



Opt-In or Opt-Out: Exploring how women construe their ambition at early career stages

Journal:	<i>Career Development International</i>
Manuscript ID	CDI-08-2016-0137.R2
Manuscript Type:	Research Paper
Keywords:	Ambition, Career motivation, Women, Gender, Self-efficacy, Professional Services

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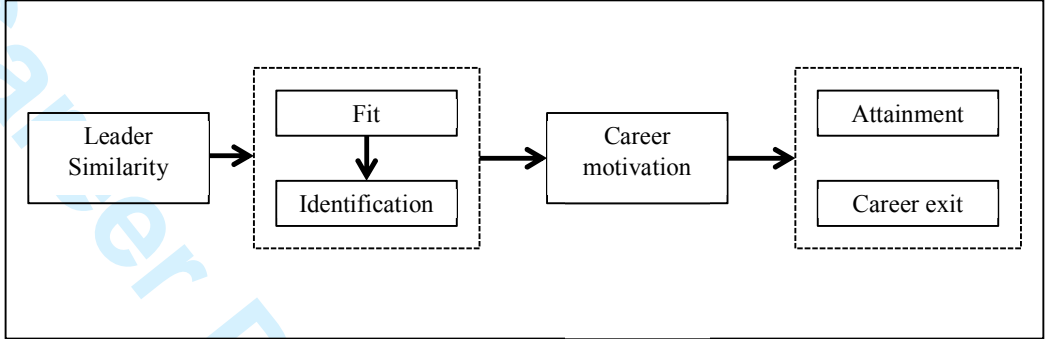


Figure 1. Identity fit model of career motivation (Adapted from Peters, Ryan & Haslam, 2013).

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1. Identity-Fit
 - 1.1 Leader similarity
 - 1.2 Group similarity
2. Self-efficacy
3. Outcome Expectancies
4. Barriers to career progression
 - 4.1 Meritocracy
 - 4.2 Work-life balance
5. Priority of career goals

Figure 2. Apriori themes.

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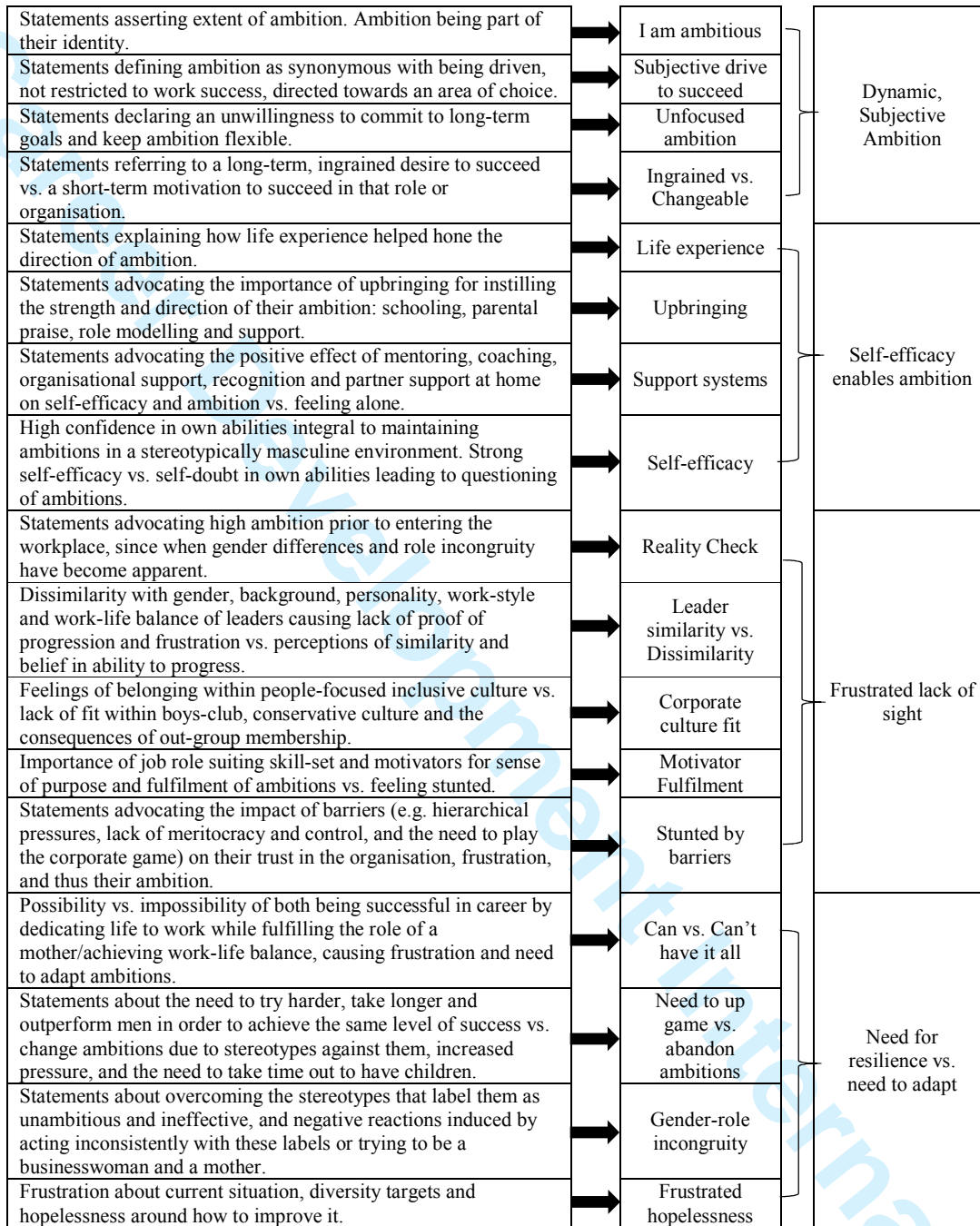


Figure 3. Final Themes Identified in Analysis.

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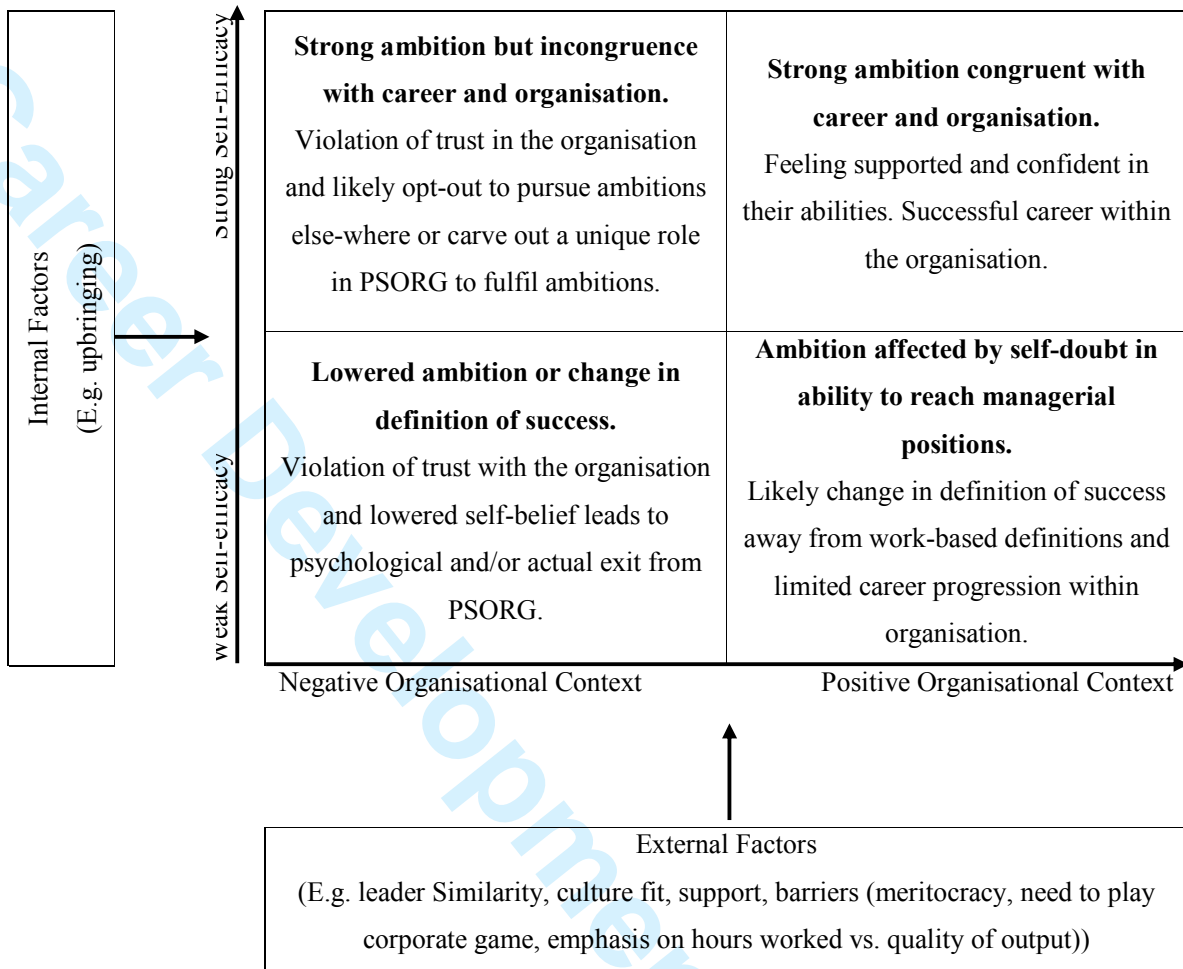


Figure 4. Model of Ambition.

Opt-In or Opt-Out: Exploring how women construe their ambition at early career stages

Abstract

Purpose: This qualitative study challenges existing models of career ambition, extending understanding of how women define and experience ambition at early career stages in a professional services organisation.

Method: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 women from a professional services organisation, who were aged 24-33 and had not yet reached managerial positions. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and template analysis was conducted.

Results: The analysis revealed four main themes in the women's experiences: subjective, dynamic ambition; frustrated lack of sight; self-efficacy enables ambition; and a need for resilience versus a need to adapt. The findings indicated that women do identify as ambitious, but they vary in the extent to which they view ambition as intrinsic and stable, or affected by external, contextual factors, such as identity-fit, barriers, support and work-life conflict.

Implications & limitations: These results indicated insufficiency of current models of ambition and a new model was proposed. The model explains how women's workplace experiences affect their ambition and therefore how organisations and individuals can better support women to maintain and fulfil their ambitions.

Originality/Value: This study extends and contributes to the redefinition of women's career ambition, proposing a model incorporating women's affective responses to both internal (psychological) and external (organisational) factors. It provides further evidence against previous individual-level claims that women 'opt-out' of their careers due to an inherent lack of ambition, focusing on the interplay of contextual level explanations.

Introduction

Organisations are under significant pressure to increase gender diversity at senior levels (Walsh, et al., 2016). Despite more women now graduating from university than men (Higher Education Standards Agency, 2014) and the known benefits of diversity, including improved decision-making, innovation, performance and financial returns (Frink et al. 2002; Konrad et al., 2008; Post & Byron, 2014), progress has been slow (Davies, 2015, Sealy, et al., 2016).

One explanation for this slow progress is the 'opt-out revolution' (Belkin, 2003), which states women in professional roles hit a maternal wall, have children and choose to exit the workplace, perpetuating the view that women have inherently lower ambition than men. Ambition, or career motivation, is defined as the extent to which individuals desire promotion and recognition, prioritise their career goals and are willing to make sacrifices for their career (Peters, et al., 2013). This definition combines the concepts of ambition for managerial positions and career commitment.

But Belkin's claim is contested. Some studies found that men have stronger ambitions to achieve senior positions than women (e.g. Van Vianen & Fischer, 2002) and that women refuse to identify their ambition, negatively associating it with selfishness, manipulation and egotism, whereas men assert it is an integral part of their working lives (Fels, 2004). In contrast, more recent studies found female students to express higher career aspirations than male counterparts (Watts et al., 2015) and that senior women do not opt-out of the workplace altogether, but leave to pursue roles with better work-life balance or flexibility (Anderson et al., 2010; Lewis et al., 2015). These recent findings suggest that women are ambitious, but leave organisations where they feel their ambitions cannot be fulfilled.

The topic of women's ambition and its impact on their careers is thus far from understood. Theoretical models explaining ambition are also conflicting in nature and narrow in focus; one model and associated body of literature focuses on external contextual factors affecting senior women's fit into male-dominated work environments and subsequently their ambition (Peters et al., 2012; 2013). Another highlights internal psychological factors, such as self-efficacy (van Vianen, 1999). Most of the literature utilises quantitative methodologies, measuring ambition as a fixed entity, rather than something which, over time, is seen as a dynamic and composite process. Furthermore, other influences, such as the well-recognised barriers that have been found to affect women's career choices (Buse et al., 2013; Lawrence et al., 2003; Metz, 2005) and their perceived ability to reach or accept senior managerial positions (Institute of Leadership and Management, 2011; Sealy, 2010; Smith et al., 2012; van Vianen and Fischer, 2002) in the wider literature have not been incorporated into the aforementioned models of ambition. Therefore, this qualitative study challenges existing models of

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3 career ambition, extending understanding of how women define and experience ambition at early
4 career stages.
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6 7 *Ambition and fit with occupation* 8

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10 Responding to Belkin's assertion, Peters et al. (2013) claimed that women do not have inherently
11 lower ambition than men, but instead their ambition is eroded over time due to the social context and
12 differing workplace experiences. They drew on self-categorisation theory (SCT) (Turner et al., 1987)
13 to propose the identity-fit model of career motivation (IFMCM). According to SCT, individuals'
14 social identities form an integral part of their self-concept, through which they view themselves as
15 prototypical members of a certain social group. Consequently, the norms, expectations and interests of
16 that group drive their behaviour and group commitment to maintain a positive self-concept. The
17 IFMCM claims that if employees perceive themselves as similar to prototypical members of their
18 organisation, particularly their leaders, their organisational membership becomes part of their self-
19 concept. Subsequently, they are more likely to perceive they fit and believe that career progression
20 and occupational success is possible, increasing their career motivation and organisational
21 commitment (Van Dick et al., 2004; see Figure 1). In male-dominated organisations, women are
22 therefore less likely to identify with their occupation or envisage themselves reaching senior
23 positions, eroding their career motivation and increasing desire to exit the organisation/career (Peters
24 et al., 2013).
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33 *Figure 1. Identity fit model of career motivation (Adapted from Peters, Ryan & Haslam, 2013)*
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36 Peters et al. (2012; 2013; 2015) have conducted several studies supporting the IFMCM. For example,
37 female surgeons' perceived dissimilarity with the consultant surgeon prototype resulted in lower
38 perceptions of prototype fit and identification with their occupation, and subsequent increased desire
39 for career exit (Peters et al., 2012). The model also extends associated research examining the
40 importance of role models for senior women's workplace success (Sealy & Singh, 2010). Women in
41 male-dominated environments often focus, without success, on seeking global role models to emulate
42 rather than identifying unique traits from different individuals, as their male counterparts do (Ibarra,
43 1999). Thus, feelings of proof of progression and fit with current occupational leaders are important
44 for women's ambition and desire to remain in an occupation.
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51 Furthermore, the IFMCM extends Kanter's (1977) seminal work on 'tokenism', describing the effects
52 of belonging to a demographic minority of less than 15% and group of lower social status. Engaging
53 in strategies to enhance their self-concept, women may lower their ambition or distance themselves
54 from other women, taking on male attributes in order to progress (Liff & Ward, 2001.) Women in
55 male-dominated organisations are less likely to respect senior women or perceive them as legitimate
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3 role models, identify positively with other women, or find support in same-sex relationships (Ely,
4 1994). Junior women may thus find it even harder to identify with leaders in a male-dominated
5 environment and maintain high levels of ambition if senior women are de-feminised.
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8 *Ambition and the double bind of social roles*

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11 Women's leadership identity has been problematised since Schein's (1973) "think manager, think
12 male" research, which reveals persistent perceptions, over four decades, of effective leadership as
13 synonymous with male, agentic attributes (Schein, 2007). Eagly and Karau (2002) explain the
14 findings through role congruity theory, suggesting societal gender roles dictate that men should
15 demonstrate agentic attributes, such as assertiveness and dominance, and women more communal
16 attributes, such as compassion and collaboration. Women are therefore presented with a double bind:
17 an incongruity between their gender role and a leadership role. Women are perceived as less
18 competent and disliked as potential or actual leaders, unless they demonstrate communal and agentic
19 attributes simultaneously (Heilman & Okimoto, 2007). Not only are women faced with a lack of
20 leader similarity (in descriptive stereotypes), but also a lack of fit with behaviours believed to be
21 requisite for leadership and workplace success (i.e. prescriptive stereotypes), when evaluating their
22 ambition.
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31 In a qualitative study, Sools et al. (2007) found explicit associations between this double bind and
32 women's ambition. Both male and female participants disassociated themselves from a negative form
33 of ambition, or an explicit desire for quick progression at the expense of others, instead associating
34 themselves with a more socially acceptable implicit drive and keenness. However, the long hours
35 required to demonstrate this keenness were incongruent with motherhood and women's social role.
36 Socialisation impacts women's reluctance to position themselves as ambitious (Fels, 2004) and
37 masculine stereotypes thus conceal gender discrimination to ensure men have a better chance of
38 being, and wanting to be, promoted (Lewis & Simpson, 2012).
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43 *Ambition: Connecting the wider literature – Importance of Barriers*

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46 Stereotypes and this double bind, along with other barriers (e.g. support and work-life balance), are
47 common explanations for the glass ceiling, preventing women from reaching the c-suite (Eagly &
48 Carli, 2007; Eagly & Heilman, 2016). Yet, as the slow progress sees more women starting to reach
49 more senior positions, and evidence shows that women are opting-out at various points in their career,
50 Eagly and Carli (2007) suggested an alternative metaphor to the glass ceiling: a labyrinth. Passage to
51 more senior levels requires persistence, navigation around barriers and awareness of, and strategies to
52 overcome, challenges that lie at every stage. Women's experience of the labyrinth has several
53 parallels to the erosion of ambition over time explained in the IFMCM (Peters et al., 2013). It is
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3 therefore surprising that these wider barriers have not been studied further when examining women's
4 ambition or incorporated into the IFMCM.
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7 Drawing on a social exchange framework, Walsh et al. (2016) explains the importance of a barrier,
8 organisational support, in maintaining a reciprocal sense of obligation and trust between women and
9 the organisation. They found organisational support - long term career development, more female role
10 models, and more autonomy over how work is completed - signals investment in the relationship
11 (Shore et al., 2006) and facilitates retention and organisational commitment. It is therefore important
12 to examine whether this violation of trust experienced in a labyrinthine organisation is associated with
13 women's experience of ambition, not solely retention and commitment, when they are presented with
14 barriers or a lack of leader similarity.
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20 *Ambition: Connecting the wider literature – Importance of Individual Level Influences*

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22 A lack of focus on barriers is not the only limitation to the IFMCM and gap in the ambition literature.
23 Peters et al. (2012; 2015) questioned whether perceptions of gender similarity are sufficient as
24 determinants of occupational fit, having examined men in hyper-masculine careers. Sharing values
25 and personality traits, for example, may attenuate the impact of demographic differences over time
26 (Elfenbein & O'Reilly, 2007). Second, other internal, psychological influences may affect ambition
27 that are not accounted for by the IFMCM. Early childhood experiences and socialisation, for example,
28 may impact the development of women's self-efficacy, moral courage and leadership capital and
29 therefore ability to reach the c-suite (Fitzsimmons et al., 2014).
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36 Van Vianen (1999) adapted social cognitive career theory (SCCT) (Lent et al., 1994), and Bandura's
37 (1986) general social cognitive framework to propose a different model of ambition for managerial
38 positions. This model and van Vianen's research suggest that managerial self-efficacy (individuals'
39 confidence in their ability to attain a managerial position), outcome expectations (the expected
40 consequences of reaching managerial status) and work-role salience (the centrality of work in their
41 life) affect individuals' ambition. Yeagley et al.'s (2010) research supported this model, finding self-
42 efficacy and outcome expectations were positively related to female students' interest in and goals for
43 elite leadership.
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49 Work-role salience is also a fundamental component of the Kaleidoscope career model (Mainiero &
50 Sullivan, 2006). This model explains career choices from an individualist perspective, determined by
51 the extent to which they seek *Challenge* and have opportunities for advancement, their need for
52 *Balance*, relationships and caregiving, and *Authenticity*, the ability to be true to themselves. Men
53 adopt a sequential approach to their careers, and tend to compartmentalise their career goals from
54 other areas of their life, whereas women integrate, and try to achieve in, all areas of their life. The
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3 kaleidoscope metaphor elucidates that career choices and attitudes are not stable states. Women
4 search for the best fit in their career depending on the context of their life; one of the three parameters
5 (challenge, balance, authenticity) will shift and take priority, forcing decisions about staying-in or
6 opting-out. Their model provides further argument for the consideration of wider influences
7 (individual level and barriers), including work-life balance, self-worth and challenge when examining
8 women's ambition. It also questions whether defining ambition as the extent to which individuals
9 prioritise career goals is dated and biased towards male versions of success.
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14 The models of ambition outlined above reveal a reliance on quantitative research and a lack of
15 coherent understanding about how women experience their ambition. Focusing too heavily on existing
16 models and theories sometimes "amounts to sharpening the wrong tools for gaining bona fida
17 understandings" (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2012, p.16) and limits comprehensive knowledge.
18
19 Moreover, research has focused either on students' career aspirations (e.g. Yeagley et al., 2010; Watts
20 et al., 2015) or on senior women who have achieved career success (e.g. Sealy & Singh, 2010; Walsh
21 et al, 2016). Given current labour market trends, the importance of, and current struggle organizations
22 face retaining, engaging and supporting young female talent (Burke & Vinnicombe, 2005; Eagly &
23 Carli, 2007), a deeper understanding of how young women experience ambition in a business context
24 is required. This qualitative study will afford a fresh, deeper insight into the impact of organisational
25 dynamics and other possible influences on women's ambition; women's emotional reactions and
26 approach to their future careers. This study therefore asked: "How do women construe their ambition
27 at early career stages in a professional services organisation?"
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Method

Due to the existing theoretical base but a lack of coherence, this qualitative study employed an abductive strategy and a critical realist approach to interpretation. The abductive strategy combines inductive approaches (building theory from the data) and deductive approaches (using data to test existing theory) by examining data and identifying aspects that contradict or do not fit with existing theory (Suddaby, 2006). A London-based sample from the advisory function of a large professional services organisation (PSORG) was used. The industry was chosen for its traditionally masculine culture, but sustained efforts to increase diversity (Peters et al., 2014; Walsh et al., 2016). Opportunity sampling through an email advertisement identified 75 female volunteers, from which 20 were randomly selected. They were aged 24-33, had a minimum of 2 years' experience and had not yet reached manager level. One participant had children. These inclusion criteria enabled the investigation of women's views entering the prime opt-out period, and ensured participants had been sufficiently immersed in PSORG's culture to allow identity-fit and leader similarity to affect their ambition (Peters et al., 2012). Nineteen semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face and one was conducted over online video messaging, lasting between 50 and 100 minutes. They comprised 18 open-ended questions to explore how participants define ambition and career motivation; how ambitious they are and whether this has changed over time; and the influences on their ambition, including leader similarity, organisational support and work-life conflict. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Template analysis, a form of thematic analysis, was adopted using King's (2012) described method. Template analysis involves identifying meaningful parts of textual data, i.e. codes, and arranging them hierarchically into themes that are relevant to explaining phenomena as prescribed in the research question. It differs from thematic analysis as it involves developing a coding template, which incorporates existing research and is then applied to the data and adapted or added to, as appropriate, to form a final template of themes that justify, refute or enhance existing theories.

Firstly, the apriori themes were developed, which related to the existing literature - van Vianen's (1999) model and the IFMCM (see Figure 2). Secondly, the transcripts were read through to be familiarised. Thirdly, preliminary coding was conducted on five transcripts, identifying and extracting text as codes relevant to the research question. The codes were compared and arranged hierarchically against the apriori themes, with narrower themes beneath broader ones; if there was no relevant theme, the existing themes were modified or a new one was devised. From this analysis, the 'initial template' was developed, and applied to the remaining transcripts in batches of five and amended as appropriate (see Appendix 1 for a mid-way template).

Figure 2. *Apriori themes.*

As the analysis progressed, the themes moved from being more descriptive, e.g. factors identified in quantitative research as moderating or influencing women's ambition, towards being more conceptual. For example, the apriori theme identity fit was based on gender similarity with leaders and group similarity as identified in previous literature; however, several nuances became apparent in the rich data. While gender similarity with leaders was important, participants also emphasised other characteristics against which they evaluated their similarity – approach to work and work-life balance, personality characteristics, values. Similarly, group fit was more focused on fit within the people-focused organisational culture than with gender demographics, and other forms of fit were also referenced; such as fit with the role and skillset required. These varying fit elements interacted to create a 'line of sight' for the women, which determined whether or not they could envisage themselves reaching, or enjoying, senior roles whilst being true to themselves. The final template (see figure 3), was then applied to the entire data set and used to interpret the findings; it led to the subsequent development of a new theoretical model.

Findings

The final themes identified in the analysis are shown in Figure 3; the first order themes include participant-centric codes, whereas the second order themes and aggregate dimensions are hierarchically arranged researcher-centric themes (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2013). Four aggregate dimensions were included in the final template: “subjective, dynamic ambition”, “self-efficacy enables ambition”, “frustrated lack of sight” and “need for resilience versus need to adapt”. Each construct is briefly discussed, along with illustrative quotes (see Appendix 2 for further quotes).

Figure 3. *Final themes identified in analysis*

Subjective, Dynamic Ambition

Participants declared that they were ambitious, albeit to varying extents. Ambition was defined as synonymous with being driven, proactive, and pursuing success; not only having goals, but also knowing how to achieve them. This drive was not solely work focused and instead was subjective, directed toward an area of their choice; such as learning, being challenged, achieving work-life balance, happiness and adding value.

“to me it’s really personal and you make it about yourself and your own goals”[P2]

“ambition means to me having a goal and being completely dedicated to achieving it... really going for it, however long it takes you really.”[P7]

Participants were near unanimous in declaring the uncertainty of their future and an unwillingness to commit to long-term goals or a role at PSORG in order to keep their options open and be able to adapt to the changeable working environment. They implied that this unfocused drive protected their ambition in case such goals were unachievable, but also limited their confidence in and speed of ambition fulfilment.

“I feel like life is very changeable in scope ...I think over a long career there’s going to need to be some flexibility.”[P7]

Participants varied in the extent to which they reported their ambition as stable and intrinsic, attributing it to an ingrained part of their personality from their upbringing, or as affected by external, organisational factors and having fluctuated or declined over time. Several participants likened ambition to a stable drive to succeed and career motivation as a short-term desire to succeed within their current workplace environment.

“my ambition is very much stemmed from something within me”[P10]

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3 *“I was really motivated when I first got to PSORG and I know that has fluctuated over the*
4 *time I’ve been here, depending on what sort of client I’m working on, how I feel supported or*
5 *not within the organisation”[P2]*
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8 *Self-efficacy enables ambition*
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11 Self-efficacy, or confidence in own abilities, was integral for women to maintain their ambition,
12 conquer adversity and be able to progress in the male-dominated environment. Despite being highly
13 ambitious when leaving university, the majority now reported severely doubting their capability to
14 succeed due to their experiences and subsequently had either reduced their ambition or wanted to exit
15 PSORG and pursue their ambition elsewhere.
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20 *“half of the battle is believing you can do it yourself, the next bit is convincing other people*
21 *you can do it.”[P20]*
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23
24 *“I don’t have confidence in myself if I haven’t got that evidence...I think it slows me down...I*
25 *wouldn’t want to take that punt”[P9]*
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28 When discussing how their ambition had changed, life experience, major life events or increased
29 maturity and self-awareness affected their perceptions of success, strength of, and direction of
30 ambition.
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33 *“the more I found out about myself, where my skillset is stronger and what things interest me,*
34 *the more I started reiterating my goals”[P2]*
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36
37 Specifically they drew on how their upbringing had instilled their self-efficacy and ambition, as their
38 schools and parents encouraged competition, high ambition and applied a certain pressure towards
39 career choices. Having received consistent praise for achievements from parents during childhood,
40 women reported success being inextricably linked to their self-worth. Participants extensively
41 referenced how their parents had acted as role models, with a focus on whether they had worked in
42 similar professional arenas or whether their mothers had worked. This had affected their confidence,
43 preparation for work and triggered a desire either to emulate them or approach their work differently.
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49 *“mum has always worked and she went back to work after four months of maternity leave ...I*
50 *think it’s been an example to me”[P7]*
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53 *“the way they [my parents] have brought us up to be very competitive and defined by our*
54 *achievements.”[P1]*
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3 Support was another key enabler, required to help achieve ambitions, “play the game”, feel less alone
4 in the process and increase self-efficacy; it was referenced in three forms. First, having support from
5 managers or mentors to push to overcome development areas and barriers, and hold open and honest
6 conversations, and, second, receiving recognition for achievements and inputs.
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10 *“it gives me a massive springboard if someone motivates me and tells me I’m doing*
11 *well”[P17]*
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14 *“my manager is the most important person for my development and for me to achieve*
15 *anything I want to achieve, they can be completely instrumental in making that happen”[P9]*
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18 Third, having a partner at home who shared a similar perspective, valued rather than resented the
19 woman’s high ambition, and supported and shared family responsibilities was important; a lack of this
20 support signalled a need to adapt ambitions.
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23 *“he will probably stay working away most of the time and if I want ...[family] then the only*
24 *person who’s really going to compromise in that situation would be me”[P6]*
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27 *Frustrated lack of sight*

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30 Participants who reported low self-efficacy drew on several negative contextual influences on their
31 ambition. Having left university with high ambitions, being surrounded by positive media messaging
32 and a strong record of achievement within education, these women were confronted with a
33 different/new reality upon entering the workplace and adjusted their ambitions to become more
34 obtainable. They felt unprepared for the requirements of, or gender differences in, workplace success.
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38 *“When you leave uni ... you think the world is your oyster and...you’re going to make such a*
39 *big difference in any company you work for...then you start realising that the reality is a bit*
40 *different ... I have changed my career motivations and ambitions throughout the years.”[P18]*
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44 Many reported questioning whether they fit in the organisation, which engendered feelings of
45 frustration and uncertainty over whether they could reach or enjoy senior positions whilst remaining
46 true to themselves. Consequently, they reported lowering their expectations or wanting to leave.
47
48 Participants identified three forms of fit: leader similarity, cultural fit and fit with job role. Gender fit
49 was not the only factor on which individuals evaluated their similarity to current leaders, they
50 compared their skillset, approach to work, challenges faced, socio-economic status and personality.
51
52 Many participants felt dissimilar to the ‘intimidating’, ‘assertive’ personality and working style of the
53 few female senior leaders, for example, and also recognised that neither female nor male partners
54 faced childcare responsibilities or had the work-life balance they desired.
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3 *“there’s no women at the top basically, um, so that affects how I see myself, not getting*
4 *there... I just don’t think it’s possible, so I think that if I was to be, you know, more senior, it*
5 *means moving outside of PSORG”[P2]*
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8 *“I’m just not the same ilk as these people, and how do I actually kind of progress or do I have*
9 *to become like them, and I don’t wanna become like them”[P17]*
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12 These sentiments contrasted starkly with two subsets of participants: those who were either from a
13 specific gender diverse department who felt they could relate to everyone, were unrestricted and
14 believed they could reach senior levels being themselves; and those who had high self-efficacy.
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18 *“I feel like there’s a lot more variety in terms of our senior people now...if I wanted to*
19 *become a partner I could carve out my own kind of style”[P1]*
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22 While many participants recognised and celebrated the supportive, people-focused and collaborative
23 culture at PSORG, they also implied that it was only readily available to the conservative, middle
24 class ‘boys club’, who reap the benefits of in-group membership, such as more natural relationships
25 with senior employees. As the women did not fit this mould, the ways in which they could add value
26 by being different were not recognised.
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31 *“I find the homogeneity of the corporate mould quite suffocating”[P17]*
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33 *“they all go on holiday together and they do boys things like “oh shall we go to golf on*
34 *Saturday and stuff” and no woman would ever be invited to that”[P10]*
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37 Thirdly, the women expressed the importance of having a job role suited to their skillset; for many,
38 this lack of fit was related to the sales focus that senior roles require.
39
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41 *“I don’t want to reach director level because you need to sell things...there are people who*
42 *are not commercially driven, I can be but I don’t want to”[P4]*
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45 Many participants reported numerous barriers hindering their progression to senior levels, making
46 them feel undervalued and their efforts unrecognised, violating their sense of trust in PSORG and
47 triggering a desire to leave and pursue their ambitions where they would be more respected and face
48 less hindrance. Thus, they reported severe frustration, feeling stunted and lacking in control over
49 ambition fulfilment.
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54 *“quite a lot of frustration because ultimately I knew I was ambitious, but I felt like I wasn’t in*
55 *the place that I could realise any of those ambitions”[P1]*
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3 *“you feel like you’re going to lose before you start. But also on the flip side I don’t think it’s*
4 *demotivating in that it makes me not want to try, it just makes me more inclined to*
5 *leave.”[P14]*
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9 These barriers included a strict, time-bound grading system, meaning quick progression or the
10 opportunity to exceed expectations was rare, and time-served and hours worked having more value
11 than quality of output. Project allocations, over which they had no control, determined their
12 experience gained, location and partner visibility, and therefore chances of promotion. These factors,
13 were perceived as incongruent with work-life balance and future family considerations. A perceived
14 lack of meritocracy in the promotion process was also reported with a lack of focus on skills or merit,
15 clear communication or honesty in the process. In addition, participants reported the “need to play the
16 game” by networking, self-promoting, and obtaining partner sponsorship, doing which they felt
17 uncomfortable and disadvantaged compared to men due to difficulties building natural relationships
18 with the male-dominated partner group.
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25 *“a lot of the people that do really well because they’re like good networkers...I just think it’s*
26 *a bit more difficult to network when you are networking with a load of guys.”[P12]*
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29 *“I don’t like the time-served attitude at all...I feel like I’m just being held for the crack of*
30 *it.”[P13]*
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32 *Need for Resilience versus Need to Adapt*

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35 Implicit and explicit statements throughout the interview reflected how participants’ ambition was
36 tied to their gender identity; their belief it is harder for them, as women, to achieve workplace success
37 and thus the need to be robust and resilient, or compromise and adapt such ambitions.
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41 *“cos I’m a high performer, people like to throw rocks at me...whereas if you’re one of the*
42 *lads they wouldn’t say that about you.” [P7]*
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45 The majority of participants believed it would be impossible to fulfil the mother role that society
46 dictates or achieve work-life balance, alongside career progression and success, and thus a sacrifice
47 was needed. They reported a need to “sell their soul” to PSORG and work long hours in order to reach
48 senior positions and they expected to face, and need to overcome, resentment and negative reactions
49 from workplace peers and other mothers if they tried to achieve both, due to the role incongruence
50 with femininity and motherhood, and stereotypes that label females as unambitious.
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55 *“you know you see certain [female] partners and stuff who don’t have kids or who don’t*
56 *spend any time with their kids cos they’re so busy focusing on their career and you think “god*
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3 *that's so selfish", but their husbands are doing exactly the same thing, why aren't they*
4 *selfish?" [P9]*
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7 Participants implied this pressure was exclusively women's and was actually exacerbated by
8 PSORG's diversity and inclusion programmes, which expected women to progress at the same rate as
9 men but did not expect men to have parenting responsibilities. By advocating efforts to increase the
10 number of senior women, women's promotions were attributed to their gender rather than skill,
11 causing women to be resented further, lack respect, lose confidence in their abilities and desire senior
12 positions less. Yet, participants were exasperated as they appreciated PSORG's efforts but were
13 unsure how diversity could be improved without creating resentment from male colleagues.
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18 *"it's telling women...you've got the opportunity to get higher up but it's also saying, but*
19 *you've got to do that and you've got to have a family... it's not really thinking, how do you do*
20 *all of that" [P6]*
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24 *"if I got promoted to director because they wanted to up the female intake, that would almost*
25 *make me lose my confidence in myself because I'd be like they only want me because I'm*
26 *female not because I'm the right person for the job" [P17]*
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30 Therefore, they would need to try harder for longer and outperform men in order to achieve the same
31 level of success. Adapting ambitions involved increasing effort to attempt to reach a level of sufficient
32 seniority before having children, moving to other industries with increased flexibility, or changing
33 their career goals to be more realistic, reflecting these challenges and focusing their drive on other
34 areas of their life.
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38 *"Women are confronted with a different reality than men and they need to adapt...it doesn't*
39 *mean that internally they [career goals] change and you don't seek the same things, it's just*
40 *you made a compromise."*[P18]
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44 Discussion

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46 In exploring how young professional women define and experience ambition, these findings
47 demonstrate that, in contrast to previous qualitative research (Fels, 2004; Sools et al., 2007), women
48 were comfortable asserting their ambition. This salient finding could be attributed to a number of
49 factors, such as the women's relatively short tenure within the organisation, young age or differences
50 in their upbringing and generation compared to previous studies. In addition, the definition of
51 ambition with which these women identified is broader and more positive than that in the literature.
52 Women defined ambition as a vague, unfocused drive to succeed, portraying it as a state rather than
53 an end goal, similar to Sools et al.'s (2007) findings. Yet, this drive was not solely applied to the work
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3 domain, with some women describing a drive to achieve work-life balance, make a difference or
4 achieve happiness, consistent with recent studies of definitions of career success and kaleidoscope
5 careers (Dries, 2011; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2006). These results suggest the traditional definition of
6 ambition, associated with a desire for promotion and recognition (Peters, et al., 2013; van Vianen,
7 1999), is biased toward male versions of success. Instead, ambition could be redefined as an internal
8 drive towards a subjective form of success.
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13 Women's reluctance to commit to long term goals was explicitly associated with how they had
14 experienced their ambition within PSORG; most reported that it had fluctuated or declined. This
15 flexibility with which interviewees approached ambition and the reported reticence to set specific
16 goals is important, as it challenges much contemporary career counselling theory and broader rhetoric
17 about career planning, drawing attention to the need to be resilient and capable of being dynamic with
18 career plans¹. Further these results extend the identity-fit model of career motivation (IFMCM) and
19 van Vianen's (1999) model of managerial ambition.
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25 Firstly, they support the importance of internal psychological factors; women who expressed elevated
26 levels of self-efficacy tended to have strong ambitions and viewed their ambition as an intrinsic part
27 of their identity and inherently stable. Such results extend van Vianen's (1999) model, suggesting that
28 self-efficacy not only predicts strength of ambition, but also determines the extent to which it is
29 intrinsic and limits the effect of external factors. Moreover, upbringing, which has received little
30 attention yet in the literature (Fitzsimmons et al., 2014), was found to be a key enabler of ambition
31 and self-efficacy; parenting styles instilling a strong work ethic, working mothers acting as role
32 models for their daughters and competitive schooling methods.
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39 Secondly, women who reported lower self-efficacy were more likely to claim their ambition had
40 fluctuated, changed focus, or declined over time due to external organisational factors, such as fit with
41 their occupation. Perceived similarity with leaders was one way by which individuals evaluated their
42 fit and was highlighted in the different perceptions between women in gender diverse and male-
43 dominated departments, supporting the IFMCM and research emphasising the importance of role
44 models for women's success (Ibarra, 1999; Sealy & Singh, 2010). Yet, women also referred to other
45 factors not solely gender, when evaluating their similarity to leaders; e.g. a lack of childcare
46 responsibilities or work-life balance and an assertive personality to which they could not relate.
47 Furthermore, fit with culture and role were also reported as ways in which these women evaluated fit
48 with their occupation.
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54 Providing a unique contribution to the literature, this study identified other external influences not
55 currently accounted for in existing models of ambition: barriers and enablers. Most of these have been
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58 ¹ We would like to thank Associate Editor Julia Richardson for this useful comment
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3 referenced in the wider literature yet their effect on ambition has not previously been studied,
4 including meritocracy (Sealy, 2010); organisational support (Walsh et al., 2016), a lack of control,
5 flexibility and partner support (Lawrence et al., 2003), and the need to play the corporate game
6 (Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2008). These barriers emphasised the role incongruity between being a
7 successful businesswoman and fulfilling the ideal worker model, alongside being a mother or
8 achieving a work-life balance, as advocated in previous research (Anderson et al., 2010). Implicit or
9 explicit in all interviews was therefore the belief that it is harder to succeed being a woman and their
10 ambition had to reflect this difficulty. Furthermore, in order to gain respect and fulfil their ambitions,
11 women needed to overcome the stereotypes that they lack ambition and resentment for displaying
12 such ambition, consistent with Sools et al. (2007), and views that they will have only reached desired
13 seniority levels due to their gender.
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21 Current theoretical models also do not adequately capture or explain women's affective reactions to
22 their organisational context: - positively pulling on robust self-efficacy and emotional resilience;
23 compromising their ambition to lower levels, perceived as more attainable; or considering leaving
24 PSORG to a role where they feel success is achievable. The participants reported only becoming
25 aware of negative external influences (e.g. role incongruence and barriers) after entering the
26 workplace. Upon this realisation, women reported feeling stunted, like they were stagnating, unsure of
27 the way to progress or whether continued investment of effort would be reciprocated, leading to a
28 violation of trust in the organisation. Subsequently this violation of trust not only affects women's
29 desire to remain in the organisation (Walsh et al., 2016), but encourages them to compromise their
30 ambitions or adapt their definitions of success to encapsulate wider life domains, as participants
31 questioned their ability to achieve their career goals.
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39 Therefore, refuting Belkin's (2003) claims and associated research that suggest women opt-out solely
40 due to an inherent lack of ambition, this study proposes that internal psychological factors interact
41 with organisational contextual factors from entering the organisation. These findings demonstrate that
42 neither the IFMCM nor van Vianen's model of ambition fully account for women's experience of
43 ambition – neither reference the emotional reaction and need for resilience, nor both the internal and
44 external factors, the enablers and the negative influences. Thus, see Figure 4 for a proposed new,
45 more comprehensive model of work-focused ambition (career motivation) (see Figure 4).
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51 The interaction between self-efficacy and external factors is demonstrated by the two continuums,
52 against which individuals can be plotted. The first continuum is the strength of their self-efficacy, or
53 belief in their capability to achieve their work-focused goals which is impacted by upbringing,
54 recognition and support; the second continuum is the extent to which the organisational context is
55 positive or negative. The external factors hypothesised to influence the positivity of this
56 organisational context include support received, leader similarity, culture fit and barriers outlined
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3 earlier. The stronger an individual's self-efficacy, the less their ambition is affected by these external
4 factors; in an organisational context that is perceived as negative, however, they are either likely to
5 leave the organisation to fulfil their ambition somewhere more positive or draw on their resilience to
6 stay and find their own role within the organisation. For individuals with weak self-efficacy, a
7 perceived positive organisational context and high level of support is predicted to protect and foster an
8 individual's ambition, whereas a perceived negative context not only will cause a violation of trust in
9 the organisation, but also further reduce their work-focused ambition, and lead to likely organisational
10 exit. The model aims to capture the emotional reaction experienced by individuals to a negative
11 organisational context. Regardless of the individuals' self-efficacy, individuals experience a violation
12 of trust in the organisation and combined feelings of frustration and hopelessness, as the organisation
13 has not provided them with a fair and equal chance of progression, despite effort expended, to reach
14 senior level positions. Subsequently, women are faced with increasing their level of effort,
15 maintaining levels of resilience and fighting their way to the top, or exiting the organisation to pursue
16 success in other areas.
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25 Figure 4. *Model of Ambition*

26 27 28 *Implications for Practice*

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30 The introduction of this model provides a unique contribution to the literature, demonstrating that
31 both low self-efficacy and a negative organisational context can erode ambition focused towards
32 career goals over time. Organisations and individuals can therefore use and interpret this model to
33 help maintain, protect and enhance women's ambition by undertaking actions to increase their self-
34 efficacy and/or the positivity of the work environment. Such measures could increase the speed of
35 progress in increasing female board representation.
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40 First, organisations could address and remove several barriers women perceive as hindering their
41 chances of success to improve the organisational context. The traditional emphasis on time-served and
42 a lack of control over working hours is a barrier for women that is incongruent with their social role,
43 causing frustration and strain on their personal relationships. By shifting towards valuing quality of
44 output, improving flexibility and affording a degree of control over project choice, organisations
45 could facilitate women's ability to fulfil their ambitions while maintaining a work-life balance or
46 parenting commitments.
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52 The perceived unmeritocratic promotion process is another barrier; women perceive that the need to
53 'play the corporate game' and network with more senior men is required. Organisations could be
54 increasing the objectivity and clarity of the selection process by setting specific benchmarks based on
55 more objective performance measures; communicating openly about criteria for promotion and
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3 employees' status in the promotion process. These actions could help to reduce barriers against
4 women, the resentment they face and doubts that they are being promoted for their gender, not their
5 ability.
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9 There are also several actions organisations could make to support women better. Coaching,
10 mentoring or managerial support could help increase self-efficacy and help women to create long-
11 term career strategies, or consider future barriers and how they may be overcome in order to be able to
12 maintain and fulfil their ambitions. Line managers should be held accountable for providing such
13 support. Taking actions that symbolise they are invested in women's long-term careers are found to
14 signal support and to maintain a trusting relationship (Walsh, Fleming & Enz, 2016). Examples of this
15 include introducing schemes to accelerate women's re-entry into the workplace after maternity leave
16 and evolving organisations' messaging about parenting to include more active and visible roles for
17 fathers. Men should be encouraged to assume more parental responsibilities and participate in family-
18 related benefits such as parental leave or part-time working; if they do so while maintaining career
19 progression, the perception of parenthood as a major barrier may diminish.
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26 The findings questioned whether organisations are introducing the most effective diversity measures,
27 suggesting that targets are exacerbating the stigma women face and causing increased frustration for
28 some women, further reducing their self-efficacy and their ambition. By re-evaluating their diversity
29 measures, organisations could dispel rumours of positive discrimination and further alleviate some of
30 the pressure on women.
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34 35 *Limitations and Future Research Suggestions*

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37 This study afforded novel insights into young women's experiences of career ambition, explaining
38 relationships identified in quantitative research (e.g. Peters et al., 2012, 2015) and uncovering several
39 influences that have previously received little research attention, such as upbringing, and the intrinsic
40 versus extrinsic nature of ambition.
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44 However, the study only included female participants and one organisation; without the contrasting
45 experience of males, it cannot be concluded that men have a better workplace experience or are faced
46 with fewer barriers. The findings are also not generalizable to all professional services organisations
47 and wider workplace contexts. Future research with both young male and female participants and in
48 other businesses would uncover the extent of gender difference in these themes and generalisability,
49 further extending understanding of women's experiences. The recent introduction in the UK of shared
50 parental leave offers an opportunity to research the impact of more visible statements of fatherhood
51 and equal parenting on men's as well as women's careers. Additionally, a longitudinal study could
52 help determine whether women become less willing to assert their ambition with increased
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3 organisational experience and/or whether differences in generation/upbringing underlie the
4 inconsistencies found between this study and previous research.
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7 Building on the suggested model of ambition, research could examine the predictive power of the
8 influences found on ambition and the mediatory relationships, including upbringing, leader similarity,
9 identity-fit with the organisation, self-efficacy, and identified barriers as factors. Such research could
10 further highlight how to increase the resilience of young professional women's ambition in the
11 workplace and the comprehensiveness of models of ambition.
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14 15 *Conclusion* 16

17
18 This study has made a unique contribution to the ambition literature, providing a new model and way
19 of understanding young professional women's identification with ambition and struggle to maintain it
20 in their current working environment. While the study supports existing models, it has uncovered
21 additional influences and ways with which women identify with ambition, and calls for more gender-
22 inclusive considerations of success. Ambition is not a purely individual-level construct, but one that is
23 socially-constructed within an organisational context. Findings from this study purport that young
24 professional women are ambitious, but that their ambition is affected by the workplace context from
25 the early stages of their career.
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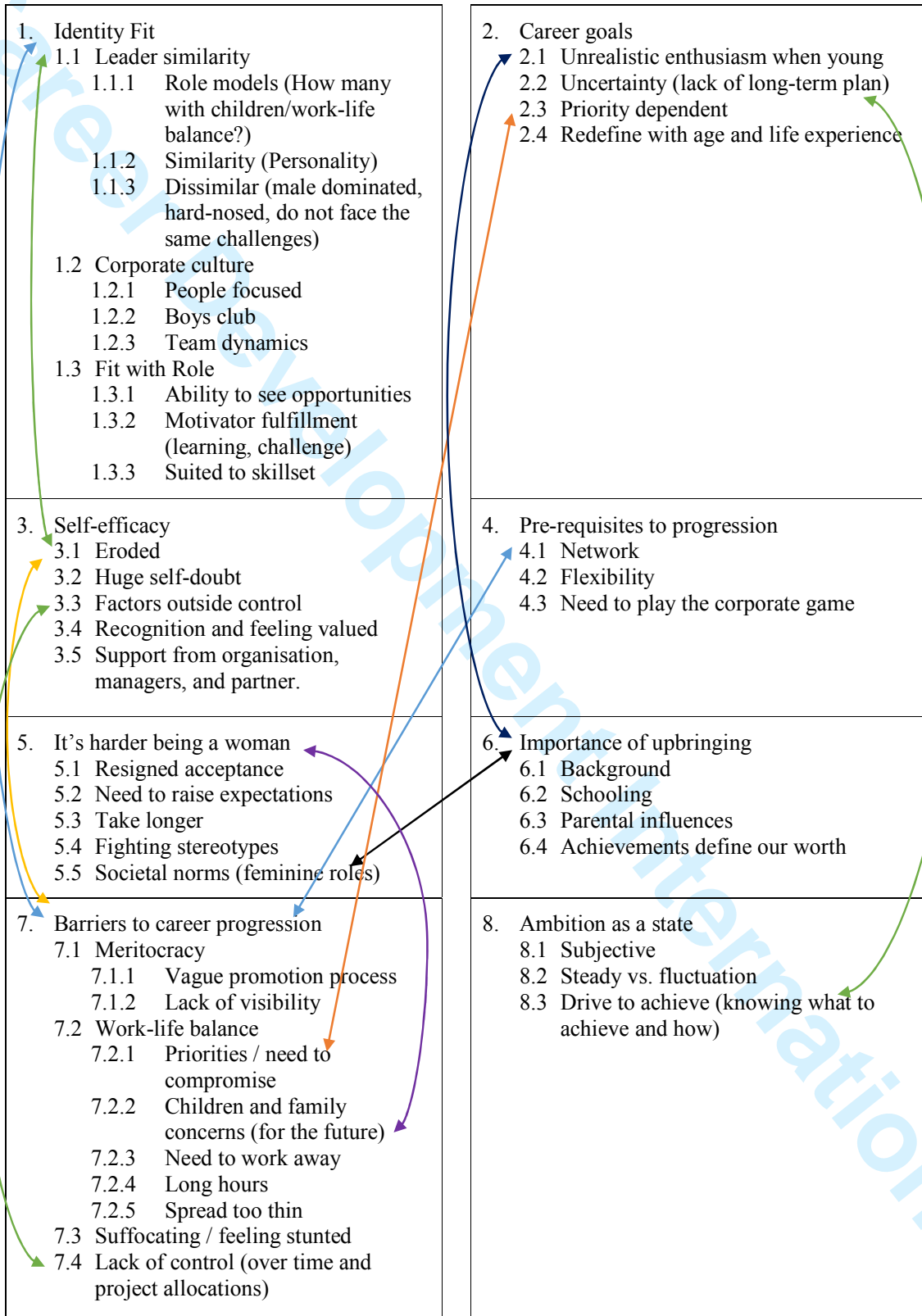
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Appendix 1 – Thematic template mid-way through analysis

Appendix 2 – Tables demonstrating further illustrative quotes to support final thematic template

Career Development International

Appendix 1 – Thematic template mid-way through analysis



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Appendix 2 – Tables demonstrating further illustrative quotes to support the final thematic template

Table 1.

Dynamic, Composite Ambition

Subtheme	Illustrative Quotes
I am ambitious	<p><i>“I would say on a scale of 1 to ambitious I’m off the scale...I’m very ambitious” [P20]</i></p> <p><i>“I’d say on a scale of 1 to 10 probably about seven, six or seven, so I’d say I was quite ambitious but not like it’s not the be all or end all” [P6]</i></p>
Subjective drive to succeed	<p><i>“being driven as in driven, having goals, personal achievement, for me are synonymous” [P20]</i></p> <p><i>“ambition, gosh, it’s hunger, it’s striving for better...it’s usually what you assume is successful” [P11]</i></p> <p><i>“focused ideas about where you want to be and finding a way a way to get there as best, well as efficiently, as possible.” [P17]</i></p> <p><i>“it might be the money, it might be the pursuit of power, responsibility, it might be because you really enjoy what you like doing.” [P9]</i></p> <p><i>“my ambition is getting as far as I can in the area that I chose to work on, for certain people it may be to stay at home and have kids” [P4]</i></p> <p><i>“the goal is to lead something and to be at the top of something and to say “okay I’ve won the game of snakes and ladders and I’ve hit the end point”” [P20]</i></p>
Unfocused ambition	<p><i>“I’m not certain I’ve found exactly what I want to do long term” [P17]</i></p> <p><i>“looking at it that way it doesn’t limit you, it means that you’re still open to a change in life plans or a change in career but ultimately you just want to do the best that you can and be respected for it.” [P20]</i></p> <p><i>“I don’t know how this will all change if and when I decide to have children” [P1]</i></p> <p><i>“I’m not 100% fixed on what that might be...I’m looking at two sort of routes ...I wouldn’t be surprised if I ended up doing a number of things” [P13]</i></p> <p><i>“I had no career plan, I had no career goals I just knew I wanted to be successful” [P20]</i></p> <p><i>“you probably end up not being perceived that well or it might affect the conviction with which you can say “this is what I want to do”” [P19]</i></p>
Ingrained vs. Changeable	<p><i>“personality wise I’m quite driven” [P19]</i></p> <p><i>“sometimes you come in and you feel like “ah I could do anything” and you’ll go and speak to everyone and be super bubbly and you’ll feel great. And then other times you’re like “I don’t want to talk to anyone, I feel crap”” [P1]</i></p> <p><i>“the ability to kind of get through those periods without giving up when you’re not motivated is almost a sign of ambition” [P1]</i></p> <p><i>“before I was probably more ambitious than I think I probably am now” [P12]</i></p>

Table 2.
 Illustrative quotes for “Self-Efficacy Enables Ambition”

Subtheme	Illustrative Quotes
Life	<i>“as I’ve gotten a bit older I kind of don’t want to do it full pelt all the time” [P6]</i>
Experience	<i>“It’s because I’ve had lots of stuff change that your priorities I think change and what you were aiming for changes” [P19]</i> <i>“When someone dies it makes you remind yourself how short your life is and you should learn from that that you’ve got to live every moment”[P11]</i> <i>“you’ve reached that stage where you’ve achieved that you wanted since you left uni...And I say “ok what am I looking for now?” so then you start revisiting” [P4]</i>
Upbringing	<i>“My secondary school was an all girls school...everyone around me was really clever and they were all girls, you know I kind of thought to myself...women can do whatever they want, they can take over the world and I should be an example of this” [P19]</i> <i>“my mum’s an artist so I suppose I see success and I see ambition in maybe a more well-rounded way than other people do.” [P14]</i> <i>“she was determined to do a job...she was the only person on her air traffic control course and I think having that...that’s who I am that’s why I’m doing that and it’s all because of my family influence” [P20]</i> <i>“I’ve not grown up with knowing any different other than having the full attention of your parents and the people around you and things so yeah I don’t think I would go any further than that [senior manager] for those reasons.” [P7]</i> <i>“my parents didn’t go to university...you’ve got less of a support network to rely on in that instance...they had no advice for me”[P6]</i> <i>“my background drives me a lot, so we were really poor so I think a lot of what I’m trying to do is make my parents proud, earn an amount of money so that I can look after them and have a different life” [P13]</i> <i>“I’ve had quite a lot of good opportunities, parent wise, family wise, education wise, which equipped me well to do whatever I want to do and now I’m in this position where I want to do it.” [P19]</i> <i>“even though my mum was really like super mum I think there are several things in her life that she ended up regretting because she couldn’t do them because she was at home...So that that maybe influences me and my way of seeing this.” [P4]</i> <i>“he’s [dad] very very proud of me but it’s what he’d think if I wasn’t in the position I am now, if I’d strived to do something that was deemed to be less ambitious”[P15]</i>

Support Systems	<p>Those who feel supported:</p> <p><i>“she’s [my manager is] very supportive and she tries to keep me focused on, you know, the next thing so...help me feel like I can still move forward, even when I’ve been kind of locked in.”</i> [P19]</p> <p><i>“your partner I think has a huge impact on whether they will actually support you [when you have children] like my boyfriend ... thought that it made more sense for both partners to take reduced hours and each do four days rather than it just being the woman’s responsibility to do part time, which is why I went out with him in the first place [laughs]”</i> [P14]</p> <p>Those who do not feel supported:</p> <p><i>“it makes it harder to have a focus because you don’t have someone to discuss it with or someone who’s got your back and knows what you want to do”</i>[P15]</p> <p><i>“You have to think about things a lot more independently rather than relying on like you know that your manager will look after you, it’s one man for his own a lot more now”</i>[P11]</p> <p><i>“I’m not entirely sure most of the times if I’m doing something wrong and I can do better because I don’t have anybody there to advise me... it puts me in perspective how long I want to stay in this project.”</i> [P4]</p> <p><i>“you are completely reliant on that person putting it forward and kind of show-casing you and that person it turned out wasn’t doing that at all”</i> [P5]</p> <p><i>“I feel like I’ve worked quite hard and that someone somewhere ought to recognise that and be like “P6, she’s good you know””</i>[P6]</p> <p><i>“there’s not many perks to being a high performer, like it can often feel like that person is doing a bad job and there’s next to no difference in how we’re treated.”</i>[P13]</p> <p><i>“I think you still need to have a lot of push from yourself, you have a lot of responsibility to move this forward.”</i> [P18]</p> <p><i>“for him [my partner] a career is just a career, it’s going to be spanning for however long until he retires, whereas I sit here and think ... how does everything else slot alongside that and therefore I feel like that’s my role almost to consider that.”</i> [P12]</p> <p><i>“unless you shout loud enough, there’s no recognition of what you’re able to do and what potential ability you have”</i>[P20]</p> <p><i>“I struggle with relationships and how they [men] perceive me, I know I’ve been in a relationship in the past where my achievements and my ambition has been seen as a negative”</i>[P15]</p> <p><i>“If they [your partner]are just as willing as you to split everything equally, to take up the slack when you’re busy, and vice versa then life feels much easier for you, you’re able to balance it [family]”</i>[P3]</p>
Self-efficacy	<p>Participants with high self-efficacy:</p> <p><i>“I’ve given myself my own targets, and I’ve never questioned whether or not I’ll get them or not”</i>[P20]</p> <p><i>“I can do anything that I want, I genuinely think as long as I’ve set my mind to it I can do anything”</i> [P11]</p> <p><i>“I feel like it’s within my capability to have some fairly big jobs at some point”</i>[P13]</p> <p>Participants with low self-efficacy:</p> <p><i>“Inside myself I don’t feel that confident. It’s like this weird tension, between “you should be confident, you should do this and you should and why not, why can’t you be partner, yeah just go for it.” And then this other bit of you was just like “Oh god, I’m terrible at my job”.”</i>[P1]</p>

Table 3.
Illustrative quotes for “Frustrated Lack of Sight”

Subtheme	Illustrative quotes
Reality Check	<p>“I thought because I was a bright upstart from uni everyone would listen to me. And I think I was quite naïve in that sense.” [P1]</p> <p>“at school and university it all came quite naturally to me...so it was quite a shock to the system to actually come here and realise that you actually work pretty hard to even get noticed” [P6]</p> <p>“I’m quite clever, I’ve got a degree, I’m quite good at what I do... and then you hit reality and it’s like actually it’s quite difficult to move up, to get recognised, to prove yourself” [P10]</p> <p>“it’s not even something that I thought about at uni, it being different for men and women in the workplace...not even a topic to be debated, it just was a nothing. And then you come here and you get into it and you think “actually it is really difficult”” [P7]</p> <p>“you have this idea of somebody in a black suit, with their black brief case, carrying their café latte on the train, and then when you get here it’s absolutely horrific... you’re like “I can’t wait to get home and take my dress off so I can breathe””[P11]</p> <p>“you get into real life and you think “actually I’m not that great” [laughs] ...I think my ambitions have become, I’ve sort of lowered my standard in a way, and sort of been a bit more realistic.” [P7]</p>
Leader similarity vs. dissimilarity	<p>Participants from a non-gender diverse department/who lack self-efficacy:</p> <p>“I can’t look at the make up of the partner panel and think that I can identify, because my background and my ethnicity don’t match....that’s quite a big thing...but then at the same time I don’t really want to be similar to [laughs] a partner.” [P7]</p> <p>“not all of them have kids actually. So they they’re kind of senior but they don’t have to do this whole work-life balance I was mentioning before.”[P2]</p> <p>“the directors and partners, to be honest they’re all, I hate the word, slightly posh older men, and I don’t really have that background” [P6]</p> <p>“the director is very good at elaborating on the truth to make things sound really good and I’m rubbish at doing that and I’ll tell things exactly how they are” [P8]</p> <p>“there’s one female partner...and she’s really quite fierce, and I’m not that fierce” [P17]</p> <p>“apart from a few token directors, which I barely know any, and all of them are quite intimidating and bitchy” [P10]</p> <p>“there’s not really any women where I’m like oh yeah I really want to be a partner and that’s how I see myself doing it.” [P13]</p> <p>Within a gender diverse department/with high self-efficacy:</p> <p>“we’re obviously all of a similar mindset which I think is part of the success... a chemistry thing or background type thing...we’ve obviously got a bit of a Northern/Northern Ireland view on life.” [P13]</p> <p>“I think it does sort of spur you on cos you know it’s an achievable thing... it makes me a bit happier about being here to be honest” [P6]</p> <p>“there’s one lady...who manages to pull off being effeminate and successful ...and you think “yeah you know what you can get there in PSORG being a certain way”” [P11]</p> <p>“he really values people and I can connect with that and I very much see that trait in myself” [P14]</p> <p>“They’re people that are capable in the job that they’re doing, they...must enjoy their job and I don’t see why I’d be any different to that. I don’t think there’s a hard and fast rule of what you have to be to be senior”[P20]</p>

Corporate Culture Fit	<p>Fit with culture: <i>"everything is shared a lot better because there is mutual respect and people do take time to help each other. It's all very warm and fuzzy here compared to other places I think [laughs]." [P14]</i> <i>"PSORG's culture is really important to me and is a big reason why I'd even consider staying til senior manager." [P12]</i> <i>"with PSORG it's more about us being personal and more interactive and it kind of fits with my personality anyway"[P19]</i></p> <p>Lack of fit with culture: <i>"I'd say departmentX in PSORG is quite a specific culture of being very hardnosed and formal, conservative." [P1]</i> <i>"I suppose that's a way in which PSORG holds you back or affects your motivation is the male dominatedness of it" [P1]</i> <i>"they felt more confident, more comfortable, because that's what I see that the guys have. And that always gets to me a little bit...they're really pally and they're really friendly and it's a completely different relationship." [P20]</i> <i>"you are surrounded by men all the time..." "do I wanna be there?"" [P12]</i></p>
Motivator fulfilment	<p><i>"what I'm doing suits my skillset. In terms of the people side, being structured and organised and figuring out what needs to happen and then a way to achieve it and being quite practical" [P13]</i> <i>"I like working in this environment where people are learning and they're absorbing new knowledge or new skills, conceptually that's something that I really find myself quite drawn to." [P9]</i> <i>"the varied work you get to do, I like the people, like mixing with intelligent people and learning, I feel like I've learnt a lot here which has been motivating for me and really good." [P10]</i> <i>"at the moment I feel like I'm learning so I'm happy where I am"[P1]</i> <i>"I'm starting to lose interest... the work that I do now doesn't really affect people in a way that I personally am motivated by"[P19]</i></p>
Stunted by barriers	<p><i>"there is so much focus on what grade you are and you almost get stamped at an ability level" [P20]</i> <i>"I don't like that it's frowned upon if you leave bang on time when there's nothing to do. I think that's a bad working environment"[P15]</i> <i>"I'm just y'know, desperate to, get a promotion because I'm operating and I'm being sold as the grade above and I just want to improve more, so I'm starting to stagnate because I'm at the top of the grade boundary." [P5]</i> <i>"it's not actually just doing a good job it's all about who you know"[P10]</i> <i>"three and a half months to wait for a promotion at a place you already work is just beyond disrespectful to me." [P7]</i> <i>"I think not enough people know how to work the system"[P20]</i> <i>"if you're not good at doing the internal politics...you're gonna go nowhere"[P13]</i> <i>"knowing it could happen at any point in time like next week they might decide to send me to Switzerland, there's kind of an uncertainty"[P19]</i> <i>"I find deeply annoying cos I'm being sold at manager level ...And being, obviously, drastically underpaid compared to what the firm makes off of me...if that doesn't get sorted in the near future I will be leaving the firm" [P13]</i> <i>"You need to stay and you need to work and it's very hierarchical...it wouldn't be you're independent and you're working on your own schedule" [P15]</i> <i>"in this place it's so defined by what projects you're on and what kind of group of people you happen to be with and what the politics and dynamics are. That completely changes the way you are perceived and therefore your motivation quite a lot so it's really up and down"[P1]</i> <i>"I'm thinking how the hell do you juggle nursery pick ups and stuff like that if it's not that flexible"[P12]</i></p>

“it’s not about what you want in your career, it’s about what PSORG needs and it’s about what makes the most money for the department. You don’t get to choose the projects you go on”[P11]

“it’s very pot luck on the jobs that you get and who you’re working with as to who you get, as to who gets promoted. And I think that is something that weighs on my mind quite a lot”[P6]

“The way that they do promotions I think is incredibly bureaucratic...and really subjective as well”[P5]

“you’re never being told whether you’re on the long list, whether you’ve been taken out of the long list and made it to the short list [for promotions], eventually I think you’re kind of being told if you are on the shortlist” [P2]

“it’s not open and honest enough and that really frustrates me, which again makes me more open and to looking elsewhere”[P7]

“you have to do extra stuff on the side of that that people recognise and people see you doing in order to play the game to make sure that you get promoted”[P10]

“when you’re trying to climb up the ladder you try and conform...even if you know you don’t necessarily believe in it because “that’s just the way things are done in the corporate world””. [P1]

“I’ve spent quite some time making sure that I built a reputation; partners and directors know me”[P2]

“I have a hard time actually pushing for things and I feel really it’s unnatural for me to do that...I’m not a natural salesman for myself so I think that’s the main issue”[P6]

Table 4.
Illustrative quotes for “Need for Resilience vs. Need to Adapt”

Subtheme	Illustrative quotes
Can vs. Can’t have it all	<p>“I have to think “I wanna be there, but I also want to have this” and if I want to have that then it involves a sacrifice somewhere”. [P12]</p> <p>“How do I think my career progression is going to develop after that? [having a child] I simply think it’s going to be parked and I don’t think it’s PSORG specific.” [P4]</p> <p>“now I want two things by the time I get to that age and how do I get both of them?” [P12]</p> <p>“I guess I try and want everything, but I probably would, the career would probably be what goes.”[P8]</p> <p>“I think it’s stupid to sit here and promote people and make out that women can have everything cos I think that’s just avoiding the very fact of life that well you can potentially have everything but you will be sacrificing somewhere.” [P12]</p> <p>“so I see my career staying quite stagnant for a while and then hopefully picking up again” [P7]</p> <p>“how the hell are you meant to do that and have a family? Like how are you meant to take time out and still be driving your career?” [P12]</p> <p>“you can’t do it here [leave on time to pick up kids], cos at the drop of a hat you’re like “oh I’ve got to stay late cos I’ve got to do this”” [P10]</p> <p>“apparently if you want a family, we [women] are the ones who’ve got to go through the hard stuff [laughs]. And men just have it easy.” [P10]</p> <p>“I think it’s huge-it’s just completely correlated, women-career it’s just completely tied together, whereas father and career, two completely separate things, they can go any direction they want” [P7]</p> <p>“I think once I’ve got to that stage and we are having a family or whatever, then it [work being a priority] will slip and it will fall.” [P7]</p> <p>“I don’t want to be in a place where if want to leave on time I feel it’s career limiting, and I’d be really worried that I would feel like that.” [P17]</p> <p>“I would rather have a job and take a slightly lower position to have my evenings and weekends than be at the very top of what I do and have no life.” [P11]</p> <p>“I’m not physically resilient enough to work hideous, hideous hours, so I guess that’s a</p>

factor" [P8]

"going into this busy team I would learn more but then I would be resentful because it would take all my evening plans and it would make me overall unhappy which would affect my career motivation" [P15]

"I think when you get to partner, working is your life regardless of what you want it to be and I'm not really myself prepared to make that sacrifice" [P6]

"there's a lot expected of you in addition to your contracted 35 hours and there is part of me that doesn't feel like that's always worthwhile" [P14]

"I wouldn't sacrifice everything for my career, but at the same time I don't think I would be satisfied not having a career." [P14]

"And that is the other question you have to ask yourself. Are you having your children for somebody else to raise? I want to raise them myself otherwise what's the point?" [P4]

Need to up
game vs.
abandon
ambitions

"I think my desire to get there and just how affected I've been in as much as I am shocked that I have worked with so few women has driven me" [P20]

"I think part of it is because I'm a girl I do feel the need to prove myself a bit more" [P6]

"standing out and at the same level trying to do better, trying to go the extra mile and trying to shine a bit more and everything, that's definitely driven by the fact I'm a woman." [P16]

"I do see that changing and part of me wants to help that change, so I do want to go up the go up the firm and help the demographics get a bit more even cos I do think that probably does put some girls off" [P6]

"it's not my career ambition or my career goals that change because I'm a woman, it's is what am I going to be able to get with the same level of effort, which is gender dependent, and I strongly believe that is still the case." [P4]

"because I'm a girl doesn't mean I'm not going to get somewhere eventually, but I do think that it might mean that it will take a lot longer to get there." [P6]

"I think it's gonna be again that race to getting things in order before me and my boyfriend take that next step and thinking "okay, I need to get to that point" [P7]

"I think in the future your priorities might change and that would make it difficult to maintain the same level of ambition but not impossible" [P3]

"it just makes you become very slightly more realistic about what is achievable and it's not necessarily because women are less ambitious, it's because women I think are more reasonable in expectations." [P12]

"I don't think it would ever change my ambition in that I would still want those things, I would still want to be working but I could see not working as hard or trying to get as far from a pragmatic perspective" [P14]

"I think pushing hard earlier on and getting yourself to the stage where you've got enough cash and enough seniority to be valuable to a team and enough money to get some good childcare solutions in place" [P13]

"I'd quite like to work it quite hard when I'm still in my twenties and thirties and then I can take a step back after that" [P6]

"I need probably to raise my expectations so that whatever I do I need to be better than a man twice to get to that point" [P4]

"So it was kind of clear to me from a fairly early stage when I joined here that if you want to get noticed I think girls just have to try a bit harder than boys... cos I think girls are naturally worse at selling themselves" [P6]

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Gender-role incongruity	<p>“there are so many career women in London who are chastised because they are really ambitious and they get nannies and they don’t spend time with their kids” [P1]</p> <p>“I get a bit annoyed that women who are ambitious sometimes get just dismissed for being pushy or bitchy or whatever and it’s just like if a boy were doing the same thing you’d applaud him” [P12]</p> <p>“You can just ask that in your next life you are a man.” [P4]</p> <p>“even the most rational people will probably still get more annoyed by a confrontational woman than they will by a confrontational man” [P1]</p> <p>“it’s just that feeling of ...women are emotional bags of nerves and men are these killers of stability and knowledge, and it’s like no that’s not the case either” [P20]</p> <p>“It’s like “oh but they all want to go and have families” no but we still want to work you know and get a good job” [P6]</p> <p>“I feel like they [men] don’t actually see the ambition, and I think it’s different to how they perceive a young male entering that environment” [P15]</p> <p>“I have to continually prove myself whereas some of the guys wouldn’t have to do that to the same extent.” [P13]</p> <p>“your ambitions as a woman and my ambitions definitely are tied to...if you don’t have kids or if you put them off cos you want to achieve certain things you’re selfish or you’re not feminine enough or those kind of things” [P7]</p> <p>“you’re gonna get people in those lanes that resent you and also people who fight against that... it’s only ever been with men that I am almost half competing with” [P20]</p> <p>“it’s unfair because I don’t have a woman there to judge it by and say “well is this happening because they’re men and it’s a female”” [P20]</p> <p>“He said “P15 you could be the best accountant in the world but it doesn’t make any difference because you’re a woman”” [P15]</p> <p>“I was part of the women’s network and he would refer to it as things like knitting club...if things that I’m doing in order to promote myself and do better are being laughed at then, what’s the point?” [P12]</p>
Frustrated hopelessness	<p>“if the whole reason of quotas was to bring more women into leadership, to inspire other women to do so as well...You’re doing the reverse because all they hear is “oh she only got promoted because she is a woman.”” [P3]</p> <p>“I also don’t like the sort of “let’s make a special case for women” ...if I got promoted to director because they wanted to up the female intake, that would make me lose my confidence in myself because I’d be like they only want me because I’m female not because I’m the right person for the job” [P8]</p> <p>“probably one of the reasons I’m staying with the organisation is because I think it is doing the right things, or it’s trying to make things better for women, I just think they’re obviously not there yet and that’s not necessarily through fault of their own.” [P12]</p> <p>“Because there’s a quota...she’s not respected...doesn’t matter if she’d have got there anyway without the quota, or she’s an amazing manager, they don’t care” [P3]</p> <p>“I personally don’t want to be promoted purely because I am a woman, I think that’s also wrong but I do think it’s difficult because...historically it’s obvious that men have been” [P3]</p> <p>“It’s very unfair but there’s nothing we can do about it and to be perfectly honest I don’t think there’s anything companies can do about it at all.” [P4]</p> <p>“there is a desire to promote more women...but I think that’s overlooking the very fact of life that regardless of if there are the career prospects there for women, you know you are still always juggling. Whereas a man isn’t” [P12]</p>