Women's Leadership Ambition in Early Careers

Ruth Sealy

Charlotte Harman

City University London

Abstract

Assumptions are made that women leaving organizations in their late 30's and 40's are choosing to become stay-at-home mothers, implying that women have inherently lower career ambition than men. This, despite the fact that young women have been "over-achieving" at university level, receiving more and better graded degrees than young men for several years. Extant research has tended to focus either on student perceptions of careers and aspirations or on the older age-group struggling to stay in organizational life. This chapter recounts a qualitative study of young women in sought-after graduate roles and asks: "How do women construe their ambition at early career stages in a professional services organization?" Considering social cognitive career theory and the identity fit model of career motivation, the chapter defines women's early career identification with ambition and their struggle to maintain it in the current working environment, revealing that the psychological exit causing women to leave later in organizational life may start a decade earlier.

Women's Leadership Ambition in Early Careers

The "Opt-Out Revolution" was coined by Belkin (2003) to describe the phenomenon of women leaving organizations in their 30's and 40's, just as leadership positions appeared to be within their reach. Assumptions were made that women were choosing to become stay-at-home mothers, implying that women have inherently lower career ambition than men. This, despite the fact that young women have been "over-achieving" at university level, receiving more and better graded degrees than young men for several years (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2014).

Research has thus started to cast a more critical eye over women's career exit, especially given drives to increase the number of women at senior levels of organizations. It has focused on alternative explanations for women's exit, such as the lack of flexibility (Anderson, Vinnicombe, & Singh, 2010); the lack of appropriate role models (Sealy & Singh, 2010); diminishing perceptions of organizational meritocracy (Sealy, 2010); a lack of identity fit (Peters, Ryan, Haslam, & Fernandes, 2012); and the composite challenges of career and life stage (O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2005), all of which affect career ambition for the senior most organizational roles.

Anecdotal evidence from practitioners in professional service firms in the UK and Ireland reported a recent deterioration in stated ambition levels of young female lawyers, based on the perceived lack of success in the generation of women ahead of them. Extant research has tended to focus either on student perceptions of careers and aspirations (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994; Lent et al., 2003; Lips, 2000; Nauta & Epperson, 2003) or on the older age-group struggling to stay in organizational life (Antecol, 2010; Elfenbein & O'Reilly, 2007; Hewlett & Luce, 2005; Liff & Ward, 2001; Mallon & Cohen, 2001). Therefore, this chapter will explore perceptions of women's ambition in early career stages in professional services.

The remainder of the chapter will be organized as follows. First, we will give a review of existing literature looking at career motivation and ambition in women. Following a brief outline of our empirical qualitative study with early career professional women, the findings of the study will then be discussed in the context of the literature.

Background

A significant outcome of Belkin's "Opt-out Revolution" article was the perpetuation of the view that women have inherently lower ambition than men and simply do not desire senior organizational positions. While this may appear controversial or even offensive, there are several studies that seemingly support this claim (Powell, 1999; Terjesen & Singh, 2008). Van Vianen and Fischer (2002), for example, examined 350 Dutch government employees from both middle management and general staff positions and found that males at both levels had significantly stronger ambitions to pursue higher managerial positions than females. In a qualitative study, Fels (2004) found that women refused to identify with the word ambition, associating it with negative qualities such as selfishness, manipulation, and egotism, whereas males asserted it was an integral part of their working lives. Such results could suggest that women neither desire senior positions nor wish to be seen as ambitious, which Fels attributes to early socialization.

In contrast, more recent research has challenged the argument that women lack ambition, especially when they enter the workplace. Watts, Frame, Moffett, Van Hein, and Hein (2015), for example, found female students in the US to express significantly higher career aspirations than male students. Project 28-40, a survey of 23,000 working women across the UK and Ireland in 2014, affirmed that women rated themselves as ambitious and actively sought opportunities for career progression, with 70% stating they desired leadership positions (Opportunity Now, 2014). Furthermore, several studies have found that when women left, many did not opt-out of the workplace altogether, but instead moved to roles in which they could better achieve work-life balance (Anderson et al., 2010; Hewlett & Luce,

2005; Mallon & Cohen, 2001; Marshall, 2000). These results suggested that women are ambitious, but they leave organizations where they feel their ambitions cannot be fulfilled. This then calls into question how we define "ambition" or "career motivation" and whether they are the same thing.

Recent qualitative research has the potential to explain women's reluctance to position themselves as ambitious, seen in prior research. Based on social role theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), Sools, van Engen, and Baerveldt's (2007) qualitative study found explicit associations between women's ambition and role incongruity. Both male and female participants tried to disassociate themselves from a negative side of ambition, which referred to a desire for quick progression at the expense of others. Instead, they associated themselves with a drive and keenness that must be implicitly portrayed and not explicitly stated in order to be socially acceptable. However, it was clear that this drive and keenness were associated with long working hours, incongruent with motherhood (as opposed to fatherhood), and women's social role in society. Therefore, participants reported a common assumption: that ambition disappears after women have children. Women thus face a double bind; it is very difficult both to convey ambition implicitly and to counter the stereotype against them. This finding suggests that the women in Fels' (2004) study may have refused to identify as ambitious due to the negative connotations associated with explicitly confirming their ambition and its incongruence with their feminine role in society. These stereotypes therefore conceal gender discrimination and ensure men have a better chance of being, and wanting to be, promoted (Sools et al, 2007; Lewis & Simpson, 2012), perpetuating demographic imbalances at managerial levels.

In the early 1990's, Ely (1994, 1995) compared women's attitudes to their careers in professional service firms (PSFs) with gender balanced and imbalanced leadership to identify social influences. Based on Kanter's work on tokenism (1977), Ely showed how, when there was fewer than 15% female leadership, women became socially constructed as "other."

Social identity theory explains clear status differences that exist between social groups (e.g. male and female; white and ethnic minority). When individuals belong to a lower status group, their group identification is less attractive and they may engage in strategies to enhance their self-concept. In applying this theory to women in the workplace, Ely suggested that women may either lower their career goals in order to preserve their self-concept or de-feminize by distancing themselves from other women and taking on male attributes in order to progress. Women in male-dominated organizations were less likely to respect the few women in senior positions and did not perceive them as legitimate role models. They were also less likely to identify positively with their female peers and did not find support in same-sex relationships, evidencing de-feminization. The reverse was true in the gender balanced organizations. Subsequently, junior female managers found it hard to identify with leaders in a male-dominated environment and, as Lewis and Simpson (2012) advocated, it seems that continuing gendered processes reinforced women's lower social status. But these studies are over 20 years old, so one has to wonder if the world of work is different for junior or middle-manager women today. Over the subsequent two and a half decades, there has been a spate of studies at mid-managerial levels endeavouring to explain why women were not reaching the most senior roles, often with a focus on demographic dissimilarity (e.g., Kirchmeyer, 2002; Liff &Ward, 2001; Polzer, Milton, & Swann, 2002).

Whereas management literature has focused significantly on the barriers to women's careers, often organizational and structural, literature from psychology has focused more on turnover theory. Such literature often highlights the cost of turnover to organizations (see Allen, Bryant, & Vardaman, 2010 for a review) and tends to be dominated by cross-sectional survey designs, attempting to correlate particular variables and implying causality. However, despite decades of research, the literature can only explain a very limited variance in turnover decisions (Griffiths, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000) and, as Russell (2013) suggested, it does not substantially "help managers deal with real voluntary turnover problems" (p. 161). Allen,

Hancock, Vardaman, and Mckee (2014) suggested that this reluctance to move away from such a dominant analytical mindset (i.e., single measureable variables causing turnover) "may slow theoretical progress by constraining the conceptualization of research questions" (pp. S61-62), and called for consideration of more varied perspectives.

Recent qualitative research has considered the interaction of both organizational and psychological factors on women's career designs, affected by the lack of appropriate role models (Sealy & Singh, 2010) and the impact of a changing view of meritocracy leading to a declining sense of belief of possibility (Sealy, 2010). Building on this, a theoretical model has also challenged the lower ambition assumption, articulating that women's ambition erodes over time due to organizational factors. Peters, Ryan, Haslam, and Fernandes (2012) suggested that, at middle levels, women's perceived lack of similarity with male-dominated leadership positions (e.g., in consultant surgery) leads to disidentification, and this is associated with increased psychological exit and women surgeons leaving. Similarly men's perceived lack of fit with more macho marine commandos was found to be associated with reduced identification and motivation (Peters, Ryan, & Haslam, 2015). Based on questionnaire data across a range of sectors and samples, these authors have proposed their Identity Fit Model of Career Motivation (IFMCM). They defined career ambition/motivation as the extent to which individuals desired promotion and recognition, prioritized their career goals, and were willing to make sacrifices for their career (Peters, Ryan, & Haslam, 2013). Individuals' diminishing belief in the possibility of their success caused them to recalibrate their ambition and ultimately leave.

An alternative theory applied to women's ambition is social cognitive career theory (SCCT), implicating further internal factors important for career choices and persistence (Day & Allen, 2004; Lent et al., 1994; Lent et al., 2003). Based on Bandura's Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1986), SCCT explains the key roles of belief in one's ability to be successful at a task (Self-Efficacy) and the cost/benefit analysis of expected outcomes

(Outcome Expectations), which takes into account perceived barriers and supports. SCCT was initially proposed to explain student subject choice and persistence, and it has more recently looked at women's "non-traditional" subject choice (e.g., see Nauta & Epperson, 2003, looking at science, math, and engineering); subsequent career choice; and interest shown in elite leadership positions (Dickerson & Taylor, 2000; Yeagley, Subich, & Tokar 2010). In all cases, self-efficacy was a key predictor.

However, research has also shown that, even if women have self-efficacy about their leadership capability, if they believe there to be significant barriers, they may either be discouraged from pursuing such roles (Lips, 2000) or it may lead to intentions to leave (Singh et al., 2013). Women's leadership interest and aspiration is affected first and foremost by their belief in their competence and ability to perform, but then also by the likelihood of their success. As Yeagley et al. (2010) pointed out, these internal beliefs of self-efficacy "do not develop in a social vacuum," but rather "are formed in the context of other background experiences, culture, and contextual affordances" (p. 37). Recent work in the UK considered how gendered cultures are prevalent in senior schools, thus affecting subject choice and careers advice for girls (Institute of Physics, 2013). As Lewis and Simpson (2012) state, male dominated organizations, discriminatory stereotypes, and gendered processes are associated with a disconnect between women and leadership and a diminished possibility of women fulfilling both their gender role and the role of the successful businesswoman. This leads to a recalibration of career goals to preserve the self-concept. The broader background of these women's careers, including the sex roles into which men and women have been socialized and the contextual influences that affect women's willingness to translated interest into goals for leadership, cannot be ignored and require further investigation (Fitzsimmons, Callan, & Paulsen, 2014; Yeagley et al., 2010).

The SCCT empirical studies have focused predominantly on college students, and managerial studies have focused at more senior levels or in non-business settings.

Unfortunately, 20 years since Ely's (1994, 1995) seminal work, we still do not know how young female professionals view their careers and ambition levels. Therefore, for this project, we asked the question: "How do women construe their ambition at early career stages in a professional services organization?"

The Study

This research focused on eliciting women's subjective experience and perceptions of ambition in order to address the gap in the literature and extend theoretical frameworks. Therefore, we followed an interpretivist approach and adopted an abductive strategy through a qualitative design (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Willig, 2013). The study focused on 20 women in their 20's and early 30's, from the London-based advisory function of a professional services organization (PSORG). The industry was chosen due to its traditionally masculine culture, but it had also had a recent increase in feminization and sustained efforts to increase diversity. To capture their experiences at the start of the prime opt-out period, the women in the sample had all been with the PSORG for a minimum of two years; they had been sufficiently immersed into the organizational culture but had not yet made managerial level.

We conducted semi-structured interviews face-to-face. There were 18 questions to explore how these women defined and experienced ambition; the extent of their ambition and how this had changed during their time at their organization; and the importance of prototype similarity, self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and barriers to them for their ambition. The data were analyzed using template analysis (King, 2012), as it is not bound to a particular epistemological position and permits the use of a-priori themes that relate to the existing literature. These a-priori themes were based on the IFMCM and SCCT, and through the analysis were revised and expanded upon to create a comprehensive thematic map. These themes will be discussed in the following sections.

Defining and Declaring Ambition

The young professional women in this study were very clear that they identified as ambitious and were motivated to be successful in their careers. However, they were also clear that their definition of "success" included work and non-work domains and, even at this early stage (i.e., before parenthood), were taking a more holistic approach to their working lives. There were many different goals or areas towards which their ambition was directed, including achieving work-life balance and happiness. This leads us to question whether our academic definition of career ambition is still too biased towards a narrow masculine-stereotyped version of success.

Characteristic of their life stage (O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2005), their in-work ambition was directed towards learning, being challenged, making a difference, and adding value. When talking about success in the work environment, their desire for reaching seniority defined the strength of their ambition. However, there was also near unanimity in declaring their futures at PSORG were uncertain, with an unwillingness to commit to a role at PSORG or long-term goals. These women wanted to keep their options open, not limit themselves, and be able to adapt to the changeable working environment. They distinguished between a long-term, stable "drive to succeed" and a short-term motivation to carry out those ambitions within a role at PSORG, which they acknowledged was affected by external and organizational factors. In doing so, they implied that the determination to pursue their goals, despite some reduced motivation, demonstrated high ambition. Some acknowledged that this reluctance to commit solely to PSORG may hinder their progress, but they felt that by doing so, they were protecting their ambition.

This was because their ambition was seen as a "state" rather than a specified end-goal, as something that was theirs alone and formed part of their identity. They wanted to be seen as ambitious, albeit to varying extents. There was a strong theme that ambition was synonymous with being driven, proactive, and pursuing success; not only having goals, but also knowing how to achieve them. Only a few participants acknowledged a negative side to

ambition in their definition, which was more associated with negative "cut-throat style" behaviors of certain individuals. These participants still had a clear view that they could be, and indeed were, ambitious without needing to engage in such behaviors.

Fit and Their Future

The young women in this study had left the university environment with high ambitions and what a few described as "unrealistic enthusiasm." Having always achieved in education, these women were unprepared for the requirements of workplace success. Gender differences became apparent for the first time, and they spoke of being confronted by a new reality and having to adjust their ambitions.

Considering the demographics of the organization and the IFMCM, many of the women spoke of looking up and seeing three issues of "Fit": only one type of individual succeeding, only one approach to work, and only "defeminized" women. While the demographics at peer level were reasonably diverse, the participants saw the partners as very male-dominated—all from a similar, privileged background—to which they found hard to relate; hence, they struggled to envisage themselves reaching senior positions. Gender was not the sole reason participants lacked similarity with leaders; they also contrasted their skillset and approach to work, which made senior positions less attractive or appear unobtainable. The young women reported that, of the few female senior leaders, most were defeminized, labelled as "fierce," and (to their knowledge) did not have children. They believed the female leaders neither had the work-life balance they themselves desired, nor had to overcome the additional challenges of motherhood, which was particularly problematic for those young women who wanted a family. Therefore, many reported feeling frustrated and unsure whether they could reach, or would enjoy, senior positions, while also being true to themselves. Together, in line with the IFMCM, these issues of "fit" caused the young women to lower their expectations of career success or they considered leaving. Interestingly, the perspectives of one subgroup, with participants from a specific, gender

diverse department, actually contrasted starkly. These individuals felt they could relate to those around them at all levels, felt unrestricted, and believed they could reach senior levels while remaining authentic. Echoing Sealy and Singh (2010), some participants identified with "close role models" at a more senior level to them (not necessarily at partner or director level), who they felt were exceptional male or female leaders and signalled hope of progression. They also experienced a collaborative and supportive environment within which they felt they "fit". This fit was associated with feelings of belonging, enjoyment, and a desire to fulfil their ambitions at PSORG.

However, for most, there were several references to a "boys club," to which they did not belong. They inferred that only men reap the benefits of in-group membership, such as more natural relationships with senior employees. Relatedly, they felt the ways in which they could add value by being different were not recognized; they reported that they were "stagnating," not fulfilling their ambitions, and gaining insufficient enjoyment from their work. This lack of fit permeated their long-term outlook of PSORG, questioning the likelihood of their success and therefore their PSORG ambitions, leading to exit thoughts and desires to pursue ambition elsewhere.

A Violation of Trust

What was clear from these interviews, but is perhaps lacking in the IFMCM, is the strength of the affective reaction of the participants. IFMCM can be considered as a rational, cognitive process—a logical deduction from what appears to have gone before—that success is unlikely and therefore exit is the sensible option. However, extant literature is lacking in explaining the emotional side of such decision-making. One possible explanation is that participants experienced a violation of trust over time, a gradual erosion of the psychological contract of expectations with the organization (Searle & Ball, 2004). When things go wrong for individuals in organizations, a bank of trust built up over time can be drawn upon to cushion negative impacts (Dietz & Den Hartog, 2006). Also over time, however, individuals

can use observations of behavioral evidence (Weick, 2001) to create a mental model of the

intent of the organization, which may not include their personal career success. This

breakdown of trust can affect employees' workplace well-being, motivation, and intentions to

remain (Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development, 2012).

Many of the young women in this study felt undervalued, with their efforts

unrecognized, triggering the desire to leave and pursue their ambitions in an environment

where women would be more respected and would face less hindrance. The perceived intent

of the organization is often conveyed through human resource practices (Searle & Ball,

2004), and the participants expressed frustration at the strict grading system imposed on them

(i.e., time-served valued more than quality of output). They reported a lack of recognition for

high performers, making it difficult to progress quickly or exceed expectations. Furthermore,

hierarchical pressures often encouraged presenteeism (i.e., long working hours and pressure

to be in the office), which they resented for being unnecessary and impeding their work-life

balance.

Many participants reported that the current promotion process was vague and

subjective, with little focus on skills or merit and more emphasis on partner sponsorship.

They therefore did not understand requirements for promotion, voiced frustration over the

lack of honesty and openness of communication, and questioned the fairness of the process.

Other participants reported a need to "learn to play the corporate game" in order to progress.

Specifically it was important to self-promote, network, and develop relationships with

partners who are responsible for sponsoring them in the promotion process. This is more

challenging for young women, excluded from "the boys' club," who struggled to find

common ground upon which to build such relationships. Echoing Kumra and Vinncombe's

(2008) professional service firm study, most of these young women reported feeling

uncomfortable and "fake" when trying to achieve this visibility, and thus they felt

disadvantaged in the promotion process.

Social Role Conflicts

The promotion process, as reported by the participants, reflected very masculine gendered notions of how to get on in PSORG, which conflicted with their values and placed them in the "double bind" of social role theory by needing them to be both "communal" and "agentic." Participants reported the need to overcome the stereotypes that label them as unambitious and ineffective in their roles, and they faced negative reactions induced by acting inconsistently with these labels. Most of these women also reported a perception that they would inevitably face increased resentment and sexism from both peers and wider society if they tried to be both a successful businesswoman and a mother, due to the incongruence between the two. Given their belief that few senior women had children or achieved work-life balance, they did not appear to register the irony of facing such sexism from female peers, assuming others would be in the same situation. In addition, negative media influences and stereotypes of success that they reported as incongruent with their real life experiences appeared to perpetuate the intransigence of the normative social roles. Resultantly, some reported a reduction in ambition due to the belief that stereotypes were unbreakable and that achieving workplace ambitions would no longer be satisfying or enjoyable due to the resentment they would face.

Disappointingly, the majority of participants believed it would be impossible to be "a responsible parent" or achieve work-life balance alongside career progression and success. This belief caused severe frustration, exasperation, and the need to make sacrifices and adapt their ambitions accordingly. They implied that the pressure to make this sacrifice was exclusively women's and that men did not face the same challenges. Also disappointing was that they did not mention that they would challenge these normative social roles in the future. PSORG's promotion structure and diversity and inclusion programs were reported to exacerbate this pressure, expecting women to progress at the same rate as men but not expecting men to have parenting responsibilities. Therefore, many participants reported

adapting their ambitions in the face of this impossibility—for example, by increasing their effort in order to reach a level of sufficient seniority before having children or by abandoning their career ambitions altogether.

Due to the stereotypes against them, increased pressure, and the need to take time out to have children, these young women reported that they would need to try harder, take longer, and outperform men in order to achieve the same level of success. Consequently, some expressed the need to adapt their ambitions to be more realistic and reflect these challenges. Implicit in most participants' responses was the need to be robust and resilient in order to face the role-incongruity, resentment, and the pressure associated with being a female in the workplace and maintain their ambition.

Self-Efficacy, Upbringing, and Support as Enablers of Ambition

Despite the challenges mentioned above, most of the women were positive about their ambitions and aspirations. Throughout the interviews, many participants reported that their socioeconomic status, schooling, and parental influences had been particularly important instillers of ambition; whether schools encouraged competition and expected professional jobs was cited as a justification for the women's self-efficacy and drive. In addition, the extent to which parents had role modeled working in professional arenas shaped participants' efficacy beliefs and how much help they had received in preparation for the work environment. So to misquote Alexandre Dumas (1854): "Nothing succeeds like (expectations of) success"!

While the majority of the women reported very strong ambition when they graduated from universities, they now varied in the degree to which they believed their ambition to be stable, which could be linked to their levels of self-efficacy (i.e., belief in their ability to succeed at higher organizational levels). Some emphasized that self-efficacy was integral to having the persistence to conquer adversity, maintain levels of ambition, and also be able to progress within the male-dominated culture and achieve success in the organization. And, if

they had a strong belief in their own abilities and their chances of success, gender similarity for them was less important; they emphasized meritocracy and similarity of skills, convinced they could reach senior positions by being good at their job.

However, women who expressed lower levels of self-belief also experienced fluctuations or a decline in ambition and were more strongly influenced by external factors affecting their outcome expectations. These women were only confident if they had proof they could perform the required behaviors and that their goals were entirely realistic; while also aware that this lack of self-belief would hinder their progression. This need for proof relates to the seminal work of Ibarra (1999) on the (contextual) need and (gendered) ability to form "provisional selves." Ibarra found that, in gender-imbalanced environments, women in professional service firms searched (often in vain) for "global" role models rather than "cherry-picking" positive attributes from various leaders, as their male colleague did, and thus found it much harder to envision themselves in leadership roles.

For some participants, the self-doubt grew during their time at PSORG as they recognized the barriers and concluded that the potential costs (lack of work-life balance and dual role conflict in trying to reach higher levels) did not appear to be justified by potential benefits. From this, they adjusted their outcome expectations and questioned their ability and ambition.

For these women who struggled with low self-efficacy and fluctuating ambition, three forms of support from others were cited as particularly integral to enabling their ambition. The first, as suggested by SCCT, was having organizational support which helped them to progress and "play the corporate game" (i.e., having managers or mentors who held open and honest conversations with them, supported them in the promotion process, and helped push them to overcome their development areas and barriers). Recognition of achievements was also cited as a form of support, increasing participants' self-efficacy and affirming their ambitions. Those who reported receiving little support and little recognition, therefore, felt

more alone in the process. The third form was having a supportive partner at home who shared similar career perspectives, valued not resented women's high ambition, and supported and shared family responsibilities. Participants reported this home support as enabling them to fulfil their ambitions, dedicate sufficient time to work to progress, and maintain work-life balance. Otherwise, participants reported the need to sacrifice their ambitions.

Concluding Thoughts

It was encouraging to see that the definitions of ambition given by these early career women were positive and, in particular, that negative attributes of behaviors associated with overly ambitious individuals did not sully the whole concept. In this way, ambition and career motivation appeared much more acceptable to these young women than their predecessors. However, as academics, we have work to do on the definition of these terms, in understanding that ambition is not confined to particular elite leadership roles. While understanding there are varied definitions of success, researchers need to consider whether future work should give credence to definitions of "ambition" that include non-work domains rather than dismissing them as irrelevant, as is often the case.

It was disappointing that, for the most part, these young women perceived there to be a lack of leaders to whom they felt similar (e.g., personality, work approach, or challenges faced), and a male-dominated culture created feelings that they did not belong and that, therefore, success was unrealistic. In that respect, very little progress appears to have been made since Ely's work in the 1990's. This had the effect of either a decrease in level of ambition, a decrease in desire to fulfil their ambition at PSORG, and/or a change in their definition of success. These barriers to their career progression meant that the women experienced a violation of trust, conveyed through poor HR processes and practices around promotion and recognition. The frustration at slow career progress and an abhorrence of

presenteeism are issues cited in other research on the Millennial Generation. Therefore, future research might examine whether young men at PSORG feel the same.

The intransigence of normative social roles still leads many to assume that women leave organizational life only due to caring commitments and the challenges of not being able to maintain an acceptable level of work-life balance. However, this study shows that the ambition and motivation levels of many young women (in this case aged 24-32) were, even before they encountered parenthood, already in decline or directed towards other definitions of success.

The findings from this study revealed a complex interplay of internal and external factors. While the temporal precedence of self-efficacy is shown in longitudinal work by Lent et al. (2008), this must not be used as an "excuse" for a lack of responsibility within the organization. Self-efficacy is likely to have developed over time with long term influences, but outcome expectations will have been formed during the period at PSORG and, as the findings from this study suggest, those expectations can be addressed and managed. Therefore, some practical suggestions from this study are that mentors, coaches, and managers should help women consider their future, acknowledge inevitable future barriers, and create strategies for the organization to help overcome them. Improving clarity and objectivity of the promotion process would be welcomed by these young women and perhaps most other workers too, with a shift in value from hours worked to quality of output. While some would advocate "learning the rules to play the game," we would question why women and others should need to self-promote to such an extent in order to get recognized. Strong organizational human resource talent management systems should be better at recognizing talent and, rather than relying on those best at self-promotion "pushing" themselves through, talent managers should encourage and support their talented workers by "pulling" them through.

Very few participants said that their gender positively impacted their ambition, by driving them to succeed more and prove others wrong. This drive is associated with a desire to make a difference, be a role model, and ensure that organizational life will be easier for women in the future, demonstrating awareness of gender at some level. However, when questioned at the end of the interview, the majority of the women declared that they had never consciously considered gender to affect their ambition and that the interview had been illuminating. This may just have brought to the fore issues that, at some level, had become apparent. One of the challenges of claiming ambition to be highly intrinsic is that it plays into Western society's individualized and increasingly psychologized approach to problems individuals encounter within the workplace. The concept of "self-confidence" has become prevalent in recent years in explaining women's lack of career progress. Gill and Orgad (2016) explained how the "cult(ure) of confidence" (p. 324) is used to identify, diagnose, and propose solutions particularly to women's issues. This neoliberal postfeminist approach individualizes problems of career self-confidence, turning the spotlight away from structural inequalities and reifying "self-work and self-regulation" (p. 324), pathologizing the problem (and therefore the solution) to what we know are organizational and societal issues.

In conclusion, this chapter gave a detailed account of women's early career identification with ambition and their struggle to maintain it in the current working environment. Findings from the study partially supported existing models and research, implicating self-efficacy, organizational barriers, and a lack of similar leaders as key influences on ambition. Yet, they also revealed how issues that organizations are currently trying to tackle at senior levels are already influencing how women identify with ambition early on. Women's ambition is affected by the workplace context from the early stages of their career. Our advice: If organizations want to stem the "out-flow" of women leaving in their 30's and 40's, they should address the issues identified above a decade earlier.

References

Allen, D. G., Bryant, P. C., & Vardaman, J. M. (2010). Retaining talent: Replacing

misconceptions with evidence-based strategies. *The Academy of Management

Perspectives*, *24*(2), 48-64.

Allen, D. G., Hancock, J. I., Vardaman, J. M., & Mckee, D. N. (2014). Analytical mindsets in

turnover research. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *35*(1), S61-S86. doi:

10.1002/job.1912

Anderson, D., Vinnicombe, S., & Singh, V. (2010). Women partners leaving the firm:

Choice, what choice? *Gender in Management: An International Journal, 25*(3), 170-

183.

Antecol, H. (2010). *The opt-out revolution: A descriptive analysis* (IZA Discussion Paper No.

5089). Retrieved from http://ftp.iza.org/dp5089.pdf

Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory.*

Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Belkin, L. (2003, October 26). Q: Why don't more women choose to get to the top? A: They

choose not to. *New York Times Magazine*, *58*, 42–47.

Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development. (2012). *Where has all the trust gone:

Stewardship, leadership and governance*. London, UK: Chartered Institute of Personnel

and Development.

Day, R., & Allen, T. D. (2004). The relationship between career motivation and self-efficacy

with protégé success. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 64*(1)*,* 72-91.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research.*

London, England: Sage Publications.

Dickerson, A., & Taylor, A. (2000). Self-limiting behavior in women: Self-esteem and self-

efficacy as predictors. *Group & Organization Management, 25*(2), 191−210.

Dietz, G., & Den Hartog, D. N. (2006). Measuring trust inside organizations. *Personnel Review*, *35*(5), 557-588.

Dumas, A. (1984). *Ange Pitou*, Vol. 1, Chapter 7 (original quote: *"Rien ne réussit comme le succès")*.

Eagly, A. H., & Karau, J. (2002). Role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders. *Psychological Review, 109*(3)*, 573−598*.

Elfenbein, H. A., & O'Reilly, C. A. (2007). Fitting in: The effects of relational demography and person-culture fit on group process and performance. *Group & Organisation Management, 32*(1)*, 109-142.

Ely, R. J. (1994). The effects of organisational demographics and social identity on relationships among professional women. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 39*(2)*, 203-238.

Ely, R. J. (1995). The power of demography: women's social constructions of gender identity at work. *Academy of Management Journal*, *38*(3), 589– 634

Fels, A. (2004). Do women lack ambition? *Harvard Business Review, 82*(4)*, 50-60.

Fitzsimmons, T. W., Callan, V. J., & Paulsen, N. (2014). Gender disparity in the C-suite: Do male and female CEOs differ in how they reached the top? *The Leadership Quarterly 25*(2), 245–266.

Gill, R., & Orgad, S. (2016). The confidence cult(ure). *Australian Feminist Studies, 30*(86), 324-344. doi: 10.1080/08164649.2016.1148001

Griffiths, R. W., Hom, P. W., & Gaertner, S. (2000). A meta-analysis of antecedents and correlates of employee turnover: Update, moderator tests, and research implications for the next millennium. *Journal of Management*, *26*(3), 463–488.

Hewlett, S. A., & Luce, C. B. (2005, March). Off-ramps and on-ramps: keeping talented women on the road to success. *Harvard Business Review, 83*(3), 43-54.

Higher Education Statistics Agency. (2014). Table 11 - First degree qualifiers by sex, mode of study and class of first degree 2010/11 to 2014/15. Figures retrieved from: https://www.hesa.ac.uk/

Ibarra, H. (1999). Provisional selves: Experimenting with image and identity in professional adaptation. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 44*(4), 764-791. doi: 10.2307/2667055

Institute of Physics (2013) *Closing doors: Exploring gender and subject choice in schools.* Report by Institute of Physics, London UK. Retrieved from http://www.iop.org/education/teacher/support/girls_physics/closing-doors/page_62076.html

Kanter, R. M. (1977). *Men and women of the corporation*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

King, N. (1998). Template analysis. In G. Symon & C. Cassell (Eds.), *Qualitative methods and analysis in organizational research*. London, UK: Sage.

Kirchmeyer, C. (2002). Change and stability in managers' gender roles. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 87*(5), 929-940.

Kumra, S., & Vinnicombe, S. (2008). A study of the promotion to partner process in a professional services firm: How women are disadvantaged. *British Journal of Management, 19*(s1), S65-S74.

Lent, R. W., Brown, S. D., & Hackett, G. (1994). Toward a unifying social cognitive theory of career and academic interest, choice, and performance. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 45*(1), 79–122. doi: 10.1006/jvbe.1994.1027

Lent, R. W., Brown, S. D., Schmidt, J., Brenner, B., Lyons, H., & Treistman, D. (2003). Relation of contextual supports and barriers to choice behavior in engineering majors: Test of alternative social cognitive models. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 50*(4), 458−465.

Lent, R. W., Sheu, H., Singley, D., Schmidt, J. A., Schmidt, L. C., & Gloster, C. S. (2008). Longitudinal relations of self-efficacy to outcome expectations, interests, and

major choice goals in engineering students. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 73*(2), 328−335.

Lewis, P., & Simpson, R. (2012). Kanter revisited: Gender, power and (in)visibility. *International Journal of Management Reviews, 14*(2)*,* 141-158.

Liff, S., & Ward, K. (2001). Distorted views through the glass ceiling: the construction of women's understandings of promotion and senior management positions. *Gender, Work and Organisation, 8*(1), 19-36.

Lips, H. M. (2000). College students' visions of power and possibility as moderated by gender. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 24*(1), 37−41.

Mallon, M, & Cohen, L. (2001). Time for change? Women's accounts of the move from organisational careers to self-employment. *British Journal of Management, 12*(3)*,* 217-230.

Marshall, J. (2000). Living lives of change: Examining facets of women managers' career stories. In M. Peiperl, M. Arthur, R. Goffee, & T. Morris (Eds). *Career frontiers: New conceptions of working lives.* (pp. 202-227). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Nauta, M. M., & Epperson, D. L. (2003). A longitudinal examination of the social–cognitive model applied to high school girls' choices of nontraditional college majors and aspirations. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 50*(4), 448−457.

O'Neil, D. A., & Bilimoria, D. (2005). Women's career development phases: Idealism, endurance, and reinvention, *Career Development International, 10*(3), 168–189.

Opportunity Now. (2014). *Project 28-40 report.* Retrieved from http://www.bitc.org.uk/system/files/project_28-40_the_report.pdf

Peters, K., Ryan, M., & Haslam, S. A. (2013) Women's occupational motivation: the impact of being a woman in a man's world. In S. M. Vinnicombe, R. Burke, S. Blake-Beard, & L. Moore (Eds.), *Handbook of research on promoting women's careers* (pp. 162-177). Gloucestershire, England: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited.

Peters, K., Ryan, M. K., & Haslam, S. A. (2015). Marines, medics and machismo: Lack of fit with masculine occupational stereotypes discourages men's participation. *British Journal of Psychology, 106*(4), 635-655. doi:10.1111/bjop.12106

Peters, K., Ryan, M., Haslam, S. A., & Fernandes, H. (2012). To belong or not to belong: Evidence that women's occupational disidentification is promoted by lack of fit with masculine occupational prototypes. *Journal of Personnel Psychology, 11*(3), 148-158.

Polzer, J., Milton, L., & Swann, W. (2002). Capitalising on diversity: Interpersonal congruence in small groups. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 47*(2), 296-324

Powell, G. N. (1999). *Handbook of gender in organisations.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Russell, C. J. (2013). Is it time to voluntarily turn over theories of voluntary turnover? *Industrial & Organizational Psychology, 6*(2), 156-173. doi: 10.1111/iops.12028

Sealy, R. (2010). Changing perceptions of meritocracy in senior women's careers. *Gender in Management: An International Journal, 25*(3), 184-197.

Sealy, R. H. V., & Singh, V. (2010). The importance of role models and demographic context for senior women's work identity development. *International Journal of Management Reviews, 12*(3), 284-300.

Searle, R. H., & Ball, K. S. (2004). The development of trust and distrust in a merger. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, *19*(7), 708-721.

Singh, R., Fouad, N. A., Fitzpatrick, M. E., Liu, J. P., Cappaert, K. J., & Figuereido, C. (2013). Stemming the tide: Predicting women engineers' intentions to leave. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 83*(3), 281-294.

Sools, A. M., Van Engen, M. L., & Baerveldt, C. (2007). Gendered career-making practices: On 'doing ambition' or how managers discursively position themselves in a multinational corporation. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology, 80*(3), 413-435.

Terjesen, S., & Singh, V. (2008). Female presence on corporate boards: A multi-country study of environmental context. *Journal of Business Ethics, 83*(1)*,* 55-63.

van Vianen, A. E. M., & Fischer, A. H. (2002). Illuminating the glass ceiling: The role of organisational culture preferences. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology, 75*(3)*,* 315-337.

Watts, L. L., Frame, M. C., Moffett, R. G., Van Hein, J. L., & Hein, M. (2015). The relationship between gender, perceived career barriers, and occupational aspirations. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 45*(1)*,* 10-22.

Weick, K. (2001). Making sense of the organisation. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers.

Willig, C. (2013). *Introducing qualitative research in psychology.* New York, NY: Open University Press.

Yeagley, E. E., Subich, L. M., & Tokar, D. M. (2010). Modelling college women's perceptions of elite leadership positions with social cognitive career theory. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 77*(1)*,* 30-38.