

Reciprocal positions of female partners: constructing your gender identity in relation to 'Others'.

Melissa Carr

mcarr@bournemouth.ac.uk

Senior Lecturer in Leadership Development

Faculty of Management

Bournemouth University

Rm 501, The Executive Business Centre

Holdenhurst Road

Bournemouth

BH8 8EB

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Women's intra-gender peer relationships has been an under developed area within the literature, although a growing body of research is contributing to this field. This paper aims to develop this area further by examining the reciprocal positions of female partners within an accountancy firm. It examines eight in-depth, semi-structured interviews that were analysed using Davis and Harre's positioning theory as a theoretical framework. Five reciprocal positions were identified through asking the female partners about their networks and relationships with other female partners. In this way women were constructing and reconstructing their identities, taking up a position through discourse and then describing their reality from this position. These five positions reflect the way in which the women are 'doing gender' and constructing their professional identities at work by reflecting on similarities and differences they associate with the other female partners.

Word count: 1,977 words (excluding tables and references).

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Over the past twenty-five years, a wealth of research has looked at women's experiences in seeking to negotiate their way through organisations and into senior management positions (Tharenou, 1999, 2001; Burke & Collins, 2001; Oakley, 2000). Much of this research has focused on the barriers women face with the emphasis on women's experiences and relationships in relation to men, the majority group, dominating the hegemonic positions within organisations (Gherardi, 2001). However, there has been little research looking at women's experiences and relationships with other women, particularly at a senior level. This research aims to bridge this gap by considering the relationships and identity positioning of senior women in relation to their female peers.

Specifically this research draws on the literature around organisation demography (Kanter, 1977; Simpson, 2000; Wilson, 2000, Ely, 1994) to understand the consequences for women when they are tokens or 'Other' within organisations (Gherardi, 1996). It also draws on the literature around women's gender management strategies (Cassell & Walsh, 1997) and positioning theory (Davies & Harre, 1990) to conceptualise the way in which women are 'doing gender'. Specifically, it recognises that women's peer relationships are an underdeveloped area in the literature and that little is understood around how senior corporate women position themselves in relation to other women. The research question therefore considers the ways in which senior corporate women construct their own professional identities at work and position themselves in relation to other women.

Methods

Eight female partners in a large accountancy firm were interviewed to gain a greater understanding of how the women constructed their professional identities at work and positioned themselves in relation to the other female partners. As such, questions were focused around three broad themes:

- How would the women describe themselves in relation to the concept of the 'ideal partner'?
- How would they describe the other female partners and position themselves in relation to the other female partners?
- How would they describe the relationship they have with the other female partners?

All the women were partners in the same firm and interviews lasted on average 75 minutes. The interviews were transcribed and coded to look for the positions that women took in relation to each other (Davies & Harre, 1990).

The reciprocal positions adopted by the female partners

Throughout the interviews, women were asked to provide examples and comment on how they saw themselves in relation to aspects of their role; be it the concept of the ideal partner, how they saw themselves in relation to the other female partners, or the relationships they had with the other female partners. As the women answered questions, they provided examples, which positioned themselves in various different ways, constructing and reconstructing their identities through discourse. Broad themes or positions were elicited that were consistent across the interviews, and focussed on the relationships between the female partners, the way

in which the women related to the concept of the ideal partner and the positions they took in relation to the other female partners. This paper concentrates on the positions the women took in relation to each other.

Self in relation to the other female partners

When asked about how they saw themselves in relation to other female partners, the women took different positions depending on the examples they were giving. Five main positions were elicited from the data and these are discussed in more detail below:

1 Professional versus non-professional partners

One of the areas that arose in the data analysis concerned the positions the female partners took in relation to other female partners who they saw as either being professional or non-professional. Although a few partners made mentions of women who they saw as professional, this was the minority. When this did occur, it was in comparison to areas of working style such as being quick thinkers, energetic, having a can-do attitude and trustworthy.

However, all the partners interviewed took clear positions of seeing themselves as different to some of the other female partners who they saw as 'unprofessional'. Much of this was focussed on the way that the other women dressed and presented themselves in a corporate way. However, in terms of their appearance, women seemed to be in a double bind, a no win situation of either over emphasising or under emphasising their sexuality. For example, several of the partners talked about women who were too 'girly' and used their sexuality at work. There was also criticism of the women who were androgynous and not 'professionally turned out'. One of the partners interviewed summed it up by suggesting that these women were actively trying to deny their femininity. This was viewed as unprofessional and therefore the position of 'professional' was defined as someone managing their gender identity at work by not being scruffy or girly but presenting the image of the professional working women.

2 Gender blind/non-feminist versus aware of gender issues and inequalities

A further theme that was developed through the interviews was the extent to which the women positioned themselves as either gender blind or gender aware. In the main, the partners made references to the issues they had faced as women climbing the ranks in the firm. Some women, however, took a gender-blind position, saying that gender had not been an issue for them in their careers. Although they expressed a contradiction; on the one hand they didn't feel that there was a glass ceiling, but then they went on to list the barriers that women faced. Other women interviewed were very conscious of gender inequalities. Some talked about the glass-ceiling in terms of how they had seen men coming up through the firm at a faster rate than them, and others in terms of the perceptions that people held about women, for example, that they are not as competitive or assertive and therefore could not survive in some of the ruthless environments or business functions that these men worked in.

3 Self as home-work integrated versus self as home-work segregated

A key theme that arose in the interviews was whether the women positioned themselves as home-work integrated or home-work segregated. The majority of the women interviewed saw themselves very much as home-work integrated and this was probably due to the fact that all these women had fairly small children and so had other external commitments on their time.

Several of these women were working flexible contracts and, as one of the partners summarised it:

'I work flexibly, it is a blooming nightmare... there are people who do just what I do which is just cope with a combination of mum and nursery and a crisis on a regular basis...' (Sue)

For this group, they were unable to draw a distinction or boundary between work and home life as the two areas were constantly being compromised by each other. The women therefore had strong identities that were tied to their home and family commitments, which meant that they were taking a position as different from the other partners; men and childless women who were in effect classified as the same. There was a sense of frustration from some of the women that they felt they were not achieving fully in either area and sometimes they felt distanced from the other partners because of this.

A smaller group of women however saw themselves as home-work segregated. One woman expressed this separation due to her belief that it was inappropriate to bring home-related issues into work and that the two should be very much separated. She was concerned with women who talked about family life and described it as *'embarrassing'*. Therefore much of the concern around being home-work segregated came around keeping personal aspects of family life at home to not risk losing your professional persona. Maintaining that distance or boundary was a way to present a professional persona.

4 Self as working mother versus self as non-parent

Although in the above category, there was a link between partners who were mothers being home-work integrated, this was not always the case and a couple of women with children still preferred to adopt a position of home-work segregated. However, the next position identified was in relation to self as a working mother versus self as a non-parent. However, what was surprising here was that it was not whether or not you had children that defined the position adopted, rather the age of your children. So for those with younger children, there was a strong theme that emerged in the women's interviews about *'making the best of it'*, in other words, both work and home life were compromised and they felt they were just *'getting by'*. These women however, saw themselves as different from other women who they classified as non-parents. For the women with young children, they talked about the other women (non-parents or with older children) as being in a different position totally, almost as if they had broken through to the other side.

Whereas some women positioned themselves as working mothers, a few other women took the position of non-parent. This distinction, as previously stated, wasn't based on whether or not they had children, but more to do with the age of their children. One of the partners made a clear distinction that she identified as a non-parent when at work and expressed that for her, she came to work to get away from talking about her children.

5 Self as singular versus self as part of the female partner group

The final position that the women identified with was whether they saw themselves as singular or part of the wider female partner group. This was a really interesting area that prompted some of the most engaged discussions from the partners, probably because prior to these interviews, there had been several discussions about setting up a female partner's network. By far the majority of women took the position of being self as singular which was interesting given that many of them were able to discuss the strengths of relationships they

had with some other women. However, when it came to an issue around the firm specifically targeting or highlighting gender through the networks, the women had strong opinions on why they wouldn't want to be associated with it, one describing it as a 'poisoned chalice'.

All of the women interviewed were opposed to the idea of the women's network but had different strength of feelings towards it. For most, the view was that they didn't see why it was necessary, that they would choose their own networks and that it was making an issue of gender, highlighting the women as 'Other'. One of the women had a particularly strong reaction to the idea of any type of women's network and mixing with women generally. She talked about some of the women's event she had been to previously and how uncomfortable they had made her feel, again because gender had become an issue and was identified in a work context.

Generally however, the women saw themselves as singular rather than identified with the other female partners despite the shared experiences and the gender issues they had raised. As one partner expressed it, there weren't any female support networks in the firm and nor should they be. Although they may identify with individual women partners, they saw the female partner group as diverse and having no commonality.

Conclusions

Five reciprocal positions were identified through asking the female partners about their networks and relationships with other female partners. In this way women were constructing and reconstructing their identities, taking up a position through discourse and then describing their reality from this position (Davies & Harre, 1990). These five positions reflect the way in which the women are 'doing gender' and constructing their professional identities at work by reflecting on similarities and differences they associate with the other female partners.

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