Some of the emerging themes in the data contribute to learning for organisations, where action could improve practice. Other themes indicate a contribution to learning, where action by individuals could improve practice. There are some conclusions which are applicable to both categories.

17.4.1 Contributions to practice: organisations

An Elite Group

There are implications in this research study for organisations delivering a recruitment function when top posts are sought. One of the most powerful themes to emerge was the congruence of several characteristics shared by all participants; there were no exceptions. This theme emerged gradually and steadily throughout the findings and is summarised in section 16.4.2. This study indicates that top post holders may reflect a small elite group within the workforce with a combination of characteristics, suitable for desiring, achieving and remaining in top posts. There are implications for recruitment in that suitable candidates for top posts, those who may be most successfully targeted, may lie within a small group in any organisation and not as previously anticipated across most women just below C-suite level, in the ExComms and Direct Reports. This study suggests that the issue promoted in recent literature that more women in the pipeline will inevitably mean that eventually there will be more women taking up executive board posts, may be flawed and poor targeting of women likely to choose to take up top posts could account for the persistent lack of progress in increasing numbers of executive women in top jobs. **I recommend that more research is undertaken to explore an emerging theme in this study, the concept of a small elite with a specific combination of personal characteristics, and to further investigate if it is possible to identify women in the pipeline who are likely to take up top posts due to this combination of personality traits in order to improve recruitment practice.**

Accelerated Workplace Schemes

A small but powerful theme emerged from the data which relates to managing talent by identifying and managing high potential women through accelerated workplace schemes. In this research such schemes placed high potential women in a position to rise rapidly through workplace structures and it aligned well with the characteristics of easy boredom and challenge seeking describing the elite group referred to above. Organisations and government might improve practice and assist more women through early career advancement if there were more such schemes and high potential women with elite characteristics were targeted. **I recommend that further research and longitudinal**

studies explore if this contribution to knowledge and practice is valid beyond this research group, and if so, if there is government awareness and funding opportunities. Such schemes may align with the desire to promote women of high potential to senior executive positions in the UK and adjust the gender balance at the top.

The Domestic Contract and Reliance on Private Childcare

One of the most powerful themes emerging from this research is that of the necessity of a stable domestic contract to support women to make a successful journey to top posts. Evidence in this study indicates that high potential women accelerating fast through the workplace, in both public and private sectors, cannot make use of recent initiatives to provide more state funded childcare, opportunities for part-time working, or extended maternity leave. It does not fit with the workplace of today for women travelling towards senior executive posts. With only one exception women in this study felt their only choice was private provision and/or childcare support from a partner. Early financial and emotional struggles are recorded in the findings from the data in sections 14.7 and 14.8. This study was limited to women who are successful and who have achieved top posts, and did not consider those women who left the workforce due to domestic and financial pressures. An improvement in company practice and consideration by government of current child care support policy, could improve opportunities for more women to advance towards top posts when children are young. **I recommend that further research is undertaken to explore if there is significant loss of talent because of the nature of domestic contracts which have to be negotiated to support women moving towards top posts and lack of financial support at critical stages.**

Re-entry to the Workplace

This research indicates few structural barriers for women in the contemporary workplace other than issues of re-entry after career breaks, such as maternity leave and chosen work opportunities in other sectors to enhance reputation building and personal portfolios. **This has legislative implications for some organisations and further research could clarify the position to government and address some of the issues of re-entry and re-assumption of previous roles.**

The Print Press

The abductive research model I employed in this study was chosen so that new factors relating to the persistent phenomenon of lack of gender balance at the top of UK organisations could emerge from listening to lived experiences of the participants. One of the strongest emergent themes relates to the print press. Evidence in this study suggests that talent was lost, tenure was shortened, and job choice was influenced because of the print press, as well as the level of distress caused to women at the top.

There was is little literature exploring this issue. An improvement in understanding of the impact of the print press and any degree of protection for women in the workforce coming into the most senior positions could improve practice and lead to change. **I very strongly recommend that research is undertaken into the impact of the press, specifically the print press in the UK, on the issue of gender balance and tenure of executive women holding top posts in all sectors. I also recommend that there is research to explore if there is a similar impact on men at the top, or if this is of a different order**

17.14.2 Contributions to Practice: Individuals

Non-Executive Directors

This research study indicates that the perception that increased numbers of non-executive directors now sitting on boards in the corporate sector, and the most senior management groups in the public sector, will lead to more women experiencing boards and then taking up top posts, may be flawed. This study demonstrates that for participants in this study seeking NED experience as an aid to preparing for executive board membership in all except one case, did not happen. NEDs were not valued posts in this regard. Best practice advice to women wishing to reach Executive Board positions might not be to suggest seeking NED posts. **I recommend that longitudinal research studies are undertaken to dispel the myth or support the view that more women taking up NED posts influences executive gender imbalance on top boards positively.**

Persuading Women to Take Up a Top Job.

A theme which emerged and which contributes to the practice of recruitment to top board positions related to how women in the study made the decision to take up a particular board post, or not. Emotional choices featured highly, 'liking' the top team, 'feeling' that this would provide increased job satisfaction and power to influence, and also a personal approach in most cases from a respected and 'liked' individual. Salary and status per se did not feature. Best practice advice to companies wishing to recruit to top posts, and best practice advice to existing Executive Directors and CEO's, may be to consider personal approaches to high potential women explaining positive personal outcomes for them should they be persuaded to take up a top post. **I recommend further research to explore how women make the career choices that they do at the top of organisations, what factors will influence women to accept a top post, and how those factors are presented to women.**

Sponsorship

There are several themes arising from this research which contribute to developing practice around talent management. The participants in this study were unanimous that coaches and mentors

allocated during management development or any other courses were not useful, and that the best support came from coaches chosen by the women themselves. I have concern at the level of confusion around coaching and mentoring which was revealed in this research, lack of data protection awareness and poor consistency over standards. In assisting talent to develop at senior levels in organisations this study demonstrates that coaching and mentoring were not key factors so much as sponsorship and networking. Sponsorship stood out in both public and private sectors as the best way many participants found to travel quickly towards top posts themselves, and the increasing use of sponsorship by the top post holders in this study to propel talented and high potential women forwards in their organisations. This often accompanied intelligent talent spotting by senior female executives, and possible identification of women in the pipeline with those elite characteristics which identified them as high potential. **I recommend further research to extend exploration of the merit accorded by women in top jobs in this study to sponsorship in both public and private sectors and I would encourage studies to explore if women from a larger cohort of leaders seek and value sponsorship.**

17.14.3 Contribution to practice: organisations and individuals together

Generational Change

This study reveals an emerging theme that describes talent management in transformation, as generational changes impact on the way women view top jobs, in fact how they view work, how the choices they make are determined and where they seek support. The literature review and the data generated from the research study reveal a developing connection between the Baby Boomer generation coming to retirement now, and Generation Y entering the pipeline. Literature and the data also revealed some disconnect between Generation Y and Generation X, where Generation X who were moving into top post holder positions were not always seen to reflect the flexibility, family awareness, shared social and work impact and an emphasis on openness of the Boomers generation and sought by those now considering senior posts in the workplace. This emerging issue is discussed at section 16.5. This study contributes to developing good practice both by individuals already at senior executive levels and an awareness that women in the pipeline may have different priorities, and for organisations where some flexibility may be required to attract or retain Generation Y women who have new expectations and demands. **I recommend that more research is undertaken to explore if the generational disconnect identified in this study is common in the contemporary workplace and could contribute to understanding the current disconnect in the women's pipeline.**

17.5 The Research Programme

Limitations

I critically evaluate the methodology and method in Chapters Seven to Nine, and also critically evaluate some emerging themes in this research leading to recommendations for further research on specific issues earlier in this chapter and I do not repeat this here. However there are some additional limitations, challenges and findings which have emerged.

I was not fully prepared for the impact of the national political and economic scene on the participants I had identified and who had agreed, and wanted, to be part of the study. This was a significant factor in managing the time for interviews and the time between interviews, knowing participants were under immense pressure. For example I interviewed a participant in the NHS at a time previously agreed to find that she had been up all night dealing with the latest government instruction related to managing austerity measures requiring cancellation of all elective surgery forthwith, involving hundreds of patients, staff and the press. Similar challenges for other CEOs and top post holders, resulted in my decision not to offer a third interview as I had originally considered; I felt fortunate to have succeeded in achieving two of at least an hour in length with each participant. **It was important to adjust expectations to the environment which I found when I entered the data collection phase of the research to gain the best from the data opportunities which presented and avoid over-pressing participants**.

The changing political and economic scene impacted on the study such that the changed and changing lives of the participants during the study was an issue. Initially the period of interview had to be extended because following the referendum and general election some CEOs and CFOs were focused exclusively on managing the impact of those events on their organisations and it became clear that corporate participants would not be available until some time had passed to allow the immediate crisis to settle. Thus I interviewed mostly in the public sector initially and moved to the private sector later than I had planned. Due to economic turmoil one participant CEO had to base herself in Australasia for a period and I was not able to follow her to undertake the agreed interviews. In this case she arranged for another FTSE 100 executive from another board to participate in her place. I accepted this and other changes of venue and timing required. I learned to be very flexible and extended the data collection period to account for this volatility. **Other scholars may find it useful to build in flexibility when undertaking research in such a volatile area**.

The participant group were part of a cohort of top post holders that was constantly in change regardless of the immediate national economic challenges. Issues of tenure are discussed at section

13.2 and section 15.2 in relation to the impact of the press. During the period of data collection two CEOs in the participant group resigned or retired, one changed boards, and others were preparing for a change of post. I was not fully prepared for this level of churn and this was exacerbated by extending the data collection period due to economic instability in the country. I accommodated this by flexing the time scale between interviews when necessary, in one instance due to a court case by two months, and taking a relaxed view of organising and reorganising the data collection. **I have no reason to believe that pressure and movement at senior executive levels in organisations would be less of a challenge at any time and other scholars may find it useful to consider this aspect when planning research of this kind.**

I explain in section 10.3 that I was constrained by the need to protect the identities of participants. The reporting of findings is limited, particularly in the interpretation and discussion, and I am aware of the limitations of this research as a result of my commitment to anonymity. This is particularly the case, for example, whilst discussing the influence of the press where I am unable to give examples. I believe that this is inevitable in a study involving participants of this calibre, visibility and status. Some of the analyses and discussion as a result can appear vague and non-specific and I regret this but have found it inevitable. I was unaware of how constraining trying to assure anonymity would be to reporting this research. **Scholars undertaking research of this nature may need to be aware that assuring anonymity is a significantly constraining factor in presenting research from studies such as this.**

Reflexivity

I refer in the discussion and above to the practical difficultly in managing the extensive amount of data which emerged. I was also limited by space in the thesis in presenting the full depth and richness of the data; this thesis could have been very long. The participants could talk extensively, and did. There is much data which is not reported in this document and as I refined the data to present what appeared to me to be the main emergent themes, and refined this again in the discussion, and again in these conclusions I was conscious that the introduction of bias was likely to be high at this point. I am aware that in spite of my best effort to be objective there is every likelihood that I have reported in the findings, themes which appeared to me emotionally or intellectually to have importance. I was helped by the rigour of line by line analysis and the generation of themes using the grounded theory analytical tool, but I am also aware that nevertheless I have influenced what is presented by my positionality. In the discussion I interpret the findings and was helped by the opportunity of checking most interpretation with participants in the study. Nevertheless I am sure I have been influenced by my own experience, and my world view of what is important in investigating the persistent lack of

progress in achieving better gender balanced executive boards and their equivalent in the public sector. There may have been some value in reducing the scope of the study initially, for example addressing just one research topic, but I also understand that an abductive enquiry, by definition looks for concepts and themes emerging from the data and nothing would have prevented intensive and extensive data emerging from conversations with this group of participants. **Scholars undertaking abductive research might be helped by understanding that data is likely to be rich and deep. They may wish to consider mitigating activities such as a rigorous analytical tool and member checking, but be aware that nevertheless the refinement necessary for publication will be impacted by the researcher's world view and experience and declaring what this is should be part of a process of reflexivity.**

I discuss the issue of reflexivity at section 9.5 and do not review that again here except to highlight when reflexive considerations identified a particularly strong possibility of bias in this study. This was during the data collection and presentation of findings, interpretation and conclusions where the mass of data was refined as referred to above, possibly according to my world view of what is important, according to my interpretation in the light of my own work experience, and according to my response to the emotional and intellectual issues raised by participants. It is my view that in the contemporary workplace there are few structural barriers to women taking up the top posts in any sector, and the reason for this not happening lies in the choice women make not to accept top posts, not that top posts are not available to them. For me, this research has been an enquiry into what is likely to affect choices that women make so that this research might contribute to change in gender balance at the top which I perceive to be static in most areas. My work experience is that where there is a gender balance at the top, better decisions are made and business outcomes are improved. **As a result of the reflexive process I am aware and therefore document the likely introduction of bias at specific points in the research process. This is in addition to the inherent bias present in any qualitative study and particularly in abductive research enquiry.**

Representativeness

I stated at the outset of this study (section 7.2) that participants were chosen because of the posts they held; top posts in the public and the private sector. There was no expectation that in interview these women would represent the other women in their place of work, or more widely other women also occupying top posts. I am very clear at section 1.2 that 12 idiosyncratic case studies may have been found. However, the strong themes which emerged and which are reported in Chapters 11-15 are there because there was a very high degree of congruency in the data across ages, sectors, and organisations. I find that this group of participants have something to say as a group, their views are

powerful in their expression and their relevance. I say at section 8.2 that the sample chosen and the exploratory methodology chosen for this research would not generate or estimate statistical characteristics of a wider population, but the findings indicate that far from a collection of unique lived experiences there are insights which are transferable, and which have relevance for other women at the top, and women making choices to accept top posts, or not. Although there was no intention to create a participant group representative of other women at the top, or women considering top posts, in fact there is an element of representativeness identified in the congruency of the emerging themes found in this study. The insights of the women in this study, both as they consider their own lived experience, but also as they reflect on the experience of other women in the workplace present a degree of potential representativeness which was unexpected and which has relevance for other groups of people. **Scholars undertaking exploratory research should be alert to the emergence of powerful data and characteristics in the sample group which has potential relevance for other groups of people.**

The current study is limited in ways that can be fruitfully addressed by research scholars in the future. The cohort which is the subject of this research, women in top posts in the UK, is small and the participant group is correspondingly small but nevertheless makes a powerful contribution through this study to knowledge and practice on the phenomenon under investigation. The abductive enquiry design which sought new and emerging themes yielded rich and deep data which prepares the way for more extensive theoretical exploration in future research in a number of new areas. The study does not assume the participants are representative of their organisations, or that as a group they represent other women also in top jobs, however the degree of congruence in the participant group indicates important learning which can be tested, potential relevance for other groups, and which offers an opportunity for re-thinking causal factors which maintain the phenomena of executive gender imbalance at the top of organisations in the UK.

17.6 Reflection

This chapter concludes the presentation of this thesis. I have reviewed the research agenda and the overarching research objectives which are to contribute to knowledge and to contribute to practice which can drive change. This chapter discusses the limitations of the research which appeared and were managed during the data collection period and which may be taken into account by future scholars in this field. I make recommendations for further research to address some of the themes arising in this research. I discuss reflexivity and the awareness that I have of bias introduced at some points specifically in the presentation and refinement of findings, and in the discussion of those findings.

I present this thesis as a contribution towards an understanding of how improving gender balance at the top of organisations in the UK may be achieved. Listening to the lived experience of women holding top posts in the workplace today was a privilege and illuminating. I have made every effort to reflect the views of the women who participated in this study especially where they raise themes which extant academic literature has not addressed and where there is potential relevance for other groups.

I have been of the view that if this topic, women at the top, was better understood there was every chance that improved gender balance amongst executives at the top in the UK would be achieved. I have changed my mind. At the end of this research journey I consider that it may only ever be a very small group of women with the combination of elite characteristics identified in this study which can propel them upwards towards seeking, gaining and retaining top posts. The disconnect in the pipeline revealed in this study may not be temporary. The reported views of women in this study and in recent literature, evidence changes in the desires of women coming through the pipeline who may focus in the future on job satisfaction, enjoy flexibility in the workplace, value highly social and family time, drive openness and transparency at work, and not want to take up top jobs. This together with the attributes accorded to the upcoming Generation Y which are similar, may indeed mean that their questioning *"do I really want to do what my mother did or does"* might result in less not more women choosing to take top posts in the public or corporate world in the UK. This research does not include in its remit the independent sector but it may be that skilled experienced women may wish to lead private businesses in the independent sector in the future not remaining at a level below the C-suite for long, taking their talents into start-ups and entrepreneurial ventures rather than taking up a top job in an established company or organisation. This also is a subject for future research.

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APPENDIX 3: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

A research study: **Women Executive Leaders: An investigation into the lived experience of women holding top posts in the UK.**

An Invitation
'You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully'.

The aims and purpose of the study

Economically advantageous outcomes which result from a gender balanced board or management team at the top of organisations are well known and there is a business case which is well established to support this. In the UK there is also considerable academic, private, public and political focus on the persistent failure to achieve an adequate rate of progress with regard to women achieving **executive** board level posts.

In the last decade research has begun to consider how human capital impacts on the progress of women towards top jobs and within that the reputational capital which women can bring to senior executive roles. Human capital includes individual assets such as education, knowledge, skills and experience. Reputational capital is an extension of this concept relevant to a contemporary work place where a traditional linear career path is less common and career portfolios can be highly individualised. Reputational capital may include visibility in the digital environment, flexibility, business innovation and access to corporate and/or public sector networks within and without the specific field relevant to the appointment. Recently published work has begun to consider whether coaching, mentoring or management development programmes can make a contribution in this area.

The aim of this study is to examine issues which might impact on women's career pathways to executive board level.

In particular the research will
1. Consider the significance of reputational capital in terms of its component parts including sponsorship, networking, visibility in the digital environment and confidence, on women's careers.
2. Evaluate and assess the impact of mentoring, coaching and management development programmes on the progress of women towards achieving executive board status.

The research will be conducted in such a way to ensure that participants are able to identify issues other than reputation capital which they consider are important in their own career pathways.

During 2016 and 2017 data will be collected from a sample of 10/12 women who have achieved Senior Executive positions, both in the public and private sector.

Why have I been invited to participate?

You have been chosen to participate in this study because you are, and have been, an executive senior leader.

A voluntary commitment
If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.
The questions are not intended to cause distress to any of the participants but some of the questions may appear personal. You have the right to say you do not wish to answer any of the questions at any time.

Expectations
If you take part in this study you will be asked to participate in an audio-recorded interview lasting about an hour and a follow up Skype or shorter call or meeting. The interview will be semi-structured and cover a number of pre-defined topics but will also allow opportunity for you to expand on your views and introduce other issues you feel are important. You will receive a transcript of the first interview. There will be two separate contacts to allow time for reflection, and for you to comment on any emerging themes. The meetings will take place at a time and place convenient to you.

Possible benefits

You will have the opportunity to discuss the impact building reputational capital may have on the career paths of women. Also you will be able to contribute to consideration of the impact, if any, of management development programmes and coaching and mentoring in relation to the building of reputational capital, and women's progress more generally, towards senior executive leadership positions.

Participation may offer the opportunity to take some time out to reflect, to assess career paths and management development within a changing workplace environment and to contribute to research your views on the issue of women persistently failing to take up the most senior **executive** posts in the public and private sector.

Confidentiality

All information collected about you and your business or organisation will be kept strictly confidential (subject to legal limitations). Confidentiality, privacy and anonymity will be ensured in the collection, storage and publication of research material. Data generated by the study will be retained in accordance with the University's policy on Academic Integrity. The data generated in the course of the research will be kept securely in paper or electronic form for a period of ten years after the completion of the research project.

Since the sample of senior executive women and organisations is small and since many participants are likely to have high personal public profiles, or represent organisations with high public profiles, it may be that contributions may be identified and attributed to individual participants. The interview will be followed by a transcript which I will provide which will allow time for any information which you feel will breach confidentiality to be deleted or modified. Nevertheless, you should be aware of this possibility if you agree to participate in this study.

If you agree to take part:

Please contact me using the contact information on the attached email (preferably) or the contact information below should you wish to participate or to ask further questions. You will be required to sign a consent form prior to the first interview.

The results of the research study

The results of the research will be published as part of my doctoral thesis. The results may also be used in academic conferences and papers. A summary of findings will be made available to all participants and can be followed up by one to one meetings if requested. A copy of the thesis will be available at Oxford Brookes University.

Research organisation

I am conducting this research as a PhD student of the Faculty of Business at Oxford Brookes University. The research is supervised by the Associate Dean of Research and Knowledge Transfer and the Head of International Partnerships for the Faculty of Business. The research study is overseen by Professor Simonetta Manfredi, Director, Centre for Diversity Policy Research and Practice. The research has been approved by the University Research Ethics Committee, Oxford Brookes University.

Contact for Further Information

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If you have any concerns about the way in which the study has been conducted you should contact the Chair of the University Research Ethics Committee on ethics@brookes.ac.uk.
Thank you for taking time to read this information sheet.

1 June 2016.

APPENDIX 4: INTERVIEW PROMPT SHEET

<u>Interview Prompt Questions</u>

Reflection – no prompts – unstructured

What contributed to your successful career path (10/15 mins)

Semi-structured

Personal autobiographical

- When did you take the decision to focus on a senior executive post – or did it just happen/ opportunistic
- Did you consciously chose any tools/seek help to achieve a senior position – what were they
- What help did you have, if any, which helped you progress
- Watershed moments /tipping points

Reputational Capital

- How important is reputation to your **company**/previous company
- How important is national/professional visibility or **reputation to you**
- How important **work related networks**
- How important **social networks**
- Have you built a digital visibility / social media **identity**
- How important is your history of **business innovation** in gaining a senior post
- How important is **flexibility** in your business world
- **International experience** important in building your reputation
- **Non-Executive Director** experience important in building your reputation

Tools

- ➢ Coaching
- ➢ Mentoring
- ➢ Sponsorship
- ➢ Management Development Programmes – in house/external

Work place experience

- Traditional/ Neoliberal
- Linear workplace career paths or personalised portfolios

Other

- o When appointed to first senior **executive** post
- o Domestic Status – married/divorced/single/with partner
- o Children – ages
- o Partners Job and income level
- o Partners work and availability to support your career path
- o Your Education and location of school/university – how important.

ANYTHING YOU WISH TO SAY

APPENDIX 5: PARTICIPANT CONSENT SHEET

OXFORD BROOKES UNIVERSITY

CONSENT FORM

Full title of Project:

Women executive leaders: an investigation into the lived experience of women holding top posts in the UK

Name, position and contact address of Researcher:

Christa Wiggin MA

PhD student at Oxford Brookes University

Faculty of Business, Oxford Brookes University, Wheatley Campus, Oxford, OX33 1HX

Please initial box

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

☐

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving reason.

☐

3.   I agree to take part in the above study.

☐

Please initial box

Yes   No

4.   I agree to the interview being audio recorded   ☐   ☐

I understand that because of the small size of the sample of participants   ☐   ☐
this may have implications for anonymity.

I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in publications   ☐   ☐

I agree that my data gathered in this study may be stored (after it has   ☐   ☐
been anonymised) in a specialist data centre and may be used for future
research.

_____   _____   _____

Name of Participant   Date   Signature

_____   _____   _____

Name of Researcher   Date   Signature

APPENDIX 6:

EXAMPLE OF INITIAL CODING

Initial Coding 160118 ▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓

FOCUSED CODES   THEORETICAL CODES.

49 between managing and non-exec and an exec? So all the way through your career,

50 you're stakeholder managing upwards, sideways, everywhere, but you're

51 stakeholder managing executives within their roles. It's only when you're on a

52 board table that you are dealing with true non-execs who are coming into a

53 business who don't know it well, who can't possibly in 20 days a year or 60 days a

54 year if it's a massive corporate, they can't possibly know that business inside. So

55 there is a way of expressing things and dealing with them that you can only learn in

56 that environment. And also, it's the only time that you are really utterly

57 accountable. So, the whole delegation chain through an organisation says 'I'm

58 responsible for this, this is my patch.' When you're on a board, you're responsible

59 for everything. That's the whole purpose of a unitary board structure. And I,

60 implicitly, I've always been quite, I think we've probably talked about this, I'm not

61 very good at staying in my box, I'm not interested in staying in a box. So I've always

62 been, when I'm not on a board, pissed off, basically, because I'm supposed to stay

63 in this box and for me, that's not my nature. But actually, for lots of people, they're

64 used to being accountable for something, and that transition, from being

65 accountable for everything without being able to control it all is a very, very

66 different psychological approach. And I think you can only learn that by spending a

67 lot of time around boards. And I think you can only really learn it by being on a

68 board. And, now I'm fortunate, I've been on a lot of regulated boards on the way

69 up, if you're not in a regulated organisation you probably get less opportunities at

70 that, and it's harder to do that now that the rules on regulated boards are much

71 tighter. But getting that experience, whether it's on a charitable trust, whether it's

72 the kind of board, doesn't necessarily matter, I think it's invaluable. So that's one

73 piece. The second piece is, you can only learn, most of what you learn in life is from

74 watching others. And the best way to learn how to be effective around a board

Handwritten focused codes: Separating management & dealing with; Defining Non-Execs; Defining board responsibilities; Non-board responsibilities; Explaining motivation; Learning Board behaviours & Skills; Private vs Public Opportunities; How to learn

Handwritten theoretical codes: BECOMING COMPETENT; DIFFERENT ROLES NON-EXEC; MEETING CHALLENGE OF BOARD; ELITE CHARACTERISTICS; BECOMING COMPETENT; BROAD AND DEEP EXPERIENCE AND LEARNING

3

APPENDIX 7: EXAMPLE OF FIELDWORK NOTES

FIELDWORK NOTES ██████████████

Date Entered	Notes	*Comments*
25.11.16	This took place in ██ room in the ████████████. I have sat on ██████ here so I was familiar with the rather awe inspiring surroundings and also the very unfriendly security checks and clearance. I waited quite some time in reception and then her Clerk collected me. He instilled on me on the way up that she was a very busy woman. I got the impression that he would not have given me access if she had not insisted! The room was ████████████████████████████████, ████████████████████████████████ She was very welcoming, and guided me to a pair of huge fireside chairs. In no time she had command of what it was I wished to do and without hesitation and unperturbed by the recorder began the interview. I could hear her e-mails were coming in on her desk at about one a minute during the hour but she was unperturbed. It was relaxed and I felt comfortable. She was very honest I felt but also guarded in what she was able to say. I became aware of how little experience many have of the way in which ██ ██████ has to work and how constrained they are. She had much to say about the women's pipeline in ████████ and sad that ████████ was likely to remain with few women at the top, or nearer the top. She is towards retirement and I felt she would like to have had better news for women coming after her. She could not think of anyone who might succeed her immediately. A very honest appraisal of her domestic circumstances in relation to work/life balance and recognising that things will be different for the next generation. Keen to be sure I understood how much she has enjoyed her career and how she would not have changed a thing. All prompt points covered; several to return to in interview 2. The clerk appeared exactly after an hour. We had finished and she thanked me for finishing promptly and made several comments about the following interview. The clerk asked if this could be shorter – she said 'no' and gave a small smile. I enjoyed this interview; ██ said same, Both recorders worked well this time Really impressed with this woman. Summ: dislocation in the pipeline/generational change/no coaching/sponsor/cannot be neoliberal – security/independence. New: unconscious and conscious bias /presenteeism /working class/uncomfortable with reputation building /mentoring others talent management /no networking /international work	*My previous experience in the setting was an advantage.* *The importance of getting round PA's and in this case clerk's.* *Focus* *Guarded* *Sadness* *Honest. Aware of generational change* *Enjoyment* *More on sponsorship needed – surprising* *More important to finish when you say you will.* *Immense amount of info should I have used Nvivo*
23.02.17	This second interview had been re-arranged twice due to ██ being involved in an appeal which was extended. ██ had read the transcript and was concerned to establish that any content from the interview would be non-attributable and I reassured and agreed to ensure she had sight of any part of the thesis that may identify her. . ██ was keen to clarify anything and introduce new thoughts but I felt got irritated if any issues were repeated because she felt these had already been addressed.	*Need to re-iterate confidentiality.* *No need to repeat. very bright nothing missed.*