By the way … self-confidence – the key to success?

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Abstract

In the past there has been an abundance of psychological theories suggesting women had an innate fear of success – that a lack of success was somehow inherent to their nature (Lips, 1997). These ideas have been totally discredited, but suspicion of woman's ability to achieve still seems to linger in some quarters – not least among women themselves. Women in a variety of educational and career situations continue to express a lack of confidence in their own abilities. Whether innate or constructed, the issues of women's self-belief and self-confidence (and the closely related ability to easily move into or "fit"' an existing professional culture and to succeed within that culture) are visited in this paper in the area of women's education, and the professional domains of nursing, law and academe.

Introduction

The authors have worked closely with, and/or conducted research involving, women – ranging from high school students through to mature age career women. Although none of the authors set out to specifically examine the issue of self-confidence in women, they found it was raised in direct and indirect ways. Concepts of personal esteem and belief were mentioned as asides, but are vitally important to the long-term capacity of women to achieve, to sustain success within their chosen fields, and to make a contribution to, and an impact in, contemporary society.

Debbie Owens conducted research with final year male and female drama students from two secondary schools. Lorna Moxham reported that despite females making up the greatest component of the nursing workforce, female nursing students appear to be plagued by a lack of confidence that their male counterparts did not display. Kristy Richardson and Gerry Neal explored the journeys of women who had undertaken Research Higher Degree studies. Teresa Moore studied senior women who worked as academics and/or managers within a university. Gerry Neal

interviewed solicitors and was struck by the fact that women, in contrast to men, often spoke about a lack of self-confidence.

While many commentators use the terms self-confidence and self-esteem interchangeably (Lips, 1997, pp. 310–314); others are more specific, confining self-esteem to feelings of one's worth, and self-confidence to belief in one's competence and abilities (Johnson & McCoy, 2000). For the purposes of this paper, no distinction is drawn. This reflects the way in which many women used the terms to cover multiple concepts.

The authors have reported their independent experiences and drawn on the common themes and ideas that emerge across ages, experiences, careers and disciplines. They highlight the fact that women continue to report less confidence and belief in their abilities, and to enact "success" in different ways. They then pose some questions for future research and professional practice.

Getting started

Owens (2004) undertook a formal evaluation of secondary school drama-in-education. Her professional experience and her academic research informed her understanding that gender was a definitive agent of identity. She also found gender was a key factor in the sense of self and self-worth (be it self-love or loathing) voiced by her Year 12 drama students.

The students studied contemporary Australian plays, then wrote and performed student-devised dramatic expressions that challenged or reflected gendered discourses. Owens (2004) identified that gender was *influential in* determining the cultural attitudes and ideologies evident in the students' work. As Boumelha (1994, p. *xiv)* stated, "Gender … is implicated in every aspect of our personal, social and political existence." Gender within the drama classroom acted as a powerful agent of self-knowledge. When the students were asked to devise a script that reflected representations of masculinity and femininity, student A's (female) monologue focused on images of an unattractive physical self:

> 'I look like a hippo.'
> '"… now we have Ms Hugeass (sic) wearing a lovely gown,
> complimented (sic) by thunder thighs and donut rolls"'
> 'I should be part of AA anonymous,(sic) well more like fat arse
> anonymous.'
> ' Mirror, Mirror on the wall who's the fates(sic) of them all
> You are A.
> I know, its (sic) me my big fat thighs and stomach … no guy could
> ever love Miss Piggy …'

The student was clearly aware of the insidious nature of the male 'view' of the female form as object. Her character knows the audience (as both spectator and mirror) is judging her. The character cannot avoid the audience's gaze. In the character's final, desperate dialogue she pleads with the mirror (the audience):

> 'You make me fat…do you want me to go down in history as the
> fattest thing on earth, get me out…please. Mirror, mirror on the wall
> who's the thinnest of them all…I am…A is the thinnest of them all…'

When A subsequently describes the need for a ladder to climb to the top of an oversize toilet bowl, she challenges the common discursive context of this image – the notion of climbing the ladder to reach the upper echelons of society, a

celebration of success, rewarding effort in a man's world. Mirrors "control, contain, exclude and imprison" (Tait, 1994: 132), especially teenage girls. As A expects, her audience/mirror will judge her – probably harshly.

Student B (female) created a script titled *The woman without a face.* This student also utilised a mirror, not to reflect the female characters' images, rather to impose and reflect men's power over women. B states the script focus is masculine dominance over females where "… a woman's purpose is merely to serve men." The student uses both a mirror and white masks as linking devices between the episodes. "The mirror was there to represent the male dominance, which is mirrored in society throughout history." The mirror serves to perpetuate the injustices of gendered relationships as constructed by masculine discourse. The masks serve to take away female identity. "… This was to represent the nameless, faceless society of women…"

Student B's masked women mirror female passivity – "The king pulls one of the girls towards him … she is draped in his lap … he is stroking her neck and face … remaining girls … shielding themselves … ." This student's purpose, via the dramatic style she has employed, is to highlight the 'natural' social order. The mirror appears to sustain the male gaze and resonates with male beauty. The masks serve either as a female challenge to the natural order (beauty), or as a symbol of the inevitability of female powerlessness as the student perceives it.

Student C (female), in her preface, states "This pressure [teenage sex], often gender-specific, gives rise to issues of equality: what difficulties must teenage men and women endure as sexual beings, and how influential is gender in relation to these?" She uses titled episodes and in episode 3 'Mates', "staging is … confined to an oversized sardine tin [which] … reflects the fierce, impenetrable bond between male homosocial groups." In another episode 'The Ladder', "the higher level of the female represents her moral standards." However, it is the "persistence of the male to have power over the female, and his eventual success, [that] represent[s] the dominance of males … in relation to sex." C challenges and deconstructs male and female stories, both fantasy and real, yet (like other female students) expresses a sense of inevitability: "the notion of male power dominating female resistance can be identified in the female's 'mechanical' recital of two of the male's lines. This suggests that the male's words … must be dutifully followed by the female."

These extracts typified the work presented by the female students, and their often passive and negative images were in strong contrast to the images used by the male students. The issues of property and ownership dominated the boys' scripts; and they regularly wrote in aggressive and confrontational language. Before even moving on to the bigger stage of the adult world, the young girls in Owens' study were utilising powerful – even shocking – words and images to describe confident (sometimes 'beautiful') men, with women placed in menial and subservient roles which demanded a certain physical attractiveness, but seemed to allow no place for intellect or achievement. As Student C saw it, the language she used brought "realism", and the "relationships, tension and focus" she employed delivered a "message of male dominance and discrimination towards women …"

Further, Owens (2004) noted a striking difference in the self-belief expressed by students in a single sex girls' school from that expressed by students in an all boys' school. This pattern is reprised by university undergraduates in the next section.

Continuing the journey

In health sciences, Moxham worked in a university faculty where student numbers were overwhelmingly female. Known as a 'caring' profession, nursing is a predominantly female occupation. In Australia, albeit slowly, the number and proportion of male nurses has been increasing. Between 1997 and 2003, employed male nurses increased from 7.6 percent to 8.6 percent of all nurses. The trend will continue as male nurses are on average younger than female nurses and the proportion of males commencing basic nursing programmes is increasing (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2007). Yet, with so many women in nursing, LM wondered why female student nurses projected less confidence that their male counterparts?

She points out that confidence has a significant impact on the clinical performance of a nurse and hence an individual's own expectations of success are important. Nursing is founded in practice-integrated learning (PIL). Critical thinking and mastery of complex knowledge and skills are characteristic of nursing education, and are closely linked in a complicated practice environment with increasingly high levels of patient acuity. Nurses are not mere doctors' handmaidens, and the rise in complexity of the nurses' scope of practice makes them increasingly accountable for health care delivery in a variety of clinical settings. Nurses are keenly aware of this reality from day one of their education. Moxham observed that this reality appears to make female nursing students nervous or uncertain.

Haffer and Raingruber, (1998) noted that threats to confidence and ways of building confidence emerged as a significant aspect in students' experiences of clinical reasoning and critical thinking development. Moxham suggests that, anecdotally, it would appear that male nurses are more confident than their female counterparts – at least they portray that heightened confidence in their interactions with staff, patients and other students.

Brown, et al. (2003) describe professional confidence as a part of, related or integral to, professional identity, self-confidence and self-esteem, self concept, professional self-concept, competent clinical confidence, critical thinking and self-efficacy. The gendered nature of confidence in nursing students, as observed by Moxham, is consistent with a body of research (see generally Lips, 1997; Valian, 1998) that suggests women generally approach tasks with less self-confidence than men and have in general lower self-concept. Moxham noted the high level of abilities and skills nurses acquire through many years of practice, and also their unique body of knowledge, system of application (the nursing process), and strong values grounded in a professional and legislative code of ethical conduct. However, she was also acutely aware that "real success" demanded a high level of self-confidence.

As a nurse educator in the tertiary sector for some 17 years, she observed many students in a variety of settings. Particularly striking, was a typical situation where students were undertaking OSCAs (Objective Simulated Clinical Assessments). She observed that the female students consistently undervalued their own abilities, ranked themselves lower when asked to self-critique, and engaged in negative self-talk with each other prior to assessment. Male students on the other hand spoke confidently of how they would pass: "we have done this before", "it's just a test" and "I want to pass." They were often heard saying to female colleagues, "stop worrying", "don't sweat the small stuff" (failing an OSCA can impede progression so is hardly 'small') and "go in there and give them hell."

Moxham observed the men sitting in apparently relaxed mode in the student lounge drinking coffee and reading the newspaper ("it's too late to worry now"); while next to them the women were observed pacing and continually visiting the bathroom (definitely not drinking as this may cause them to leave their OSCA), and cramming in last minute information from textbooks and notes. The women regularly described their feelings of concern, how they thought they would fail, and how they worried that they would not know enough.

Moxham posits that this lack of confidence can often flow through to the students' graduate year where, despite clinical experiences in many settings during their baccalaureate programmes, many graduate nurses are not confident in their ability to provide competent care in life-and-death situations where clinical decisions must be made rapidly (Messmer, Jones, & Taylor, 2004).

She argues that self-confidence helps to project an aura that makes others trust in one's abilities to complete a task successfully. This is essential where patients expect competent, evidenced based care provided by proficient practitioners. Confidence helps nurses do what they need to do. It is also critical in empowering a health practitioner to source someone that can impart needed information and skills; or in knowing when to refer a patient on.

Moxham argues that undergraduate nursing programmes need to assist female students overcome any lack of self-confidence and belief so that they graduate as competent, safe, confident practitioners. She suggests that considerable more research is required in this area so the issues can be better understood, and addressed.

Branching out

Richardson and Neal researched postgraduates – examining the effect of negative supervisory experiences on the research and personal lives of women who had undertaken Research Higher Degree (RHD) studies. Again, self-confidence commonly arose as an issue for women students.

For the research, the framework of eleven key practices of effective postgraduate supervisors, identified by Richard James and Gabrielle Baldwin (1999), was used. This allowed research participants to easily identify the practices that were missing or negative for them as part of their supervisory experience. Participants were asked to identify their most negative experiences (i.e., whether practices were problematic, or absent, in their individual situation).

While none of the practices specifically concerns the issue of self-confidence, the comments of some participants reflected their sense of confidence and belief in their own abilities. As one reported:

> So at times I wasn't sure. The other times I was a bit scared too. I mean, you know, … I probably give this impression, you know, I can handle anything and seem confident and everything but there were times when I was a bit frightened. … I didn't want to feel like I was failing too. Like I didn't want people to pick up on that perception.

Another expressed concern for the ultimate value of her PhD, with this comment:

> [does my] concept make sense? … It's six years down the track, am I wasting my time doing this because the passion I felt for it and where it came from in the earlier years … situations have changed …

academically the focus on [my area of interest] has changed … am I
wasting my time?, by the time I have finished my PhD who will give a
diddley-squat anyway? …

When this participant was asked whether there was any advice she would give to
someone dealing with a difficult supervisory experience, she focussed upon the
need for women to "stop being polite … [and to] stop sitting back and waiting for
others to do what they say they will do in relation to … supervision." When asked
whether she considered it required considerable self-confidence to deal with the
supervisor and the institution in such an affirmative way, she agreed but
emphasised:

> I would advise any woman doing research especially externally …
> don't be polite … when it comes to your supervisor, don't fudge it like
> it did for the first two years with this particular supervisor. Don't fill
> in the once a fortnight box because "oh she's a terribly busy woman".
> Because then you denigrate yourself too. Because you're a terribly
> busy woman too, you've got a full time job, you've got a family,
> you've got all the other things that are happening in your life. It's that
> business about … 'well I mustn't be as important as my supervisor …
> or the institution.' And that's a load of gobbledygook.

The confidence to negotiate the competing issues of family, full time employment,
employment expectations and a difficult supervisory experience were particularly
noted by two research participants. In speaking about the difficulties she was
experiencing in the writing phase of her research, one participant said that "in
hindsight I probably should have bitten the bullet a lot sooner and changed my
supervisor." But at the time she noted:

> I knew I had a problem to deal with and I didn't really know how to
> deal with these lack of results. … . But I also postponed the problem
> because of personal issues that I wasn't properly coping with very
> well either.

The competing facets of life and the inherent pressure of "succeeding" in all those
aspects were too much for another woman who did not complete her RHD. She
noted:

> … I was fairly tired, but also I'm also fairly task driven … so the fact
> that I was actually, I guess involved in three tasks, as in raising a
> family, working and studying and doing none of them very well, it
> was fairly demoralising actually. And that's what I couldn't cope with.

In her opinion her "failure" to complete the RHD was her "fault":

> I would suggest that I was more the problem than the supervisor … at
> the end of the day, I guess if I was really committed to the PhD I
> should have been able to turn off [to the other things in my life].

Ultimately in her view, to be a "successful" PhD student you needed to be selfish.
In her words:

> My particular observation is, and there is no doubt that there are
> exceptions to the rule, but my observation is that people who complete
> their PhD, male or female are extremely selfish actually because that
> is all they are focussed on and everything else goes by the wayside. …
> and if you can do that you are successful.

This reflection of traditional (male) behaviour – competence and confidence in public predicated on support (usually by females) in private – is echoed in the next section where participants enact a blurring of the public-private divide.

Women in charge?

Also reminiscent of the "dramatic expressions" observed by Owens, Moore considered how "performances" within an academic workplace reflect a negotiation between interpretations of dominant discourses and subject positionings of the academics involved. These performances are influenced by what is valued and rewarded, or devalued and punished (Lucal, 1999), i.e., what is seen as constituting success. In this scenario punishment can include being overlooked for promotion, lack of status or recognition, lack of access to training opportunities, and remaining underrepresented in senior positions (Moore, 2005: p. 80).

Moore saw that there was indeed a dissonance between the subjectivities of actual or "real" women and the male construction of "woman" (Gatens, 1998). She saw that some women perform femininity to satisfy both their own, and many patriarchal, expectations – endeavouring to establish success in this way. Being a "good" woman is being a "successful" woman. She observed sexed "scripts" outside a drama classroom and in the real world of work – and how they can be imposed on women with significant consequences for how women perform (Elsdon, 1999) – particularly in the workplace.

One of Moore's interview participants, Veronica, expressed the dilemma faced by many career women, in this way:

> You are very conscious of being a woman and you are also very conscious of not wanting to be a stereotypical woman who cares for people, but you don't want to be the bastard who doesn't care. So, I mean … I think women who are in … in public places are constantly walking that fine line and I think that for many women it's almost impossible and they go over the edge one way or the other ...

Veronica emphasises particular workplace discourses that position women as caring and compassionate (or as uncaring and bastardly). As the good (hence, in the eyes of many, "successful") woman is constructed as the nurturer, this positioning carries an extra layer of emotional work that is not a prerequisite for a good male academic. Male academics are not necessarily judged on their ability to nurture or care, nor are they generally expected to "perform" this behaviour in order to be seen as successful. Moore's work highlighted the paradox that if an academic woman did not perform in the role of the caring, compassionate teacher, then she was not being a "real" woman. Alternatively, if she performed as a 'real' woman then she was not a "good" academic (whose behaviour was supposedly objective and aloof).

Moore suggests this struggle between public and private spheres saps women's self-confidence and creates uncertainty about their role and direction. Another participant, Alice, explained it this way:

> [Students] talk to you more, they come and consult with you where they wouldn't consult with the [male academics]; and yeah, they become more personal with you … Sometimes I feel like [some of the men] have a blatant disregard for students. Like as if the students are all a bit of a bore really. Whereas I think we [women in the faculty]

> almost take on a nurturing role with some of the students, and spend
> inordinate amounts of time with some of them, when I know my
> [male] colleagues have said 'our 20 minutes is up – go …

Although Alice is positioned as caring by her students who seek her consultation, she also positions herself in this role. Alice sees student support as part of her performance of a "good" academic – a successful academic. However, both students and male colleagues may see her response to students as being part of what women just do naturally. As Burton (1997: 30) suggests, there are pressures to conform to particular faculty environments and the overall university culture. It is difficult for the roles of "woman" and "academic" to be brought together in the same performance. To be seen as successful many women perform as "good" women, and hence as "good" teachers: in turn reinforcing traditional gender expectations. For academic women to be seen as (and to feel) successful, often a particular performance is required. The type, or the script, of that performance depends on the audience.

The ongoing dilemma of this performance for women can, and does, create its own uncertainties – its own lack of confidence. Moore has argued elsewhere (2005) that the performance of gender is a pre-requisite for being seen as successful. Successful women negotiate a range of dominant discourses when they are charting a career pathway in workplaces that often reinscribe traditional gender norms. "Success" on their terms may be in stark contrast to the success benchmarks of male colleagues. Participant Veronica discovered she was the lowest paid academic in her particular area:

> … I was told that I was the lowest paid academic … I now know that
> when one of my colleagues who works in a similar area, was offered a
> position here, he said, "I'll only come if you give me blah, blah, blah"
> and he negotiated a good set of conditions for himself

This demonstrates men "know the rules", while women will often lack the ability (confidence) to play by those same rules that are necessary to achieve success. For some at least, there is no self-belief in their "worth" to be paid more – to be given more. Alice spoke about a lack, not of monetary rewards, but of time and support:

> I mean it's [teaching and writing] extremely difficult to juggle. I harp
> on about Joe, but he's been here for four years now and has had one
> subject each semester to teach to enable him to finish his PhD ... now,
> I've got four subjects going this semester … and [I'd] like [to] finish
> my PhD … I can't do it.

Even though Alice was experiencing the workplace very differently from Joe, she still felt the need to be "good" in order to succeed:

> [I am] on tenurable track at the moment, which means basically that
> I'm on probation to be a "good girl" for three years and then if there's
> a position available you go on to tenure

Not only did Alice feel pressure to be "good", she also did not display enough confidence and belief in her own worth to protest the inequality of the workplace as it directly affected her and her ability to achieve success within it. This female lack of confidence was also observed in legal workplaces.

Into the fray

Neal researched the experiences of Queensland solicitors, including the concept of success. During interviews with nearly 40 solicitors, she noted a number of women raised the notion of self-confidence, or more significantly, the lack of it. In contrast, the question of confidence was rarely mentioned by men and then only in a positive way. One young man spoke about the life changing decision he and his wife made to move (with two very young children), from busy capital city lives to the country, even though he had no job to go to:

> Q - … did you think it was a bit of like jumping off the edge of the cliff
>
> A - it might sound a bit flippant but I really didn't care … ah, from the point of view that … you might say: hubris – you might say: ego – you might say: whatever it is – but I've always had self-confidence to the extent that … it didn't really trouble me

This solicitor's confidence was in stark contrast to many of the women interviewees who seemed racked by self doubt and uncertainty – about their qualifications, abilities, and promotional aspirations, as well as their level of acceptance within their chosen profession. The comments of one woman (a solicitor for 20 years and established partner) typified remarks made by female practitioners:

> A: I'm in a position where I've been working to get to for a while … I'm not sure if I'm there yet [laughs] …
>
> Q: but you are a partner -
>
> A: I'm still not sure whether … I'm not persuaded that I'm performing at optimum levels – as a partner – there's more that can be done …
>
> Q: so is that an individual sense for you – or something within the structure of the formal partnership …
>
> A: no – no – it's an individual thing … I'm quite nicely placed in the hierarchy – no – it's my individual performance that I think could be improved – that might be because I go through life thinking: I'm a fraud and they'll find out soon [laughs] …

Other women openly raised issues of self-confidence. Some recognised that their lack of confidence might impede their career progress, as one said:

> I realise for me confidence is a big issue – and that's something I need to work on if I'm going to continue in this profession …

Whether they personally feared, or avoided, success, or whether they were simply acknowledging a perceived impossibility of achieving traditional success benchmarks in the light of entrenched attitudes within (at least some parts of) the legal profession is perhaps impossible (for researcher or participant) to ascertain. One interview participant (male, late 30s) thought it was less likely women could succeed in *adversarial disciplines*; and another (male, early 30s) felt that although it might *sound sexist*, he queried whether women were suited to the essential *role of problem solver* required of a solicitor.

Interview remarks resonated in the survey phase of the research. Women and men were asked whether they considered they enjoyed equal access (with peers in their organisation, or generally in the profession) to a range of workplace benefits (including promotion/partnership). On the issue of equal access to promotion/partnership, 100 percent of male principals and 83.33 percent of the other men said they enjoyed equal access. However, only 78.26 percent of female

principals and 54.22 percent of other women reported that same level of confidence.

The fact that women who had already achieved partnership/principal status were reporting this lack of confidence admits a range of possibilities – perhaps they had achieved partnership later and/or with more difficulty than male colleagues had done; or perhaps they had achieved their principal status by going elsewhere (either another firm, or starting up their own practices). Similarly, perhaps the low percentage of women non-partners who reported confidence in their equality of access had not sought partnerships because they believed those doors were closed to them; or, they did not see such progression as the way to "success." These are areas that require research and exploration in the Queensland legal profession context.

There have been similar findings in respect of accountants in Australia (a study found 88 percent of men believed men and women had equal opportunity for promotion in their organisation, but only 55 percent of women held this view (O'Neill, Morley, Bellamy, & Jackson, 2001, p. 16); and in an Australia wide survey conducted during 2004 for the Australian Young Lawyers' Committee (Hudson, 2004).

Neal observed that women's lack of confidence seemed to be operating both at the personal level of their sense of self and self-belief; and also at the systemic level whereby these women lacked confidence in their basic ability to move through their profession in the same way as their male colleagues. She suggested that women's lack of self-belief is triggered by something deeper than current professional systems and structures. One well established and highly regarded female legal principal echoed Owens' school students' consciousness of the "male gaze" in this way –

> A: we used to joke there was a class for male lawyers at university in arrogance that female lawyers just didn't know about … we used to all joke about it – none of us seemed bothered by it, but that's not to say [we] haven't been affected by it later on … men seem to be much more confident – we as women seem to be more hesitant and unsure of our abilities … [in the city] mainly I worked with women lawyers and we all had the same thing … I remember we went on… an advocacy course and we girls spent our whole time wondering whether out hair up looked better on camera – or down – did we look skinnier side on … where the guys just got in there and didn't even care about the cameras being on … you know, we were all very concerned that somebody looking at us later on would make decisions as to our abilities based on size and shape, and, you know …
> Q: because perhaps you knew that society did make those decisions about women
> A: I guess so – I mean it's come through and obviously we've picked it up from somewhere … you just don't become stupidly vain like that overnight I suppose [laughs] -
> Q: what you're describing is not somebody sounding vain, but somebody sounding really worried …
> A: we were – we were –
> Q: … that you were going to be judged on the wrong criteria -
> A: yes – we were – we were insecure the whole way through the course – whereas we had another male solicitor who had come through 18 months behind us who was saying: … that's going to be a breeze …

> Q: … women have said to me about … confidence – do you think that
> is an issue for some women –
> A: definitely – definitely – we <u>definitely</u> lack … we joke about the
> arrogance training [for men] – it's probably just the male confidence
> and they're confident from the day they hit university … (emphasis
> that of interviewee)

In her study of Australian lawyers, Thornton (1996, p. 81) argued "the confidence exuded by … benchmark men in training arises from the belief that they are the rightful heirs to positions of power and privilege in our society."

Conclusion

Thoughts and ideas expressed by these different and disparate women represent "disappointment or despair over what kind of person [they are] (or have failed) to be" (Manion, 2003, p. 37). Manion, in her examination of the ways shame may be gendered, canvasses the view that "a large proportion of girls and women blame some general personal inadequacy for their failings while attributing their success to external sources …" (p. 24).

The significance of an individual's views about self-confidence or self-esteem is clear when key explanations for success are considered – ability, effort, luck, and task ease/difficulty (Lips, 1997, p. 313). As Lips reports, "females tend to attribute failure to lack of ability or to other stable causes, while males are more likely to attribute failure to externals/or unstable causes …" (p. 313). The female "pattern of taking little personal credit for success and blaming themselves for failure leads to discouragement and decreased self-confidence" (p. 313).

It is often argued that women have choice, but "[c]hoice has both voluntary and structured aspects; choices are made in circumstances we ourselves do not choose"; and the career journey/success of many women "cannot be explained by an internal flaw, but by the contexts in which they make decisions" (Apter, 1993, pp. 178, 179). For example, career choices for women may be "socially constructed through assignation to less prestigious work and underpinned by structural factors, such as the inadequacy of institutionalised child care" (Thornton, 1996, p. 81). As we have seen, choices may also be constructed through the performance of gender in strategic conformity with societal roles and expectations (Lucal, 1999).

While considerable research has been carried out in some specific areas (e.g., with a view to encouraging more women into scientific disciplines), and psychologists have carried out numerous studies of confidence levels for women and men; literature searches still reveal little about women's self-confidence in professional settings coupled with ways to enhance/manage this. The writers are concerned to avoid classifying this issue as a "woman's problem" and recognise that responses need to be multifaceted – perhaps incorporating better understandings of what is meant by "success", mentoring, training and development, structural supports (such as child care and flexible career paths), addressing systemic issues of sexual harassment, awareness training sponsored by professional bodies, and the like.

It is clear that women themselves recognise the difficulties at a young age, but it is suggested they rarely have the practical tools (or the structural supports) to empower them to overcome stereotypes of the confident male and uncertain female. Women in the workforce can seek assistance and find nothing. As one

female lawyer said: *I've looked outside to ... for courses, short courses, self-development type stuff – and it's just not out there ...*

It is suggested that a first, and vital step, is to re-open and widen the conversations and create more spaces where these complex concerns, and potential solutions, can be aired and debated.

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