The Micropolitics of Gender at Work

Leading women in education
rocking the boat and moving on

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Declaration

I declare that this dissertation is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

Carole C. Peters
June 2004
I dedicate this thesis to individuals, young and old, who have experienced the meaning of
difference and to my son Simon, daughter Sam and grandsons Levi and Kaleb in the hope
that they can be part of a future society that more readily recognises, accepts, acknowledges,
rewards and uses the abilities and talents of women, thereby supporting outstanding
leadership potential regardless of gender, age, race or affiliation.
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Love to my daughter Sam and son Simon for having the courage to be different; and to grandson Levi1 for bringing me joy in his perceptive innocence.

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1 Intersections:
Abstract

This thesis investigates the experiences of 21 women in leadership and management who chose to leave their positions in the central office of a large state education department in Australia between 1991 and 2001, despite a record of high achievement and, for most, many years of loyal service. In particular, I identified why the women left and elements of the organisational culture that altered their career directions. The study adds to existing knowledge about women in management in Australia and the phenomenon of ‘the glass ceiling’ (generally understood to refer to an invisible barrier which prevents women, because they are women, from advancing beyond low to middle levels of organisational management). It demonstrates that the few women who do make it into senior management positions often encounter resistance to their acceptance at that level where the predominantly male managers exclude those who are different.

Using a qualitative research approach with in-depth, open-ended interviewing techniques drawn from a critical feminist perspective, I worked with the interviewees to explore their experiences as women in organisational management. In combining a phenomenological approach with critical reflection I aimed to create a dialogue on lived experiences while at the same time using theory to inform and reflect on those experiences. My focus shifts back and forth from the women’s stories, related in their own voices, to my critical interpretation through a feminist lens, of their life-worlds.

The sample ranged from women leading projects and special programs to directors, executive directors and chief executives. All, with one or two exceptions\(^2\), encountered barriers and described gendered micropolitical processes at work. The loss of talent is central to the research. The findings suggest that more could be done to retain women of high potential and, more broadly, to value talented and ‘different’ individuals who may disrupt the traditional understanding of ‘manager’ or ‘leader’.

In a profound questioning of the corporate culture the research participants identified the micropolitical processes at work that often blocked career progress. They questioned political game playing, factional politics, unwritten rules, gatekeeping, the exclusiveness

\(^2\) The two CEOs in the sample did not link their leaving to gender politics although one recognised a history of male advantage and traditional job selection processes that excluded talented women.
of the boys’ club, positional power, and the hierarchical and bureaucratic management structure. They observed that relational, inclusive and interactive management styles were not valued in a corporate culture that defined merit in masculinist terms. Many challenged excessive self-promotion and careerist politics; recognised techniques that excluded and marginalised women; and asked why men with mediocre performance records got promotions, often ahead of more qualified, experienced and talented women who worked passionately for ‘the good of education’.

Yet these female leaders recognised that behaviours cannot be divided neatly along gender lines. Many of the interviewees cited examples of a new wave of women they considered had become honorary males, responsible for perpetuating rather than resisting deeply entrenched practices, and not supportive of other women. One experienced CEO, who had worked in a wide range of public sector positions, distanced herself from gender debates and rejected feminist arguments that identified leadership as gendered. Adding to the complexity of the stories, other women at executive level talked of survival, the exhaustion of the lone female, the overwhelming weight of expectations from others (both male and female) and the ethical dimension of working in an ‘alien’ environment. As the ’90s progressed, social justice discourses were lost in the neoliberal agendas of managerialism and economic rationalism and feminist voices were submerged.
Preface: Autobiographical significance

Why did I decide to write this thesis and why did I choose to write about outstanding women in leadership and management? Because I care passionately about the continued injustice experienced by many women in a world where positional power and privilege automatically accrue to men. I would like to see organisational change which maximises the experience and skills of women whilst simultaneously maximising organisational performance (French, 1995): real change that can come from valuing, encouraging and acknowledging talent and ability, regardless of gender, cultural background, ethnicity, socio-economic status or sexual orientation. In an increasingly competitive and global workplace, we need people with the ability to question, to think at high levels of complexity, with a strong sense of justice, a tolerance for ambiguity and the ability to see things differently. Diversity makes good business sense (Karpin, 1995) and is vital to ethical decision-making processes – different people, different thinking … a different world.

My experience of injustice in a large bureaucracy, first wading through a minefield of structural barriers, then confronting a barrage of covert, deeply embedded discriminatory practices, has motivated me to speak out. In breaking the silence I have joined the resisters, the activists, the feminists, who refuse to collude in a system that rewards conformity and discourages difference. I have ‘rocked the boat’ in the sea of patriarchy and for that I have paid a price.

Yes, there is a big price to be paid for speaking out: exclusion, marginalisation, isolation, closed doors, insulated ceilings. But the stories of injustice and discrimination against women (and other ‘outsiders’) still need to be told, not only to highlight continuing disadvantage but also to expose privilege and advantage in a system designed by men for men. It takes thinking minds to discern covert behaviour and it takes courage to speak out. The women in this thesis who tell of their experiences are talented, articulate, capable and experienced leaders and managers. They have moved on voluntarily, but not without experiencing the anger, the hurt and the sadness that comes with being undervalued in a system that pays lip service to notions of equity but cannot understand the real meaning of diversity.
Susan Mitchell (1996), a former academic and now a best selling author, spoke out bravely on her departure from ABC television in 1994:

The battle to save the show had been bloody and protracted, and had involved many people in South Australia. It was a fight for a program not made in Sydney as well as a fight for a program written and presented by a woman who was over-opinionated, overweight and over forty – an ‘uppity’ woman. Certainly ‘uppity’ in the eyes of those male managers of ABC television in Sydney, who let me know they were most displeased with the fact that I fought such a hard and public battle. I was still stinging from the male fist of power.

Perhaps I should have done what they told me. Crawled into a corner, licked my wounds and shut my mouth. And kept it shut, despite the media’s questions, in the faint hope that in the future those same men might offer me a few crumbs from the high table … So why did I take on a public fight I knew I couldn’t win? Because it’s not in my nature to walk away from injustice. (p. 3 emphases added)

Women who experience discrimination feel anger and a sense of powerlessness and frustration in the face of deeply embedded cultural practices. Those who speak out are often labelled paranoid, accused of imagining things, of being too sensitive, of taking it personally. Discrimination is personal and it is political. Speak out, rock the boat! If all the people alienated by the hegemonic masculinist culture rocked the boat together, it would surely sink. We need a tidal wave of voices. Gentle ripples won’t change the shape of the landscape. It is taking too long!

Like the women whom I interviewed for this thesis, I have moved on; I have stopped banging my head against the promotional brick wall. I knew it was time to leave after a protracted equity battle over a job I missed out on (a really nice bloke, hand picked by the boys’ club, got the job). The final illuminating moment came when the executive director informed me that my responses to the written selection criteria were excellent, but that in the interview I had come across as too passionate, too intense and too focused. At first I was shocked and distressed, wondering how I could possibly change my very essence, but later, at home, I collapsed laughing. I knew I would always be passionate, especially about a job in gifted education; I would always want to be focused in my work; and I would always be intense about the things that meant a lot to me. I needed to work in an environment where people would value my talents, recognise my contribution and support me to be who I am. Like the women in this thesis, I want to make a difference and I want to remain true to my beliefs and values. These words from my childhood
(quoted from Shakespeare by my self-educated, nonconformist father\(^3\)) stay with me always:

This above all,
To thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man (sic).

— Shakespeare (Hamlet)

\(^3\) In acknowledging my father I reflect on parental influences, memories and changing perceptions over time. In doing so I also acknowledge the more hidden strengths of my mother and how Betty Friedan’s (1963) analysis of ‘the problem that has no name’ helped to explain so much.
Introduction

There’s an old saying about women having to be twice as good to get half as far as the average bloke. Average is the key word here. After all, who cares if a couple of talented and ambitious workaholics manage to shatter the glass ceiling? The playing field won’t truly be level until great hoards of mediocre chicks are able to rise through the ranks and stay there – just like chaps do. That’s when we’ll know feminism has really done its job.

— Emma Tom (2003)

Discussing women’s rights or gender equity is a contentious issue, a disquietening message, because ‘feminism has had its day’, ‘women are equal now’, ‘women are taking over’, ‘they’re all lezzos anyway’. In fact, to speak out in the name of gender is currently acceptable only in terms of ‘what about the boys?’ (Stapleton, 2000; Illing, 2004) but debilitating to a woman’s career prospects if she dares to mention discrimination against women in the workplace. The advent of women entering the workforce in large numbers since the 1970s has fuelled the perception that ‘women are taking over’ when in fact only small numbers have entered the management ranks (generally less than 10% in senior management). This perception, combined with the new managerialist and economic rationalist discourses that have dominated the workplace in recent years, has meant a huge backlash against feminism and a new conservatism where silence in the face of adversity is the accepted and safe response (Peters, 2002).

Women in leadership and management

Women in leadership and management positions still raise eyebrows. In the last ten to fifteen years in Australia we have seen the first female Chief Executive Officer of a state education department, the first female Vice Chancellor of a major university, the first female State Premier, the first female President of the ACTU, the first female Police Commissioner, the first female Director of Public Prosecutions, the first female Chairman (yes, the official title is Chairman!) of the board of a major company and the first female Aboriginal government minister. The list of firsts is still growing. Being the first, or even one of the first handful of individuals to negotiate new territory, demands talent, resilience and courage. Being first is being visible. For women, climbing the career ladder
in a traditional, male dominated, corporate culture is like climbing an unknown mountain without a guide. Tall poppies stand out and tall poppies risk being cut down. In Australia, women in leadership and management positions are recognised as tall poppies not only because they are women ‘climbing mountains’ and working in unchartered territory but because they possess the ability and the potential that make these breakthroughs possible.

Affirmative action in the 1980s brought with it a wave of opportunities for women aspiring to management positions. For some women they were ‘heady times’ (interviewee). The glass ceiling, if not broken, was showing some cracks. Since then women in leadership have continued to try to shatter the glass ceiling, open windows of opportunity, knock on doors and negotiate ‘sticky floors’ (Porter, 1995) although many have realised it doesn’t do your career any good to be associated with the issue (for example, Lynne Oldfield, Chief Executive of the Australian Council of Businesswomen, quoted in Stevens, 2000). The ‘power suits’ of the ’80s are out and fashion designers, supported by the media and glossy women’s magazines, reflect a renewed emphasis on the feminine. “Women no longer want to feel like a manager, they want to feel like a woman (sic)” says veteran designer Giorgio Armani after showing his 2003-04 autumn-winter collection in Milan (Bita, 2003). Now, with the 1990s behind us, feminist gains seem precarious as women continue to face discrimination at work4. However, feminist and pro-feminist researchers are becoming more aware of the complexities (and multiplicities) of gender and power in organisations, realising that the mere presence of women in bureaucratic structures is not enough to change the culture (Morgan, 1996).

Yet women in management bring new perspectives. While recognising that there are significant differences between women – influenced by class, race, sexuality and ideology5 – new perspectives are made possible when management is diversified, when hegemony is disrupted. Diversity means difference, opening up new possibilities for change. Change can mean embracing new ideas or looking at old ideas in new ways. Change can be driven by the ‘bottom line’ or by a passion for ‘making a difference’. It can be financially driven, politically motivated or ethically grounded, seeking to change lives in positive ways. Anita Roddick, founder of The Body Shop, an international retail

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4 See research studies pp. 18-24.

5 The focus for investigation is gender; the complexities of class, race, age and sexuality are recognised but not interrogated in this thesis.
chain with an environmentally friendly philosophy, is an outstanding example of a leader who is doing things differently. Her fresh perspective shines through in her book *Body and Soul* (1991):

The great advantage I had when I started The Body Shop was that I had never been to business school … If I had to name a driving force in my life, I’d plump for passion every time … the twin ideas of love and care can touch everything we do … In the 15 years I have been involved in the world of business it has taught me nothing. There is so much ignorance in top management and boards of directors; all the big companies seem to be led by accountants and lawyers and become moribund carbon-copies of each other. If there is excitement and adventure in their lives it is contained in the figures of the profit and loss sheet. What an indictment!

In following new paths and reaching new horizons, women are building new realities (Aburdene & Naisbitt cited in Hill & Ragland, 1995). New realities cause us all to rethink and redefine long-held cultural mores.

**Gender, power and organisations**

Both public and private sector organisations in the Western world have experienced some quite dramatic changes in management style and culture over the last twenty years. Many public sector organisations have moved from a history of traditional roles and relations based on notions of public service (Halford & Leonard, 2001) to a more competitive ethos, as modelled in private sector organisations, both under the influence of local and global competition and escalating consumer choice. In this thesis gender is foregrounded as a defining influence on organisational culture, both historically and in today’s economically driven workplace. In turn, gender is linked to power and influence. Gender “pervades the cultures, structures and practices of organisations and the experience[s] of women and men who work in them” (Itzin & Newman pp. 1-2). Power is linked to gendered beliefs and assumptions in which the masculine is central and advantaged. Building on the work of Rosebeth Moss Kanter (1977) who identified the possession of power as historically associated with men, Susan Halford and Pauline Leonard (2001) point out that:

… men are the primary agents of power, and they are so because they are men. They use organisational structures to mobilise their power over women. A structural relationship therefore exists between male power and organisational hierarchies, rules and procedures: all are used as a means by which women can be kept at the bottom of organisational structures, with little power or material reward. (p. 217)

Bureaucratic organisational structures not only support male power, but represent the male way of doing things. They are *a performance of masculinity*:
Power is … understood … to be far more than the exercise of rules or procedures to maintain gender hierarchies; it is understood as so thoroughly embedded in the design of bureaucratic organisations that it is a ‘knowledge’, in the sense of an unquestioned way of thinking and doing. (Halford & Leonard, 2001, p. 217)

In a poststructuralist sense power can be viewed as “a disciplinary regime or knowledge which dominates not only women but all those subjected to it” (Halford and Leonard, 2001, p. 218). It is possible to see that different women and men may work within the same workplace, yet experience their organisation in very different ways. The complexity of organisational life means that for some people “organisations offer a way of understanding themselves, their relationships with others and the world generally”; for others they present “a set of guidelines for relations and behaviour which are an accepted part of life”; and for some “they are a site of conflict, either to establish their own positions or to resist the positions of others” (Halford & Leonard, 2001, p. 218). Thus organisations may be all of these things, either simultaneously or at different moments in time.

The stories presented by the women in my thesis confirm that at times some of them worked in organisational pockets or subcultures that were more collaborative and conducive to their own style of operating. Moreover, one woman, in a senior executive position in the late nineties, was adamant that she was not disadvantaged by the culture, as she had helped shape that culture by selecting her own team and her own support networks. However this interviewee was an exception. Interestingly, her insistence that gender was irrelevant to her executive authority conflicted with the stories of other interviewees who reported that this quite powerful woman still met with resistance (as had women before her) from a male faction determined to remove her from power. Another interviewee, as a result of a management reshuffle, inherited a female line manager so ruthless, authoritarian and ‘hard’ that her thoughts of leaving were a direct result of this experience. Perhaps these two examples are indicative of a change, escalating through the nineties, to a more managerial ethos – market driven and rationalist in approach – and the selection of women who support this ethos. Yet it was because of the dominant cultural climate (which exhibited both elements of patriarchy and managerialism) that, in the final analysis, the women in my sample (with few exceptions) chose to leave.
Aim and context of the research

The aim of this feminist research study is to investigate the experiences of women in leadership and management positions in the central bureaucracy of a large state education department in Australia and, in particular, to identify elements of the organisational culture which may have impacted on their careers. It is my intention that this micropolitical study of the (gendered) culture of the organisation will add to existing knowledge about women in management in Australia and the phenomenon of ‘the glass ceiling’ which generally refers to the inability of organisations to remove structural and cultural barriers that block career progress for women (Morrison, White & Van Velsor, 1987; Davidson & Cooper, 1992; Sinclair, 1994; Ramsay, 1995; Smith & Hutchinson, 1995a; Still, 1995). The research seeks to highlight the reasons why all but two of the women in this study left their former employment with an Australian public education department. Through their stories I reveal the micropolitical influences of gender on the progress of women seeking career improvement, the male advantage, and a masculinist organisational culture. The loss of talent is central to the research which asks what could be done to retain women of high potential in the system, and, indeed, to value talented and ‘different’ individuals who may disrupt the traditional understanding of ‘manager’ or ‘leader’.

The title of the thesis suggests that these leading women in education were rocking the boat in a sea of patriarchy; disrupting established norms of behaviour in a masculinist culture. The research participants were strong enough to resist victimisation and indeed were actively seeking change by managing in different ways and by identifying power games, discriminatory practices and entrenched management styles and alliances.

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6 Micropolitics focuses on ways in which power is relayed in everyday practices through influence, networks, coalitions and political and personal strategies to effect or resist change (Morley, 1999; Blase, 1991; Ball, 1987; Hoyle, 1982).

7 There were two exceptions included in my category of leaving: one woman began planning retirement as a direct result of an ‘incident’ that prompted a significant shift in her loyalty (a type of psychological leaving); another vowed never to return to central office, citing a clash of values as leading to her decision to leave.

8 In using this metaphor I acknowledge that men’s continued domination in senior positions is linked to a range of interconnections between particular masculinities and managerial practices, for example paternalism, entrepreneurialism, careerism and personalism (Collinson & Hearn, 1994).

9 The term ‘masculinist’ refers to the dominant ethos of the organisation under consideration, one which conforms to and reproduces features of the hegemonic forms of masculinity present in wider society (Connell, 1987).
‘Rocking the boat’ is used in the sense of describing the participants’ desire to change the dominant culture of the organisation or at least to create an environment where operating outside the masculinist paradigm was recognised and valued. Most rocked the boat by disrupting taken-for-granted ways of thinking about (and doing) management: questioning the corporate culture; resisting compliance or assimilation. They were strong women. All but one (possibly two) wanted to operate differently and eventually left because those differences were not valued.

The selection of the women for the study was influenced by my intent to profile talented individuals; to highlight their high level of competence; their ability to manage; their capacity as outstanding leaders; their ability to question existing practices; and their commitment to ‘making a difference’. Outstanding women doing and seeing things differently tend to ‘rock the boat’ in a male dominated culture which has traditionally worked to men’s advantage.

The objectives of the research are to identify:

1. Reasons why highly capable women in leadership and management positions voluntarily left the Education Department over a ten year period;
2. Where these women are now;
3. Organisational support/initiatives that might have resulted in the women staying with their former employer.

Some specific questions for investigation include:

- How are women in leadership and management coping with the ‘glass ceiling’?
- Are highly capable women in leadership and management ‘rocking the boat’ i.e. challenging the status quo?
- Is indirect discrimination impacting on promotional opportunities for women in leadership and management? If so, in what ways?
- Are there other factors in operation either promoting or limiting women’s progress?
- How can factors promoting progress be built in and factors limiting progress be reduced? (Adapted from Bellamy & Ramsay, 1994, p. 68)

My personal experience of women’s disadvantage (and men’s advantage) in a profession where two-thirds of the teaching workforce is made up of women and over 70 percent of
promotional positions are held by men (Saunders, 1993; Barrera, Finlay, Saggers & Stuart, 1999) has been influential in my selection of this research problem. My work in gifted education at local, state and national level influenced my choice of women of high potential as the subjects of the research topic.

The broad category of leadership and management allows for the identification and selection of women who exhibit high potential in a range of leadership and/or management positions. Restricting the sample to only women who have reached line management positions would exclude women who have shown high levels of ability and resourcefulness in leading projects, special programs and other Education Department initiatives. It also recognises that women’s access to line management positions has traditionally been limited by structural barriers and discriminatory practices, and that leadership can be defined in non-hierarchical ways. Leadership is conceptualised in its most inclusive sense. As described by Blackmore (1999), “Educational leadership is something that good teachers, good bureaucrats and not just good principals or CEO’s do” (p. 6). When denied access to positional power many women find other pathways for developing their leadership abilities.

However, many of the research participants were in senior management positions. The sample ranged from women leading projects and special programs to directors, executive directors and chief executives. Due to the qualitative, in-depth nature of the research and the need to keep the scope of the project manageable, the research focused on 21 women who left central office positions between the years of 1991 and 2001. The decision to leave was voluntary and I asked these women why they left the state education system after many years of loyal and exemplary service.

My interest in the recognition and development of potential has extended from children and adolescents to adults, particularly in the workplace. While working as a consultant and project leader with teachers and administrators to raise awareness of the needs of gifted and talented students, I repeatedly encountered adults of high potential reaching out in a path of self-development and growth. Many of these adults were women in teaching or ‘junior’ management positions rather than positions of power and authority, yet they demonstrated understandings, ideas and insights which indicated advanced levels of thinking and excellent leadership qualities. Like the children in my extension programs, these adults stood out from the crowd in their heightened awareness of issues of justice
and equity and in their ability to question and challenge the status quo. I began to question why highly capable women were usually ‘the workers on the ground’ rather than our educational leaders.

The research, in the context of public sector education, is influenced by an Australian government report by Bellamy & Ramsay (1994), designed to explore the experiences of female managers in the private sector. My research is not seeking to generalise beyond the participants but will contribute to a growing body of research on women in management and the culture of organisations. The focus is on women as leaders, highlighting the dual impact of gender and high achievement on career development. It includes recommendations to assist organisations, such as state education departments, to create more supportive conditions to attract and retain women of high potential.

Overview of thesis

In this thesis the critical reflection runs through the chapters (with links to the literature) and is not confined to the ‘reflection’ section at the conclusion of each chapter. My commentary is interspersed with the women’s stories, told directly from the interview transcripts. My aim is not to be prescriptive so I leave space for reader interpretation. The direct quoting from the interview transcripts is a deliberate tactic to reveal the essence of the participants’ narratives, rather than a re-presentation through my voice. The women’s voices give my thesis its originality and freshness.

This introductory chapter provides general background information, outlines the aim of the research and places it in context. Chapter 2 provides a review, from a feminist perspective, of the literature on women in leadership and the literature on management styles, difference, masculinities and masculinist cultures. The review highlights the significance of gender discrimination in the career development of women as well as the significance of the corporate culture in limiting women’s careers in management.

Chapter 3 describes the research methodology which uses a qualitative research approach with in-depth, open-ended interviewing techniques drawn from a critical feminist perspective. The phenomenological influence is linked to my desire to capture the authentic lived-experiences of the participants as told through their own stories. The combination of the two approaches allows me to present the women’s stories as they tell them and then to interpret those stories through a feminist lens. The semi-structured
interview and questionnaire format was designed to investigate the issues surrounding the women’s departure from their employer and their sense of themselves as leaders or managers working within the culture of the Education Department. This chapter also outlines post modern influences that reconceptualise feminist research to focus not only on the oppressive aspects of power but on the way power, through situationally specific forms of hegemony, operates to shape our world view. Through a study of these micropolitical processes, my intention is to use the shared experiences of female leaders to contribute to knowledge of the intersections of gender, power and organisations.

Chapters 4 to 8 analyse the subjective experiences of the women by extracting significant themes. The participants present their own accounts of career experiences in a large bureaucracy, allowing for multiple perspectives on the themes that arise. The interpretation of these perspectives is influenced by my position as participant researcher. As one of the interviewees (one of the five project leaders at Level 5) my views are incorporated proportionately into the research. As the researcher I also influence the research through an interpretive framework of critical feminism that questions the advantage of privileged groups and focuses on the relationships among culture, power and domination (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000). The participants’ experiences are interpreted in a feminist context which means that the issues of male dominance and male advantage are essentially part of the research.

Questioning the Corporate Culture is the underlying theme of the thesis and is developed explicitly in Chapter 4. These female leaders questioned political game playing, factional politics, unwritten rules, gatekeeping, the exclusiveness of the boys’ club and the hierarchical management structure. The self-promotion of men in management, lack of recognition of the achievements of women, and change and restructure as a strategy to keep the men in power highlighted the male advantage. As the researcher, I question the masculinist culture as it reveals itself in the central office of the organisation and draw attention to “the micropolitics of coercive power relations such as harassment, bullying and spite as a means of gendered regulation” (Morley, 1999, p. 73).

Chapter 5 discusses the complexities of life balance: the influence on career of family care responsibilities, finding support, family friendly equity areas and the pressure to conform to extended and inflexible working hours. Balancing home, community and work responsibilities was not easy, especially in a climate of work intensification, but all
of the women were prepared to work the hours that the job demanded – that alone would not have prompted the decision to leave. A desire to work in a more supportive environment was at the forefront of the decision-making process, contradicting the stereotypical perception that women leave jobs for family reasons.

Chapter 6 explains how the participants were treated differently as female leaders in a male dominated work environment. This includes their feelings of isolation as the lone female, experiences of bullying and harassment, patronising attitudes, the reactions of other women and men when reporting to a woman, and having to be better than a man to prove one’s worth, especially if working in an area linked with equity or social justice. It also discusses the micropolitics of advantage in organisations that normalise the image of male as central and dominant, inevitably positioning women as the problem and leading to equity programs designed to ‘fix the women’.

Chapter 7 looks at the different management styles of the interview sample. Although there were individual differences, particularly in the case of a chief executive with a more rationalist approach, the philosophy of working for the good of education permeated the stories. Most described their leadership style as inclusive, collaborative, interactive and supportive; focused on developing the talents of the team and centred on the effective management of people. Others pointed out that management styles are complex, varied and context related. Yet the underlying inclusive, relational focus differed quite markedly from the more transactional (command and control) style of the dominant culture. The respect, recognition and empowerment that many of these women were keen to give to those who worked with them and for them was something they were frequently unable to get for themselves, especially from transactional and traditionalist line managers.

Being bypassed for promotion, outlined in Chapter 8, was one of the main reasons many of the women left the organisation. The waste of talent and the inequity in job selection processes were major concerns as was the use of organisational restructuring as a sidelining device. Failure to recognise the management skills of project leaders, mostly female, meant that they could not compete with the predominantly male line managers in the promotional stakes. Most of the women who were in senior and executive management positions found that they eventually hit the glass ceiling, feeling alienated from the masculinist culture. When they became a threat to the male status quo, they were often sidelined in the next restructure.
Chapter 9 explains where the women are now and how they feel about moving on. The women talked about the risks involved in stepping out in new directions, highlighting the positives and reflecting on their decisions to leave. They acknowledged the support they had received from role models and mentors, many of whom were other women in the research study. The value of a male mentor or male sponsors as a means of opening doors in a masculinist culture was significant for some women, particularly those who had reached senior management positions and above. This chapter also conveys the research participants’ recommendations for change which tended to focus on a complete overhaul of the central bureaucracy, including ‘eliminating’ entrenched managers who blocked real change; more equitable job selection processes; the valuing of a diverse range of management styles; the valuing of ideas and continuous learning; an acceptance of difference; an emphasis on education as opposed to managerialist and careerist politics; and more flexible working conditions to promote life balance.

In conclusion, Chapter 10 summarises the main reasons given by the interviewees for leaving the central office of a large bureaucracy. The reasons centre on being treated differently; feeling isolated, marginalised and excluded; being bypassed for promotion (despite demonstrated high performance); having a different sense of professionalism, ethics and good management; and not feeling supported in the corporate environment. Most felt that their values and ideals for educational leadership clashed with those of the dominant culture (hence rocking the boat). Many of the women found themselves sidelined to jobs outside the main areas of influence in the organisation, which raised questions about the valuing of work associated with the feminine. This final chapter confronts the silence and the fear of speaking out for those who run the risk of being excluded from positions of power and influence in male dominated cultures. It also acknowledges that a feminist analysis of women and leadership cannot “assume a commonality of women’s interests, ignoring the diversity which exists between groups of women” (Wilkinson, 2001, p. 1). In essence, these conclusions provide possible strategies for changing the organisational values and enhancing management professionalism for women in leadership and possibly for men who feel marginalised by the dominant culture of education bureaucracies.
Literature review

Despite the wave of management opportunities inspired by Affirmative Action in the 1980s, claims that the glass ceiling has been ‘shattered’, ‘cracked’, ‘dented’ or ‘broken’ are unsupported by any real and lasting change. Whilst more women have moved into middle management positions, executive management remains dominated by men (EOWA Census reported in Williams, 2003). The economic rationalist approach to education and business in the 1990s reconstructed social justice, including gender equity, in terms of ‘diversity’ as a ‘bottom line’ issue for organisations. And now, when gender issues are discussed in education circles, the context is ‘boys in schooling’ and the shortage of male primary teacher role models (Illing, 2004) with not a mention of the gendered division of educational leadership and the role modelling that creates. These arguments, linked to a men’s rights perspective, tend to ignore broad social structures and matters of power, social dynamics and organisational culture (Kenway, 1997).

Thus, the imbalance of women and men in management, particularly senior management, and the implications for the performance of organisations is a current and continuing issue. Attention has increasingly focused on why women, once they enter corporate management, do not advance but remain in low to middle levels despite affirmative action legislation and employer awareness of equal employment opportunity guidelines (Still, 1984; Bellamy & Ramsay, 1994). Even the few women who do make it into senior and executive management ranks can encounter resistance as a common language and common experience binds the dominant group and excludes those who are different (Kanter, 1977). The glass ceiling may be cracked but not broken – it remains impenetrable for most women. Although two of the women in my study shattered the glass ceiling, others encountered impenetrable barriers. It is the invisibility of the process of exclusion “referred to variously as ‘masculinist cultures’ and ‘glass ceilings’ that accounts for its durability in the face of anti discrimination legislation and affirmative action” (Blackmore & Sachs, 2000, p. 7).
This chapter explores some of the themes running through the literature on women’s experiences as managers and leaders in organisations. What are the implications for women who take positions of leadership in organisations with management structures that have traditionally been built by men and for men (Cockburn, 1991; Burton, 1993b)? What are the implications for organisations of including more women and members of minority groups? With an increasingly diverse workforce, differences in management styles and differences in values emerge. Often dominant groups strive to maintain the status quo through a process of devaluing difference. Yet it is in the valuing of difference, in the recognition of new ideas and new ways of being that we can grow as individuals and as the contributors to organisations. “We can support systems in being resilient by encouraging them to exercise their freedom to explore new connections and new information … Open and inquiring, such systems become wiser about themselves” (Wheatley & Kelner-Rogers, 1996, pp. 101-102). However, when power differences emerge and resistance to change is strong, some women may choose (consciously or unconsciously) to adapt, conforming to the requirements of the dominant culture. Others may eventually become weary of the resistance to their attempts to do things differently, to be accepted and valued in their own right, and leave.

Women in management

Statistics

Despite advances made by the women’s movement and the resultant opening up of opportunities for women, gender-role stereotyping, the influence of culturally entrenched beliefs, and the strength of traditional value systems continue to limit career development for women of high potential. Women are still under-represented in many high level occupations, in management, on company boards and in politics. And a disproportionate number of women occupy low paid, low skilled and low status jobs. The executive culture is a masculine domain, dominated by men and oriented in favour of men. Traditional expectations place a heavy burden on women as they attempt to manage the multiple facets of their lives and to break down barriers in the workplace and beyond.

In Australia, as in every country worldwide, women are conspicuously under-represented in management. A government commissioned report by Bellamy and Ramsay (1994) reveals that in 1993 women in Australia constituted 23 percent of all management positions (Australian Bureau of Statistics) falling to less than 5 percent at upper
management levels (Affirmative Action Agency); and only a handful of women sat on the boards of Australia’s top 100 companies. These figures have not changed significantly in the last decade and “at its current glacial pace Australian management will achieve equal representation for women in a mere 177 years” (Fiona Krautil, director of Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency reported in Stevens, 2000, p. 18).

In fact, recent figures released by the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency (EOWA) reveal that although women make up 44 percent of the Australian workforce, 53 percent of Australia’s top 200 companies have no women in executive positions; women fill only 8.8 percent of senior positions; and just two of our top 200 corporations have a female CEO. In these same 200 companies women fill a mere 8.4 percent of board seats. This compares unfavourably with the USA where women fill 15.7 percent of senior positions and all but 14 percent of major firms have women in executive positions (Cooper, 2003; EOWA 2003 Australian Census).

Women executive directors stand at a mere 1.3 percent; and of the 2,345 director positions in Australia in 1999 only 10.7 percent were held by women (Korn/Ferry International & Corporate Women Directors International cited in the Women’s Policy Office Fact Sheet, November 1999). The Weekend Australian newspaper’s list of Australia’s top 100 executive salaries for the twelve-month period to the end of June 2002 reveals only two women within its ranks (Gluyas & Elliott, 2002). The Australian Bureau of Statistics figures for February 2000 indicate that the total number of women in management positions has remained unchanged since 1993, standing at 22.7 percent.

Even in occupations where the workers are mostly women, managers are overwhelmingly likely to be men – an observation made by Kanter in 1977 that remains true today. This means that male managers in female-dominated work places are selected from a much smaller pool of potential managers. As much research has supported the premise that when we think manager, we think male (Schein, 1975), men are advantaged in a process where male competition is reduced. The shortage of men in areas such as primary teaching has the potential to influence selection in promotional processes, thus creating an unacknowledged form of affirmative action for men. In addition, many women apply for positions only when they feel certain that they are fully qualified for the job, whereas less qualified men, their confidence boosted by more “opportunities to engage in challenging
work-relevant activities across different settings” (Cleveland, Stockdale and Murphy, 2000) and the support of the boys’ club, will be more likely to ‘have a go’.

Women represent approximately 70 percent of the total education workforce in Australia but occupy only 25 percent of management positions in education departments (ABS Census, 1996). The figures for Western Australia are an example with women comprising more than two-thirds of the teaching workforce and one quarter of school-based promotional positions. In contrast women surpass men in higher educational qualifications, holding nearly as many bachelor degrees (49% and 51% respectively) and 60 percent of all post graduate qualifications (ABS Census of Population and Housing, 1996).

**Historical overview**

In the past the lack of women in management was explained by the structure of a society where patriarchal practices and traditional values defined the women’s role primarily in terms of home and family, leaving the world of paid work to men. With the second wave of feminism and the movement of women into the workforce in large numbers during the ’70s and ’80s, there were changes to both the demographics and the arguments. Now, it was argued, because of their dual roles, women were less dedicated to the job than men and, due to their lack of experience, did not have the required management skills. Women needed to improve their qualifications and go to management skills courses to compete with men in the managerial stakes. “All over the world, women entered into the training and education that would prepare them for managerial equality with men. Women had only to prove themselves competent … and the world would prove itself to be fair” (Colwill, 1997, p. 47). But equal representation is still a distant goal:

> Today we are older and wiser. The research energy of hundreds of academics has been devoted to the study of women, men and organisations … [Women] have entered the professions in unprecedented numbers in what they believe to be the first step towards leadership. Women have read the books, earned the credentials and proved their competence. Yet in every country, in virtually every occupation, in almost every company, women continue to be under-represented in management in proportion to their representation in the workforce. (Colwill, 1997, pp. 47-48)

With the realisation that management skills can be gained in spheres outside paid work and that years of experience on the job are not the only measure of merit, the ‘deficient

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10 The requirement for schools to retain gender-linked deputy principal positions (which divided these appointments on a 50/50 basis) ceased at the end of 1997.
woman’ theory is losing favour. Arguments for women in leadership have since wavered between assertions that women are ‘as good as any man’ or, more recently, that women collectively bring something special to leadership: unique feminine qualities previously overlooked (Blackmore, 1999). This ‘female advantage’ argument (for example Rosener, 1990), introduced in a valiant attempt to point out the added value that women could bring to management, is also losing favour, particularly with postmodern feminists who say that highlighting skills unique to women’s experience has the effect of essentialising women and leaving the normative male intact (Blackmore, 1999; Fredrick & Atkinson, 1997). The link between the female advantage argument and ‘women’s work’– the emotional, nurturing and caring work – provides the opportunity to further denigrate women by suggesting that ‘soft’ skills belong to women and that ‘hard’, more rational skills belong to men. In addition, the risk in highlighting special ‘female’ qualities and applying them to women as a group can be that the differences and talents of individual women are ignored. Yet the argument is complex, as highlighting skills that have previously been undervalued is a necessary part of the change process towards a more diversified workforce and a way of disrupting the generally accepted notion of what it is to be a manager.

More recent explanations of women’s low numbers in management, particularly senior management, focus on the cultures of organisations and the direct and indirect organisational barriers to equal access for minority groups. The historical development of our thinking in the area of women in management can be clarified by classifying the associated research and writing into two types: person-centred and organisation-centred (Colwill (1997). The person-centred approach tends to focus on blaming the victim so that the responsibility for organisational change remains squarely on the shoulders of women (Vinnicombe & Colwill, 1995). The organisation-centred approach is more complex, introducing issues of power and the gendered nature of organisational management cultures. However, in any discussion of power it is important to note that power can be used not only in the more traditional sense of power ‘over’ others but in the sense of understanding and empowering the self and others (Sawicki, 1991; Blackmore, 1999).

Changing the dominant culture of an organisation is not an easy task, although there may be more progressive, ‘empowered’ subcultures within the larger structure where change is initiated in the form of resistance (Foucault, 1982). Both women and men can contribute
to maintaining the status quo but it is men who have a vested interest in preserving the
male advantage. Surprisingly, many women will deny any experience of personal
discrimination even though they are well aware of the existence of sex discrimination in
the workplace (Crosby cited in Colwill, 1997). This may be because, in striving to
perceive the world as a just and fair place, “women must compare their situation, not to
the situation of men in comparable circumstances, but to the condition of other less
fortunate women” (Colwill, 1997, p. 55 citing Lerner and Abbondanza). Or it may be
silence in the form of fear – fear of jeopardising one’s career by speaking out against
discriminatory practices. As explained more fully in Chapter 3, I draw on feminist
theories and literature which problematise issues of male dominance and power. In this
chapter I review the research on women in management with the intention of highlighting
their experiences in masculinist organisational settings.

The increasingly subtle and sophisticated ways in which dominance is achieved and
maintained in institutions can be studied through the lens of micropolitics. As explained
by Morley (1999) “conflicts, tensions, resentments, competing interests and power
imbalances influence everyday transactions in institutions”. Micropolitics can be subtle
and elusive, “leaving individuals unsure of the validity of their readings of a situation” (p.
45). Both feminism and micropolitical analysis “can label unnamed feelings, experiences,
practices and transactions” that when expressed by members of oppressed groups are
often silenced or dismissed by dominant discourses (Morley, 1999, pp. 5-6). “The
invisibility of the process[es] of exclusion – the problem that has no name, but referred to
variously as ‘masculinist cultures’ and glass ceilings – account for their durability in the
face of anti discrimination legislation and affirmative action” (Blackmore & Sachs, 2000,
p.7). As Maud Eduards (1992) points out, the most effective opposition to change is kept
intangible.

In 1994 Joan Eveline argued the need for a critical (d)enunciation of 'men's advantage'.
The feminist discourse of women's disadvantage (as opposed to men’s advantage)
reinforces an assumption that processes advantaging men are ‘normal’. Rather than
highlighting the inequalities between men and women, the discourse of disadvantage
conceals and congeals them into a 'woman's problem'. For a woman to make career
progress she must be given ‘training’ or 'self-esteem'. However, in a reversal of the
argument, Eveline suggests that if EEO policies are to succeed “one could make a case
that men need, at least, an equal amount of training and retraining” (p. 134).
Gherardi & Poggio (2001) analyse the gender order at work – the rules and the rituals by which gender is created and recreated in organisations. They also point out the ambiguity that characterises social expectations towards women who enter traditionally male territories. Women, as ‘aliens’ in a new territory are expected to prove themselves; they are expected to lead and, at the same time, ‘act like women’. As explained by Sylvia Gherardi (1994) in her article titled *The Gender we Think, The Gender we Do in our Everyday Organisational Lives* women are also expected to adapt — to fit in with management and assimilate to an organisational culture that “formally acknowledges equality but in practice denies the diversity of gender” (p. 595). Viewing gender in the context of organisational culture: “something organisations ‘do’ and not as a natural attribute of people” can help those within the organisation, particularly managers, “to be aware of the hegemonic masculinity underlying dominant social practices” (Gheradi and Poggio, 2001, p. 245). As Acker (1990) highlighted in her theory of gendered organisations, organisational structures are not gender neutral. The universal image of a worker is actually a man: “Images of men’s bodies and masculinity pervade organisational processes, marginalising women and contributing to the maintenance of gender segregation in organisations” (p. 139).

In this thesis it is my contention that the culture of the Education Department, particularly the central office of the bureaucracy, is male dominated, and it is this domination that makes it difficult for women to enter and remain in senior management positions. Underlying gendered attitudes to women and men outside the dominant group help to create, maintain and promote a power elite. All but two of the women in this research study emphasised that their concerns centred on the hegemonic culture of the educational bureaucracy which they had chosen to leave. All of the women cited a history of structural barriers to women and a seniority system geared to length of service and ‘homosocial reproduction’ (Kanter, 1977): a ‘social similarity’ (Halford & Leonard, 2001) management system advantaging white middle class males. Management positions are often closed to people who are different (Kanter, 1977), and despite a high profile given to women who make it to the top in organisations, their reign is often short and far from sweet. The dominant central office culture was masculinist, hierarchical and bound up with issues of power and privilege. Yet there were subcultures, such as those linked with personnel or social justice (staffed by mainly women or by women and men who resisted the dominant style), where more relational and connective styles of management could be practised.
Chapter 2

Research studies on women in management

The following research studies include investigations as to why women decided to leave positions in corporate management as well as research into managerial effectiveness and issues surrounding the perceived attributes of a successful manager. The qualities of effective managers have traditionally been linked to ‘masculine’ characteristics such as independence, aggression, competitiveness and logical reasoning. Hence the conclusion by Schein (1976) ‘think manager … think male’.

The stereotypical perception of women as ‘not tough enough’ for leadership, less ambitious and less competitive, has strong links with continuing societal expectations of women as the prime nurturers and carers (and men as breadwinners and heroic leaders). Women are often seen as being less committed to their jobs than men. Paradoxically, if they continue to work without stopping for family concerns, they are often branded as uncaring or overly ambitious (Fredrick & Atkinson, 1997). However, the evidence is that many women are highly committed to their careers and when they do leave employment, it is not family concerns, but the gendered nature of the organisational culture that is a prime motivating factor.

The findings of Bellamy and Ramsay (1994), in their work for the Women’s Employment, Education and Training Advisory Group, highlight the barriers to women working in corporate management in Australia and provide insights into gender stereotyping and the corporate culture. The report revealed that, of the thirty women interviewed, nearly half named a conflict between personal and professional values as a prime reason for their decision to leave their former company. Other reasons why middle and senior management women voluntarily left corporations include: being treated differently as a woman; not fitting the corporate culture; lack of a career path; lack of a mentor; being on the fringe of the organisation in a support function; exclusion from male networks; negative treatment after maternity leave; and having a different management style (p. 11). The main reasons centred on an alienating corporate environment, on feelings of difference and differential treatment, of not belonging, being excluded and lacking support. On the basis of the experiences described by the women, the researchers conclude that the major difficulty these women faced was marginality, a key to understanding why women in corporations continue to hit the ‘glass ceiling’ (p. 54).
The issues relating to why women leave organisations are also examined by Leonie Still (1993, 1994) who reports that there is concern in some Australian organisations that top women executives are leaving for self-employment or lesser status roles. A few have realised that the culture may be a precipitating factor in the women’s decision to leave. In examining this cultural dilemma, Still (1994) outlines steps that women need to take to reach their full potential, such as altering their mode of operation from a ‘victim’ mentality (a ‘blame the women’ argument?), deciding whether to share power or get the male managerial culture to yield power. Still (1993) explains that in the pursuit of a managerial career ambitious women either join the male culture as ‘honorary males’ or they become one of the growing number of senior women who engage in ‘corporate flight’. According to Marshall (1991), many women who leave are the sole woman at their organisational level (or one of a small number) and the organisational culture has a large influence on their leaving.

In a detailed account of the experiences of women who were successful in their careers and had reached middle or senior management positions, yet decided to leave, or were contemplating leaving, Judi Marshall (1995b) raises questions about working in male-dominated cultures and explores perceptions of change. She sees much change as not really change but rather “a rearrangement or development of what happened before” (p. 5). She quotes Watzalawick, Weakland and Fisch (1974) who distinguish between first- and second-order change, to point out that, in first-order change, often our basic assumptions remain the same whereas to achieve ‘real’ or second-order change we need to alter a fundamental pattern. In other words, achieving change involves questioning assumptions, questioning established patterns and understanding how we keep things the same. Eleven of the sixteen women in Marshall’s study reported dissatisfactions and pressures associated with working in what they termed as ‘male-dominated cultures’ that often rendered their organisational environments hostile. Not only were the environments male dominated numerically but the collective behaviour of the men made the women feel “excluded, under attack, less than effective, marginalised and isolated” (Marshall, 1995b, p. 309).

Amanda Sinclair’s investigation, Trials at the Top (1994), focused on the way the corporate culture reinforces masculine norms to the detriment of women. A study of Australia’s chief executives (CEOs) in the private sector was undertaken to identify the reasons for the continuing exclusion of women from the executive culture and the scope
forces for change. In an attempt to discover more about women in the executive culture, the researchers had to focus on men, ‘masculinism’ and executive identity. Sinclair found that success in the executive culture depends on two things: firstly, the individual’s willingness to confer it on herself, and secondly, the culture’s capacity to recognise and confer success on the deserving individual. Sinclair concludes that women tend to lose out on both counts. She links this to the theory that, for either psychologically or socially determined reasons, men tend to overestimate their performance, attributing their success to ability. In contrast, women generally underestimate their ability, attributing success to luck or opportunity and failure to themselves (see also Davidson & Cooper, 1992). Secondly, explains Sinclair, as women advance to higher levels in the organisation, they receive fewer endorsements. Men are less likely to offer endorsement to women they now see as competitors. In addition, senior executive males are likely to hold a more traditional view of success, which has established itself in a culture where the stay-at-home wife has subjugated her own life to the spouse’s career.

Building on her study of eleven male chief executives, Sinclair (1998) interviewed twelve senior executive women to examine gender, power, and sexuality in a changing business culture. She supports the argument that Australian organisations are clinging to an outdated concept of leadership which does not reflect the diverse experience of the workforce and points out that “much of the theory and research on power and influence in organisations has been gender-blind” (p. 111). We expect our leaders to be a certain type of person – a tough, heterosexual male linked to the heroic tradition of leadership, deeply rooted in Australian cultural mythology. This is supported by recent research by Nevard (2002) which identified the discourse of heroic leadership (hero, champion, superhuman) as a cultural practice which generally excludes women and is past its use-by date.

Sinclair (1998), like other researchers (Flax, 1992; Fredrick & Atkinson, 1997; Fletcher, 1999), warns that research into sex differences should always be treated cautiously and cites the controversy surrounding Carol Gilligan’s pioneering research (1982) on moral development in men and women as an example. Research highlighting differences can be twisted and used as a pretext for the ‘deficient woman’ argument. This argument suggests

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11 Sinclair (1998) proposes that male (sexual) identities are supported through the enactment of leadership. “For many male leaders, leadership has also been an accomplishment of masculinity, with a traditional but invisible link between enactment of a particular heterosexual masculinity, self-esteem and leadership. For women, leadership has mostly required the active censorship or camouflage of female sexuality” (p. 157).
that if women would just develop the requisite toughness and assertiveness, construct the networks and mentor relationships taken for granted by men, improve their qualifications and resist their tendencies to nurture, they could, with time, take their place beside men. Sinclair firmly rejects this argument as well as the ‘absence’ or ‘pipeline’ argument that insists that the dearth of female leaders is the reason for the lack of women in management positions and that if we just wait long enough, until women become more qualified and experienced, time and patience will be rewarded. In rejecting the ‘fix the women’ argument, she recommends instead that we “broaden the concept of leadership so that it can encapsulate and symbolise the work that many … women [and some men] are already doing” (p. 107). By illuminating emerging forms of women and men ‘doing leadership differently’, Sinclair is making alternative masculinities visible whilst avoiding simplistic and essentialist arguments that all women lead ‘differently’.

A Western Australian study by Stuart & Barrera (1996) examined why senior women and men are leaving WA public sector employment, in particular, to determine whether the data showed any consistent differences by gender. These senior people of talent and experience would normally have been expected to complete their careers in the public service. Analysis of the data suggested no significant gender differences in factors such as quality of life issues or a perceived decline in the ethos and professionalism of ‘public service’. However, men more frequently reported frustration with existing salary and rank classifications while women reported frustration about their career prospects and lack of promotional opportunities commensurate with their abilities. Interestingly, significant differences emerged in perceptions of organisational culture. The “male respondents made relatively few comments during the interviews about the cultures of the organisations from which they had come, whereas this area dominated the discussions with women” (p. 185). Whilst most men indicated that they had been quite comfortable within the culture, women cited internal organisational factors as highly significant in their decisions to leave. The politics of the bureaucracy; unacceptable leadership and management styles; isolation; and being marginalised were significant issues for the women. Having a management style not valued by the corporate culture; feeling enormous frustration with organisational ‘game playing’; and observing the compromised integrity evident in the ‘climb to the top’ left many women disillusioned.

Another Western Australian research project by Saunders (1996a), based on Amanda Sinclair’s 1994 study, documented the views and personal experiences of CEO’s in
government departments. The project expressed concern at the low participation rate of women in Western Australian government agencies. There was considerable discussion about the potential contribution of women in relation to workplace diversity, creativity and innovation, workplace reform and customer focus. The poor reputation of the public sector as an equal opportunity employer, the different skills and approaches women bring to management and the reasons why women would be suited to the workplace of the future were significant outcomes of the report.

Other research studies indicate that despite their increasing participation in the workforce, women still find it hard to shatter the glass ceiling, particularly in the realms of senior management (Morrison, White & Van Velsor, 1987; Tharenou & Conroy, 1988; Davidson & Cooper, 1992; Morrison, 1992a, 1992b; Smith & Hutchinson, 1995a). Discrimination in the selection process has been well documented (Riger & Galligan, 1980; Gale, 1980; Alban-Metcalfe, 1985; Booth & Eveline, 2001; Eveline, 2001) and because the discrimination is often indirect and subtle it is difficult to prove. In addition women are often assigned roles that encourage dependence, provide few career opportunities and are designed to support masculine roles while men are assigned the more valued, visible, and powerful roles in organisations (Davidson & Cooper, 1992; Still, 1993; Sinclair, 1994; Smith & Hutchinson, 1995a). The Australian Industry Task Force on Leadership and Management Skills (Karpin Report, 1995), a task force constituted to address diversity issues, focused on women as the major disadvantaged group within Australian management.12

Women in senior management in Australian universities and schools are similarly underrepresented. For example, although women dominate the teaching workforce, they occupy a disproportionately small percentage of substantive promotional positions in Western Australian public schools. The report Gender in Promotion: An Examination of the Issues (Saunders, 1993) identified five key barriers to promotion: structural barriers (such as temporary and part-time status); mobility and family responsibilities; lack of incentives; lack of encouragement and mentoring; and organisational culture. Of these,

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12 The Karpin Report on management education (1995) advocates diversity in management for leading organisations of the future. The Report recognises the potential that increasing the number of women managers has for improving management skills, workforce relations and enterprise performance throughout the economy. The value to the national economy and Australian business performance is emphasised. Thus the argument for women is more in terms of productivity than human rights (see Blackmore, 1999).
both males and females identified mobility and family responsibilities, and a lack of incentives to apply as problematic. Significantly, the female participants cited gender bias in the school culture as a painful and negative influence for them. Male participants did not raise this dimension. The role of the school principal as educational leader and agent of attitudinal change was believed to be crucial. A strong impression of opposing value systems in the teaching workforce emerged. Many female participants considered that their skills and abilities were under-utilised and unrecognised. The perception that many school managers (predominantly male) did not share their values and vision for schools and students was evident in comments which indicated that they “felt exhausted thinking of ways to work around managers they considered, in educational terms, to be diametrically opposed to themselves” (p. 51). The report clearly identified a range of organisational cultural factors, some subtle and others quite apparent, which act as inhibitors to the progression of women through the promotional career structure.

A more recent study of the barriers to the promotion of women in the Education Department of Western Australia13 (Barrera, Finlay, Saggers & Stuart, 1999) confirmed the findings of six years earlier “that men and women hold significantly different views on a variety of issues related to human resource management and promotional opportunities” (p. 1, Executive Summary). Although major structural barriers to promotion no longer exist there continue to be major cultural barriers, including social and organisational expectations and traditions. The authors also confirm that although the Education Department has a highly feminised workforce (which is increasing), women are still significantly underrepresented in management positions. Despite an improvement, since 1993, in the number of women in promotional positions, with positions held by women rising from 25.3 percent to 29.3 percent at Level 3 to 614, the Equity Index rating is low (Office of Equal Employment Opportunity rating reported in Barrera et al., 1999). Indeed, the Equity Index for primary schools continues to be one of the worst for all government agencies. A rating of “low equity index, high proportional representation of women” by the Office of Equal Employment Opportunity (cited in Barrera et al., 1999) was accompanied by the recommendation: “Dismantle the glass ceiling” (p. 1).

14 A beginning teacher is Level 1; a director is Level 9.
Research studies by Blackmore (1999), focusing on women, leadership and educational restructuring in schools and the central bureaucracy in the Victorian state education system reflected similar gendered power relations in bureaucratic life. Blackmore noted how the discursive construction of gender equity changed over time and within different political contexts, but she also noted important continuities in gender power relations which “centred around discourses of bureaucratic rationality and the embodiment of authority in particular masculinist forms” (p. 8). In my thesis women managers were a minority within the Education Department central bureaucracy. A theme emerges of highly competent women not content to accept that, as women, they should be treated ‘differently’ and expecting that their talents, hard work, experience, expertise and qualifications should be recognised and rewarded.

Valuing difference

The argument for more women in management is supported by Irwin & Perrault (1996) who investigated managerial effectiveness through a peer assessment system. This assessment revealed that women outperformed men in 28 out of 31 management skill areas. These included “the challenging areas of meeting deadlines, high productivity, and generating new ideas” (p. 5). Previous studies demonstrated that women excelled in interpersonal skills but this study highlighted a broader range of managerial skills and behaviours, indicating that overall women were stronger in both interpersonal skills and managerial effectiveness. “Women have learnt to manage effectively without relying on the control of resources and power to motivate others. Possibly, because they’ve seldom had access to such power, women have developed alternative ways to achieve success” Irwin & Perrault, 1996, p. 10). Irwin and Perrault found that the women in their study led by providing clear guidance and direction and when they sensed that their help was needed, or when asked for support, they provided it. They conclude that women in leadership and management should not be discriminated against as they have, in fact, the edge in terms of their effectiveness.

Essentialist arguments

Traditionally feminine qualities have been submerged in organisational contexts where the masculine model, usually hierarchical and built on a command and control management style, dominates. Leadership skills are still identified as residing more in males than in females. Given that the preferred leadership skills of the future appear to be
based on developing a combination of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ traits involving strategic thinking and communication skills, both women and men have something to gain from working together (Powell, 1990). To do this effectively it is necessary for both women and men to recognise the privileging of behaviours associated with the masculine and the devaluing of behaviours associated with the feminine. Oppositional discourses such as womb/brain, sameness/difference and femininity/competence need to be challenged for women in leadership to move ‘beyond the double bind’ (Jamieson, 1995)”. And organisations need to create a favourable climate to encourage cultural awareness and value difference.

As Bem (1993) explains, it is not male-female difference that is responsible for inequality but a social world so organised from a male perspective that the special needs of men are automatically taken care of while the special needs of women are problematised or ignored. If we think in terms of multiple differences (and similarities), we are less likely to set up oppositional categories which privilege established power groups and marginalise those viewed as different or other. ‘Masculine’ and ‘feminine’ models can coexist and operate in synergy (Claes, 1999) and a range of leadership and management styles, including those traditionally associated with the feminine, can be recognised and rewarded.

There are multiple interpretations of femininity and masculinity and behaviours can vary across time and context. For example, a woman in senior management may adopt a more masculine management style in order to ‘fit in’ with the dominant culture, sometimes becoming an ‘honorary male’ in the process (or she may change her behaviour to and fro depending on the context). This co-option process may have its impact on men who may also feel pressured to conform to the dominant image of an existing managerial model. Other women survive using their own communication styles in more female friendly sections of the organisation, while there are others who continue to ‘rock the boat’ (Peters, 2001), eventually deciding to leave in search of a more supportive environment.

The double bind for women arises from dominant images of the strong heroic male leader. For example, research studies of mixed-sex interactions have shown that men interrupt women more than women interrupt men, and men talk more than women (Spender, 1980b). And ‘holding the floor’ in a meeting is a power strategy used traditionally by men to claim attention, whether or not their input is justified. Yet when
women try to speak, and interrupt at the same rate as men in a mixed group, they are often labelled as ‘persistent’, tenacious’ and ‘annoying’ by male participants! (Spender, 1980b; Davidson and Cooper, 1992).

Making a link between childhood conditioning and the world of work, Oakley (2000), citing Tannen, explains why men are more comfortable in the ‘art’ of self-promotion. In childhood most girls are socialised to believe that sounding too sure of themselves will make them unpopular with their peers whereas boys are expected to emphasise, rather than downplay their status. These patterns are reenacted in the workplace:

In corporate life, women are less likely than men to engage in behaviours that are self-promoting, a pattern that Tannen traces back to early childhood socialisation. She observes that men more often than women engage in behaviours that get them recognised with those in power, which gives them an advantage in the art of managing up. Women are less likely to blow their own horn, and therefore are less likely to be recognised. (Oakley, 2000, p. 324)

Oakley (2000) reports that a woman is more likely to request rather than issue orders, a sign of respect which can be misinterpreted as a lack of self-confidence or a failure to effectively exercise authority. Therefore, in the almost all-male world of upper management women are forced to change their linguistic style to a more command-oriented form in order to be perceived as strong, decisive and in control. However, in adopting a male linguistic style female managers run the risk of being perceived as too aggressive. This double bind is what Jamieson (1995) has identified as the femininity/competence bind. “The existence of toughness and femininity in one personality are difficult qualities for our culture to reconcile and digest” (Oakley, 2000, p. 324).

Thus, social expectations and images of what makes a successful manager or leader collide. Judy Rosener, author of America’s Competitive Secret (1995), says that when men with a traditional ‘command and control’ leadership style encounter women with an ‘interactive’ leadership style, they may have difficulty in recognising them as leaders at all. Conversely, when they encounter women leaders who have adopted the command and control style, they may have difficulty relating to them as women. She says that this creates 'sexual static' for men, because they realise, with the new interest in interactive leadership in organisations today, that their style may not be the only one that works, or, indeed, the most effective. Therefore women can be faced with a double bind: counteracting stereotypes can ‘backfire’, causing them to be censured for deviating from
feminine norms, yet if they adopt a more ‘feminine’ style they are in danger of being labelled as ‘soft’ and ineffective as leaders (Rudman, 1998, pp. 290-291).

Linguist Robin Lakoff (cited in Jamieson, 1995, p. 121) says that “a girl is damned if she does, damned if she doesn’t”. The assumption that women cannot be both feminine and competent acts as a ‘control myth’ (Lipman-Blumen cited in Jamieson, 1995), limiting many women to supposedly ‘female’ ways of behaving and discouraging resistance. Jamieson (1995), citing Olsen, unravels the double bind:

The evaluated woman has deviated from the female norm of femininity while exceeding or falling short of the masculine norm of competence. She is too strident and abrasive or not aggressive or tough enough … This double bind draws energy from our tendency to think in dichotomies characterised as masculine or feminine, and then set in a hierarchical relation to one another with the masculine thought superior and the feminine inferior. [Thus] the idea that women are defective persists. (pp. 120-121).

Thus an over reliance on difference arguments which attempt to “open up management power structures and carve a place for women” may in fact serve only to disempower them “creating simplified binary categories, and implying that a hierarchical relationship exists between men and women, with one gender … dominant and superior and the other subordinate and inferior” (Halford & Leonard, 2001, p. 137). Traditional notions of men belonging to the public ‘work’ sphere and women to the private ‘home’ sphere can further bolster these arguments (Bacchi, 1990; Bacchi, Thiele, Eveline & Currie, 1992). By focusing on which is ‘better’, we may fail to criticise the foundations upon which such dichotomies are based (Fredrick & Atkinson, 1997).

**Relational work / Connective leadership**

Over twenty-five years ago Jean Baker Miller (1976) argued that the (socially conditioned) qualities that women possess in abundance, such as caring, cooperating and connecting with others, were consistently devalued as characteristics of a subordinate sex. Even the women themselves endorsed this attitude. According to Miller, “There is no question that the dominant society has said, men will do the important work; women will tend to the ‘lesser task’ of helping other human beings to develop” (p. 42). This dichotomy means that our major social institutions are not founded on the tenet of helping others to develop. She believes that by supporting growth in others women are more attuned to change. Moreover, they are confronting society with real change when they
recognise that fostering growth in others, without the opportunity and right to growth for themselves, is a form of oppression.

Fletcher (1999) takes Miller’s argument further and “puts her finger on what remains a largely non-discussable subject in contemporary management: the types of organisations we seek to build [are at odds with] the long established norms, behaviours and power arrangements within them” (cover review by Senge in Fletcher, 1999). Fletcher shows clearly why women have difficulty realising their full leadership capabilities in today's organisations by highlighting the disappearing acts surrounding relational work. Relational work\(^\text{15}\) is often off-line, backstage or collaborative. It is typically occurring in an uncoordinated way throughout organisations and is usually carried out by women whose status within the organisation is not high (Fletcher, 1999; Booth & Eveline, 2001).

In explaining why relational work is rendered invisible (disappeared) in today’s workplace, Fletcher (1995, 1999) examines its link to ‘women’s work’. She says that three separate acts of disappearing\(^\text{16}\) are evident in her data. First, misinterpreting the intention: relational practice is seen as motivated by a personal idiosyncrasy or trait rather than a desire to work more effectively (thus devaluing the practice and the relational skills needed to enact it). Secondly, common language descriptors of relational attributes (nurturing, empathy, caring) are associated with femininity and therefore assumed inappropriate in the workplace. Finally, the social construction of gender means that this way of working gets conflated with images of femininity and motherhood and as such is devalued in workplace settings. At the same time as relational work is devalued, we come to expect that it will be done and we expect that it will be done by women. As Peter Senge states in a review of Fletcher’s work, “Little is likely to change until enough people – i.e., men – are able to see what is so difficult to see: that the very leadership behaviours in work settings we claim to want are invisible to us when they are practiced (sic)” (back cover, Fletcher, 1999).

\(^{15}\) Relational work derives its name from relational psychology and is based on a theory of growth-in-connection. Interactions are “characterised by mutual empathy and mutual empowerment, where both parties recognise vulnerability as part of the human condition, approach the interaction expecting to grow from it, and feel a responsibility to contribute to the growth of the other” (Fletcher, 1999, p. 31). The leader is able to customise or make accessible her/his expertise and is willing to step back from the expert role in order to learn from/acknowledge the contributions of others.

\(^{16}\) Fletcher (1999) uses the term ‘disappearing dynamic’ to describe the process of disappearing relational work.
Fletcher (1999) uses relational theory “to differentiate the many aspects of mutuality such as empathy, authenticity, empowerment and fluid expertise” (p. 138). In an environment of mutual empowerment or fluid expertise, “power and expertise shifts from one party to another, not only over time but in the course of one interaction” (p. 64). A combined characteristic of relational practice is an ability to empower others (through making expertise accessible) as well as the capacity to be empowered, that is, step back from the expert role in order to learn from or be influenced by others.

Fletcher’s argument reinforces the radical tenet of Miller’s model of relational growth: “the belief in the power of relational interactions to affect change through mutual engagement and co-influence” (p. 13). This emphasis on growth and change takes the ‘female advantage’ literature further than merely emphasising the relational traits, characteristics, and attributes socially ascribed to women (such as caring, being involved, helping, building webs of connection rather than hierarchies, seeking consensus) which have the potential to further stereotype, universalise, or co-opt women.

Organisational sociologist and management consultant Jean Lipman-Blumen (1996) talks about the new ‘connective era’ of leadership – a multifaceted approach embracing two forces: interdependence and diversity. Other authors, for example, Margaret Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Rogers (1996) talk about the need for both individuals and systems to be open to new ways of being and to learn through interdependence with those we previously refused to see. In times of rapid change, turbulence and globalisation, an era of connective leadership is emerging. Cleveland et al. (2000) explain:

First, with the rapid growth in technology and the breakdown of geopolitical boundaries, everything is connected to everything else. Second, as the world becomes smaller … recognition of diversity in cultures, values, preferences, styles, skin colour, abilities [and] gender … is essential. Leaders in the connective era must draw upon a wealth of styles and abilities, especially those that emphasise mutuality and inclusiveness, to harness the forces of interdependence and diversity. (p. 297)

Thus connective leaders must draw on a wide range of styles, moving from the ‘competitive edge’ to the ‘connective edge’ (Leavitt and Lipman-Blumen, 1980) with a focus on relational (collaborative) rather than direct (focus on self as sole source of leadership) achieving styles. In particular, Lipman-Bluman (1996) is interested in the multitude of ways that leaders can ethically build effective, enduring relationships with followers, constituents and even business competitors to achieve success in their organisations.
Booth and Eveline (2001), drawing on the work of Fletcher, describe the work (commenced by Faye Gale) on changes to The University of Western Australia’s (UWA) promotion procedures, including a selection committee working in a ‘companionate’ leadership style. A broader framework for assessing job applicants was established, with the usual curricula vitae enhanced by teaching portfolios, peer assessments, student feedback and the philosophical perspectives of the applicants. Importantly, the members of the committee established a dialogue as they dealt with disagreements in their judgments. They purposefully increased their discussion of the relational work of the applicants, work that often goes unrecognised. The committee aimed to reduce the influence of outside gatekeepers, “once the Holy Grail for establishing merit” (p. 9) Yet Booth and Eveline point to the fragility of the changes made by the committee which, like any committee, was vulnerable to an influx of ‘new’ members ignorant of the processes involved. “A committee carrying less responsibility for the accuracy of the outcomes would be attractive to those wanting to maintain established norms advantaging most men” (p.12). In other words, to the frustration of many researchers, equal opportunity gains can be reversed with relative ease (Wienecke, 1991; Booth and Eveline, 2001).

Fletcher (1999) points out that factors inhibiting women’s progress in organisations are not only problematic for women, but for organisational effectiveness as well. Through a broader understanding of equitable selection processes (such as those instigated at UWA), including the value of relational work, the ‘bottom line’ advantages of recognising and rewarding the creative potential of work generally associated with the feminine can become evident – a competitive advantage as highlighted in the following quote:

The process of devaluing work associated with the feminine and reifying work associated with the masculine has probably produced many other routine but ineffective work practices – that is, practices that are in place not because they are particularly effective but because they are in line with masculine norms of behaving. (Fletcher, 1999, pp. 138-139).

Masculinities
A comparatively new field of knowledge and politics is the study of men and masculinities. Informed by poststructuralist feminist analyses of “gendered power relations that combine a focus on structure with that of agency, contradiction and difference” (Collinson & Hearn, 1996, p. 9 citing various authors: Hollway, Ferguson, Pringle, Martin & Kondo), “critical studies on men highlight not only male power, but also the material and symbolic differences through which that power is reproduced”
(Collinson & Hearn, 1996, p. 10). Based on social science research, this work is distinct from the pop-psychology books about men that promote neo-conservative arguments of ‘natural difference’ and ‘true masculinity’. As Connell (1995) says, these limited views of masculinity, often promoted by the media, “roll back the rather limited advances against discrimination made by women and gay men in the last two decades” (p. ix). This discourse of masculinity in crisis, often linked to ‘blame the feminist’ arguments “taps into both male and female uncertainties about changing gender roles, into job uncertainties and destabilisation of previously secure male career paths” (Blackmore, 1999, p. 138-139). The ‘sensitive new age guy’ and the ‘strategic manager’ have grown out of this discourse, gaining credibility because they are seemingly inclusive of a range of ‘feminine’ behaviours. However, as Blackmore (1999) points out, “the asymmetrical power relations based on gender have not altered” (p. 142).

In education circles we hear the cry “What about the boys?” as girls in school are perceived to be outstripping the boys in achievement. The popular argument for boys has gained momentum in the last few years and has been picked up by the media in articles such as “The Trouble with Boys” (Yallop, 2001), “Girl’s Talk puts Boys Behind” (Yamen, 2002) and “The New Movement Against Men/Whipping Boys Don’t Cry/A New Leash on Life” (Cosic, 2002). Talk of ‘feminist revenge’ makes a provoking byline as does ‘failing boys’, but substantiated research attached to these articles is thin on the ground (Kenway, 1997). A men’s rights perspective (for example, Biddulph, 1995) dominates “the education literature, the press and the in-service and public lecture circuit in Australia” (Kenway, 1997, p. 3). Claims that boys are disadvantaged in school, particularly in their primary years where most teachers are female, point to a lack of role models for boys (West & Lillico reported in Yamen, 2002). Of course no mention is made of the absence of female principals as role models for girls despite the large number of female teachers in the system. And no mention is made of the fact that in adult life men claim higher salaries, occupy a disproportionate number of management positions, and hold the power in all of the world’s major institutions.

A more enlightened contribution to the gender debate is the social science work on masculinities which moves beyond the men-as-victims scenarios which dominate the men’s movement literature. Building on feminist theory and research and, in keeping with postmodern influences, this work recognises that “masculine identities are not static but historically and spatially situated and evolving” (Kenway, 1997, p. 5) demonstrating an
understanding of broad structural inequalities between males and females, and a recognition of the complex and dynamic influences of power, society and culture.

Drawing on the work of Connell (1995) on the construction of masculinities, Kenway (1997) explains that an understanding of the changing conceptions of masculinity over time allows us to view “masculinity as a life project involving the making and remaking of identity and meaning” (p. 5). Masculinity is no longer viewed as a singular entity. Instead there are multiple masculinities (as there are multiple ways of being female), which can be understood through a social analysis of gender and power relations (Connell, 1995; Martino & Mayenn, 2001; Hearn & Parkin, 2002).

The various masculinities “can be clustered on the basis of general social, cultural and institutional patterns of power and meaning and are built in relationship to each other” (Kenway, 1997, p. 5). Connell (1995) calls these hegemonic, subordinate, complicitous, and marginal. “The concept [of] hegemonic masculinity is now widely used and refers to those dominant and dominating forms of masculinity which claim the highest status and exercise the greatest influence and authority”, legitimating “the broad structure of power known as patriarchy” (Kenway, 1997, p. 5). Thus it is through a complex set of power relations [that] certain types of masculinity are valued over others (Martino & Mayenn, 2001). Other factors — such as race, class, ethnicity and geographical location — need to be considered in developing an understanding of the complexity of boys’ and men’s behaviour. These are the factors that have been influential in a postmodern interpretation of feminist theory, in which a range of feminine/feminist behaviour is interpreted historically and contextually.

Although men are increasingly aware of turbulence and change in gender relations, Connell (1995) cautions that many are ambivalent, and all continue to draw a ‘patriarchal dividend’: the advantage men in general gain from the overall subordination of women. However there are some men, particularly those who think differently and question the status quo, who find themselves, like women, excluded from powerful networks (Peters, 2001). The opportunity for women to work with (profeminist) men who have no problem working with creative and talented women (Marshall, 1995b), men who themselves may have experienced exclusion from the dominant group, is perhaps a way of sharing an informed gender perspective, and a way of moving forward in the gender debate. Some men may share the concerns raised by the women in this thesis. Some may realise that the whole responsibility for change cannot be placed on the shoulders of women.
In an article titled *Teaching Managers about Masculinities: Are you Kidding?* Amanda Sinclair (2000) says that the way forward in the understanding of gender relations in organisations is to turn from a focus on women to a broader focus on men and the construction of masculinities in management. She points out that the ‘short’ agenda – focusing on equal employment opportunity or palatable arguments for ‘diversity’ is not enough. She is convinced that the teaching of gender needs to encompass masculinities, but she has found that the task is not easy, particularly for a female teacher to a predominantly male group.

**A peak masculinist culture**

Much research has questioned whether women can compete in organisations where the dominant culture of the managerial elite is white, middle class and male and whether, when women do make it into positions in senior management, they can survive without becoming honorary males (Still, 1993; Kirner & Rayner, 1999) or without realigning their values. Currie, Harris & Thiele (2000) interviewed staff in two Australian public universities, establishing a framework based on Coser’s (1974) concept of the ‘greedy institution’. Comparisons were made between male and female staff, and academic and general staff in the two universities. The overall picture was of staff working long hours in the greedy institutions that Coser says are omnivorous of their loyal workers. Interestingly, the researchers (Currie, Harris & Thiele, 2000) noted a certain uniformity of responses across site, gender and occupational status. They suggest that this apparent uniformity is the product of “a peak masculinist discourse used mainly by those in more powerful positions in these institutions, which acts to disenfranchise all those who do not operate within its restricted and restrictive boundaries” (p. 269, emphasis added). The impact of current economist and neo-liberal discourses [the new managerialist and economic rationalist discourses that are pervasive in universities today] operates to normalise high workloads and a prime commitment to the institution. Although both men and women are affected by these market forces, the researchers question whether both women and men are equally able to devote extremely long hours to their paid work, given the cultural and social expectations surrounding women’s domestic responsibilities.

The notion of the ‘24-hour workday’ and the pressure to work faster and smarter leaves those unable to work extended hours with doubts and questions surrounding their ability to perform (Epstein & Kalleberg, 2001). The balancing act (see Chapter 5) of combining domestic and paid work is more like a tight rope for many women and a handful of men.
Yet the women in my thesis were able to work the hours demanded by the greedy institution. They were dedicated to doing their jobs well, whatever energy that took. Contrary to popular belief, it was not domestic responsibilities that were holding them back, it was a far greater force embodied in gender, power and organisational culture.

The greedy organisation seems similar to the addictive organisation described by Schaef and Fassel (1988) who studied how people become tied to an organisation to the point where they will do anything to please it – the organisation becomes addictive. Communication in addictive organisations is used to establish and maintain power bases, is often crisis driven, and can be manipulative and intimidating. Often change is introduced for the sake of change. Schaef (in Schaef & Fassel, 1988) claims that the white, patriarchal male system is destructive and continues to exist because we all cooperate with it. “[E]ven our thought patterns are in the language of the male system that rewards lies, secrets, and silences on the part of women” (Rich cited by Schaef & Fassel, 1988, p. 45). The silence means that the advantage for men is never openly discussed.

In contrast, healthy organisations seek managers who model effective leadership “by functioning as learners, by sharing their uncertainties and mistakes, by encouraging others to search for new ideas, and by creating an environment in which it is safe for others to be themselves” (Schaef and Fassel, 1988, p. 221). In healthy organisations “the boss is happy to credit her subordinates for their brilliance, in no small part because her job is getting her subordinates to be more brilliant than they might otherwise be” (Schrage, 2000, p. 412). When colleagues recognise and give credit for the contributions of others their efforts are likely to be reciprocated. The organisational benefits of attribution are reflected in the generation of ideas and a positive, healthy working environment for all. However, as Schaef and Fassel point out “there is little evidence that women are affecting [addictive] systems, and more recent research seems to indicate that women, like men, are being eaten up by them” (1988, pp. 43-44). They note that women are now beginning to leave corporations because they realise that they are not going to make it to the top and they really have not been influential in changing the climate of corporations to make them more humanistic and healthy. Many (like the women in my thesis) are leaving to start their own businesses (a trend which continues today) where they can be more influential in determining the climate of the organisation (see also Morrison, White & Van Velsor, 1987). More recent research confirms that dissatisfaction with masculinist organisational
cultures is now frequently identified as the key reason women managers leave their jobs (Marshall, 1995b; Moore & Buttner, 1997).

Summary

“Women, we are told by the media, live in an era of ‘post-feminism’. Equity strategies for women in leadership are increasingly debunked because ‘women don’t need it anymore’” (Wilkinson, 2001, p. 1). Yet despite significant changes, including the introduction of legislation initiating affirmative action for women, there has been little ground gained with regard to women occupying leadership positions in all aspects of social, political and organisational life in Australia. A major array of formal and informal barriers still exists, even in more traditionally feminised occupations, such as education (Wilkinson, 2001). Organisations, dominated by a male power elite, still operate to exclude women from positions of power and influence. While men often explain women’s poor representation at the executive level by saying that women have poor self-confidence and are hampered by responsibility for the home, women are increasingly refuting the image of the ‘inadequate woman’. Feminist researchers, and increasingly, women constrained by masculinist work practices, look to the structures and conditions limiting career progression and question organisational constraints.

Despite a long period of publicity and legislation, the limited success of women in accessing senior management and executive positions is a strong argument for the focus to be placed on women. The Karpin Report (1995) noted the slow rates of change in the levels of participation of women in management in Australia. It noted that this inequity is widespread and apparent in small, medium and large enterprises, on boards of directors, and in management education institutions. Recent research by Nevard (2002) takes the recommendations of the Karpin Report and questions whether the call for diversity in the workforce has in fact encouraged the appointment of a more diverse group. Are more women being considered for appointments and what is the best advice to provide to women seeking management positions? According to Nevard, women can “operate a little differently from their male leader/manager colleagues but, like their male counterparts, they must reflect something close to the existing male defined industry culture” (Abstract). Thus women, and men, are still constrained by a culture shaped by men and for men.
Similar findings to the Karpin Report are reflected internationally. The USA Federal Glass Ceiling Commission (1995) recommends that corporate leaders become increasingly cognisant of both the existence of the glass ceiling and the value of workforce diversity at the management and decision-making levels. It recommends “that all government agencies, as employers, increase their efforts to eliminate internal glass ceilings by examining their practices for promoting qualified minorities and women to senior management and decision-making positions” (p. 10). A recent comprehensive report by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) (Wirth, 2001) expressed deep concern that “patterns of attitudinal and institutional discrimination … continue to bar women from certain jobs and hinder their career development. Occupational segregation by sex persists – as do social policies based on a traditional model of the family with a male breadwinner” (p. 4). The ILO report concluded that females occupy few of the positions with the most power: “Women are still concentrated in the most precarious forms of work throughout the world. They too often experience a 'sticky floor' and too rarely break through the 'glass ceiling’” (Wirth, 2001, p. 134). Moreover, for women who also experience racial discrimination, the barrier to the top jobs is even worse (Wirth, 2001).

Catalyst (cited in Lord & McKenzie, 1998), a non-profit research group based in New York and known for its research on gender issues in organisations, reminds us that “efforts to maximise the value of the workforce by capitalising on the talents of women are likely to be successful only when an organisation takes an inclusive, problem-solving, comprehensive approach” (p. 1). This means commitment from all levels of the organisation and a genuine commitment to long-term change.

A creative vision for the future, new insights into current world problems and ethical decision-making demand diverse and different thinking. The mere addition of women and other minorities is not enough. Changing organisational thinking to be open to new ways of seeing will bring rewards in terms of organisational performance and the ability to attract and retain talented and committed employees. It is clear that the women in this thesis want to challenge traditional cultural assumptions and organisational barriers which exclude approximately half of the pool of talented individuals from realising their full potential in the world of work. Barriers to the development of full potential can cause great conflict for bright and capable females as they search for a meaningful expression of their abilities and an opportunity to make a difference in the world. Self-actualisation
in the workplace should be an option and a possibility for outstanding individuals regardless of gender, sexuality, culture or class. Yet being treated differently, as a group (of women) rather than being appreciated as competent leaders and managers, was a concern for most women in this thesis – as the following chapters illuminate.
Research methodology

A critical theory is an account of morality that is sensitive to the historically contingent nature of the culture that spawned it: by adopting a hypothetical stance towards their own traditions and on this basis grasping their own cultural relativity, participants in the formation of a critical theory take a questioning stance toward their own practices while nonetheless avoiding the paralysis of moral relativism.


Qualitative inquiry

The research methodology for this thesis is based on a qualitative, critical, and feminist framework, influenced by phenomenological considerations and postmodern perspectives. The work of Kincheloe and McLaren (2000) on a reconceptualised critical theory has influenced my thinking. Their work has in turn been influenced by ‘post-discourses’ such as postmodernism, critical feminism and poststructuralism.

Qualitative inquiry is a naturalistic form of inquiry which studies real-world situations through an inductive, holistic approach. In simple terms it is an alternative to the traditional forms of scientific and quantitative research which employ a logical-deductive approach. Whereas quantitative inquiry often employs standardised measures in an attempt to make broad generalisations, qualitative research aims to understand people, not to measure them. Qualitative methods permit the evaluator to study selected issues in depth and detail, with the intention of developing a greater understanding of the cases and situations studied, without seeking to generalise across categories. In fact, most qualitative researchers are wary of making generalisations as they are aware that each case is special and unique, and varies according to time and context (Patton, 1990; Sarantakos, 1993).

A reconceptualised critical theory recognises that an individual’s view of the self and the world is “even more influenced by social and historical forces than previously believed” (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2000, p. 281). Like traditional critical theory, it rejects notions of economic determinism and instrumental/technical rationality, understanding instead that there are multiple forms of power, that research is influenced by the researcher, and
is value laden. In addition, in questioning the advantage of privileged groups, a reconceptualised critical theory focuses on the relationships among culture, power and domination. It seriously questions the use of the term *emancipation* and the assumption that we can emancipate ‘others’, recognising both the arrogance of this assumption and the fact that no one is ever completely emancipated from their sociopolitical context. Kinchelow and McLaren (2000, citing Grossberg; Lull; McLaren; McLaren, Hammer, Reilly & Sholle; and West) explain that critical researchers have come to understand that language is not a mirror of society but shifts in meaning depending on the context in which it is used.

Although primarily influenced by a critical feminist perspective, my research is also influenced by phenomenological considerations in that I attempt to capture the authentic lived-experiences of the participants as told through their own stories. Phenomenological inquiry is a form of qualitative inquiry that focuses on the question: “What is the structure and essence of experience of this phenomenon for these people?” (Patton, 1990, p. 69). Husserl’s (1950) *lebenswelt* or ‘lifeworld’ notion of phenomenology suggests that people are active creators of their own world and have a consciousness that communicates to them everyday experiences and knowledge. Phenomenology to Husserl is the study of how people describe things and experience them through their senses; the everyday intuitive world of day-to-day experiences (Sarantakos, 1993). Max van Manen (1990), following Husserl’s definition, also “sees the lifeworld as the world of lived experience and is interested in the essence, or nature, of lived experiences as they are brought to light through the experience of individuals” (Barnacle, 2001, p. 2). Thus “phenomenologists focus on how we put together the phenomena we experience in such a way as to make sense of the world, and, in so doing, develop a world view” (Patton, 1990, p. 69). Descriptions of experience and interpretations are so intertwined that they often become one, each essential to the other.

My incorporation of a phenomenological perspective, which I find particularly helpful in relation to data collection, is not intended to discount theoretical knowledge. As pointed out by Barnacle (2001), there is a tension within phenomenological thought between theoretical and non-theoretical knowledge. If we privilege “lived experience over and against non-lived experience [there] is the danger that the subject will be understood as the site of some sort of pure, unmediated, knowledge or understanding” (p. 4). Barnacle explains:
According to a post-structuralist critique, foregrounding the immediacy of experience in opposition to that which is abstract, or secondary, results in a model of the subject as pure and present to themselves and, therefore, untainted by theory and everything that it implies: language, culture, history, etc. (p. 4)

There is an opportunity, I believe, for phenomenological research to engage more with the tensions between theory and practice, and abstraction and immediacy, in a way that perhaps other theoretical frameworks are less equipped to do. (p. 5)

In combining a phenomenological approach with critical reflection, I aim to create a dialogue on lived experiences while at the same time using theory to inform and reflect on those experiences. Having heard the participants’ stories, attempting to capture their lived experiences as authentically as I can, I shift into interpretive mode or critical theory by trying to ‘read’ their stories with the knowledge that masculine hegemonies may have shaped their experiences in critical ways. As pointed out by Currie, Thiele and Harris (2002), no study can be politically neutral and all work is theoretically grounded. Interpretation is influenced by the values and perspectives of the researcher located within a social and cultural context. “As John Dewey observed decades ago, individuals adopt the values and perspectives of their social groups in a manner that such factors come to shape their views of the world” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000, p. 287). My focus will shift back and forth from the lived-experiences of the women as they tell it, to my critical interpretation, through a feminist lens, of their life-worlds (Felicity Haynes, UWA, personal communication, April, 2003).

Although some researchers, particularly grounded theorists, may believe that research predates theory – that the researcher starts with a tabula rasa, and elicits theory from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) – I agree with many feminist researchers (Maynard, 1994; Kelly, Reagan & Burton, 1992; Morley, 1999; Currie et al. 2002) that “individuals begin with a particular theoretical perspective and that this informs the type of questions asked, the methodology used, and even the interpretation that creates the narrative” (Currie, et al. 2002, p. 58). The act of placing a critical feminist lens on everyday work experiences can reveal the micropolitical “subtext of organisational life in which conflicts, tensions, resentments, competing interests and power imbalances influence everyday transactions in institutions” (Morley, 1999, p. 4). As Morley (1999) explains, the workplace has become a major site of gender politics and it is through the study of micropolitics that we can focus on the ways in which power is relayed in everyday practices.
In qualitative research, questions and problems for research most often come from real-world observations and dilemmas (Pilcher & Coffey, 1996). Research is a process of trying to gain a better understanding of the complexities of human interactions, seeking to explain, describe, or explore the phenomenon chosen for study (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). Similarly, in participatory research “the researcher adopts a more subjective stance to the practice setting, treating the practitioners and others involved as members of a shared life world” and respecting them as “autonomous and responsible agents” involved together with the researcher in the process of change (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000, pp. 584-585). I hope to provide the reader with a deeper insight into the phenomenon of the ‘glass ceiling’ barrier to women in management. To do this I have investigated the experiences of a group of women within a particular time and context; their work experiences spread over a ten-year period within the central bureaucracy of an Australian public education department. I make no attempt to essentialise their experiences; they are the experiences and stories of each individual woman, told from her perspective at the time of interview and influenced by my feminist perspective in the interpretation.

Through the processes of qualitative inquiry, the research participants were encouraged to relate the stories of their career experiences in their own voices, to share (through interviews and focus groups), and to reflect on those experiences (creating a spiral of reflection which both feeds back to participants and informs the research).

The choice of a qualitative research approach, which uses in-depth, open-ended interviewing techniques, was influenced by my desire to work with the interviewees to explore their experiences as women in organisational management. My own connection with the research stems from my experiences as a project leader, working in a central office position within a state education department. I am, in fact, one of the interviewees and thus I have a participant observer role in the research. As I worked in the same organisation as the interviewees, I had some prior knowledge and understanding of some of the women (approx 40%) and their work in a collegial sense but I had not worked directly with any of them in any formal sense. This knowledge and shared experience of the organisation assisted me in the selection process and in terms of building trust and mutual rapport. A snowball effect ensued as the women I trusted and admired in terms of their leadership ability recommended other outstanding female leaders who had left the organisation. My feminist intent was made clear to all research participants.
Critical research

Critical research works towards the empowerment of individuals. “Inquiry that aspires to the name critical must be connected to an attempt to confront the injustice of a particular society or public sphere within the society” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000, p. 291). A fundamental assumption is that oppressive structures can be questioned and changed by exposing hidden power imbalances and by employing more empowering research processes (Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000). Critical researchers question the traditional researcher’s guise of neutrality and “frequently announce their partisanship in the struggle for a better world … often regard[ing] their work as a first step toward forms of political action that can redress the injustices found in the field site or constructed in the very act of research itself” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000, p. 291). The ‘bent to action’ embodied in critical theorists’ perspectives sits well with cooperative research paradigms that encourage active collaboration and participation between the researchees and the researcher.

In choosing a critical research paradigm, I am also conscious of postmodern and poststructuralist influences that have impacted on my thinking (hence the link to a reconceptualised critical theory). I will draw out the aspects of critical theory that relate to my feminist perspective and that resonate with the postmodern influence of abandoning the search for essential truths. The core of this idea (although others may perceive it differently!) is that no knowledge can be viewed as pure, uncontaminated, rational and objective. Different people hold different views of ‘reality’ over time, place and context. Postpositivist research which is postmodern and critical in orientation is shaped by “social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender values” which develop and change over time (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p. 165). Critical researchers concerned with the hermeneutical act of interpretation – making sense of what has been observed in a quest for understanding – realise that “even the so-called objective writings of [quantitative] researchers are interpretations, not value-free descriptions” (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2000, p. 286 citing various authors).

Critical theory for the new millennium is described by Kincheloe and McLaren (2000) as a social theory. They explain that a social theory can be understood as a map or guide to the social sphere. Although it does not determine how we see the world it helps us to devise questions and strategies for exploring it. They explain:
A critical social theory is concerned in particular with issues of power and justice and the ways that the economy, matters of race, class, and gender, ideologies, discourses, education, religion and other social institutions, and cultural dynamics interact to construct a social system. (p.281)

A ‘reconceptualised’ critical theory analyses competing power interests; hegemony; advantage; power plays; privileged groups and their interests in protecting the status quo; as well as issues of race, class, age, gender and sexuality. It takes critical theory’s traditional concern with the oppressive aspects of power and looks at the often subtle, ambiguous and situationally specific forms of hegemony (underpinned by dominant ideological practices) which shape our world view. It is “intensely concerned with the need to understand the various and complex ways that power operates to dominate and shape consciousness” (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2000, p. 283). Yet Kincheloe and McLaren (citing various authors) concede that ‘power’ is an extremely ambiguous topic that can be studied in terms of oppression or can incorporate aspects of empowerment and emancipation “to engage marginalised people in the rethinking of their sociopolitical role” (p. 283).

“Feminist poststructuralists argue that in patriarchal societies, knowledge and power work systematically to marginalise women, defining us as ‘other’ to the patriarchal order of meaning” (Weeden, 1997, pp. 171-172). Through investigating the women’s stories and drawing out particular themes and issues, “I am not working towards a definitive [re]solution, but rather attempting to expose the broader underlying cultural dynamics at play which impact on individual lives” (from abstract by Durey, 2002). How individuals make sense of their lives and experiences within existing power structures is a primary focus for my research.

Feminist methodology

In my use of a qualitative, ‘reconceptualised’ critical approach, I was strongly influenced by a feminist perspective. Feminist research focuses on women and on creating knowledge about women’s experiences. Flax (1992) reminds us that we need to recover and write the histories of women and women’s activities into cultural accounts and stories to compensate for gender relations based on domination in contemporary western societies. Feminist theories thus have a compensatory, as well as critical, aspect. According to Lather (1988) “to do feminist research is to put the social construction of gender at the center of one’s inquiry.” Gender is central “in
the shaping of our consciousness, skills, and institutions as well as in the distribution of power and privilege” (p. 571). She advocates an openly ideological approach to critical inquiry and emphasises the necessity for self-reflexivity to raise awareness of how researcher values permeate the research (Lather, 1991a).

“A feminist methodology has at its base a critique of objectivity, of the supposedly rational, detached, value-free research as traditionally espoused” (Edwards, 1990, p. 479). In exposing the bias of the male-defined intellectual position, feminists have developed research techniques which, although varied, share certain characteristics (Bowles & Klein, 1983; Stanley & Wise, 1983; Lather, 1988; Acker, Barry & Esseveld, 1983; Edwards, 1990; Reinharz, 1992; Sarantakos, 1993). For example, feminist (critical) research:

1. puts gender at the center of social inquiry, increasing the visibility of women;
2. examines women’s experiences with the view that ‘the personal is political’;
3. looks critically at the social construction (and deconstruction) of ‘knowledge’;
4. is not merely on women but for women, raising issues concerning the relationship between the researcher and the researched; and
5. is reflexive in nature, making explicit the researcher’s reasoning and the researcher’s effect on the actual research process.

I make no apology for placing gender at the center of my inquiry as I am quite open in my intent and have been influenced in my choice of research topic by my life experiences, both within the public and private domains. My life experiences, including my experience of working on the margins as a woman in gifted education in a bureaucratic context, have helped me to remain open to understanding other forms of discrimination; however, I make no claim to speak for other marginalised groups, or, indeed, for women as a group. However, like many feminist scholars, I am “troubled by the cultural expression, production, and perpetuation of patriarchy, ageism, and racism, and intrigued by the resistance of subgroups to these forces” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 150).

Flax (1989) emphasises gender as a social relationship in which feminist theorists are faced with a fourfold task:

1. to articulate feminist viewpoints of/within the social worlds in which we live;
2. to think about how we are affected by these worlds;
3. to consider the ways in which how we think about them may be implicated in existing power/knowledge relationships; and
4. to imagine ways in which these worlds ought to/can be transformed (p. 71).

Kirby and McKenna (1989) emphasise that when ‘researching from the margins’, it is important that the researcher is incorporated into the research and not left hidden from the process. Just as it is important for me to declare my bias, it is important in conducting feminist research that I have insight into the experiences of women from a feminist perspective. Transformative social research calls for empowering approaches to research where both researcher and researched become, in the words of feminist singer-poet, Cris Williamson, "the changer and the changed" (Lather, 1991a, p. 56). The learning process is a shared experience developed through exploration, self-reflection and a deeper understanding of particular situations, leading to empowerment and change.

Stanley and Wise (1993) argue that what is essential to ‘being feminist’ is the possession of ‘feminist consciousness’. They “see feminist consciousness as rooted in the concrete, practical and everyday experiences of being, and being treated as, a woman” (p. 32). They explain that this consciousness is a feminist interpretation that recognises how the experience of being a woman is constructed in a sexist society.

Studying women’s lives from a feminist perspective also means that the issues of male dominance, masculinity and men are essentially part of the research. Accounts of women’s experiences can provide an insight into the strategies men and male-dominated institutions use to maintain their power. Institutional structures, practices and policies, the social system of patriarchy and male dominance can be examined in the light of women’s disadvantage (Kelly, Burton & Regan, 1994). Sophie Laws (cited in Kelly, Burton & Regan, 1994) points out that we need to investigate the connections between the construction and practice of masculinity and women’s oppression. Amanda Sinclair (2000) argues that we need to turn from a focus on women to a broader focus on men and the construction of masculinities in management. Feminist methods are directed towards breaking down taken-for-granted concepts and rebuilding them into new entities; in the process revealing what is really going on from a feminist perspective (Harvey, 1990; Sarantakos, 1993). This dialectic method, central to feminist critical research, entails a constant motion of deconstruction followed by reconstruction, until underlying power structures and relations are exposed.
Thus a feminist examination of power structures and relations can highlight not only the disadvantage for women, but the advantage for men. Cynthia Cockburn’s (1991) work, which investigated *Men’s Resistance to Sex Equality in Organisations* (the sub-title of her book), made a significant shift from the literature on women’s disadvantage. She built on earlier analyses by Bob Connell (1987) and Clare Burton (1991) to confront the pervasiveness of men’s advantage. The normalisation of men’s advantaged position and the invisibility of this advantage means not only less power and influence on every dimension for women, but more for men. Cockburn “itemises the way men organise against women to retain these advantages, which at the behavioural level involves the fostering of solidarity between men and sexualising, threatening, marginalising, controlling and dividing women” (Ramsay, 1995, p. 178). In her work on *The Politics of Advantage*, Joan Eveline (1994) argues that because feminism has been so preoccupied with women’s disadvantage, men’s corresponding advantage has remained virtually invisible and unremarked. She too points out that it would be more strategic to focus on male advantage – “the everyday spectrum of privileges that accrue to men” and accepted as unremarkable – to avoid the assumption that processes advantaging men are normal, natural and immutable (p. 130). Blackmore (1999) suggests deconstructing the glass ceiling to uncover this advantage in order to seek out what it constitutes and why and how it has been maintained. In that way we can move on from discourses urging women to adapt to masculinist organisations, instead questioning the underlying complexities of power and advantage.

**Postmodern influences**

Feminist research is influenced by, and has, in turn, influenced postmodern perspectives. In postmodern feminist research there is a shift towards more reflexive, language based, interpretive practices (Lather, 1991a; 1991b). The centrality of the personal in feminist research enables narratives and accounts to be collected, many in the ‘social actors’ own voices, language and words. Universal claims regarding women are problematic as cumulative identities of gender, race, class, sexuality and age changing over time and social context lead to a profound questioning of the category ‘women’ (Franzway, 2001). Yet, for me, avoiding the stories of the dilemmas faced by women is not the answer. Any story will be incomplete, viewed from the perspective of the teller, and influenced by context, time, current and past ideologies, attitudes and beliefs. Barrett and Phillips (cited in Franzway, 2001) argue that while the deconstruction of ‘woman’ is necessary,
feminism cannot escape from “a modernist history of egalitarian, and emancipatory, movement” (p. 17).

There is a danger of feminist politics becoming so guarded that a silencing of women is the result. This silence is advantageous to dominant interests concerned with preserving the status quo. The stories in this thesis represent the lived experiences of women in leadership roles in the workplace and their voices are a reminder that gender issues of power and dominance are still current.

Postmodernism, like feminism, “has helped bring into question the importance of difference and the role of the researcher in the construction of knowledge” (Tierney, 1999, p. 451). As explained by Tierney:

Knowledge is not ‘discovered’ by an academic sleuth who pretends to be an archeologist uncovering preexisting facts. Instead, researchers create data. Individuals and groups, based on social, cultural, and ideological positions, create knowledge. Whereas modernist assumptions about society assumed objectivist notions of scientific law, the postmodernist argues that such laws are constantly shifting. Objectivity does not exist. The postmodern challenge is to decide how particular interests are supported, denied, overlooked or occluded. (pp. 451-452)

Postmodern (particularly poststructural) perspectives also destabilise the gender binaries, the oppositional categories of men and women. More complex understandings of masculinities have developed over time: some men are marginalised in hegemonic cultures and some women may deny feminist concerns or adapt to a masculinist culture. Yet both men and women internalise the dominant gender’s conception of masculinity and femininity (Flax, 1992). Both men and women contribute to class, gender and cultural relations and reflection on how we contribute to, enable, compensate or contest these relations is vital to feminist scholarship.

Problem statement

The purpose of the research study was to investigate reasons for highly capable women in management and leadership positions electing to leave (or in the case of two, reassessing career pathways or contemplating leaving) the public education system. In essence, the investigation seeks to highlight workplace barriers to women of high potential in a bureaucratic context. The Education Department (as I refer to it in this thesis) is the largest single employer in the state with a fortnightly payroll of up to 35,000 individuals spread across approximately 900 work sites (1998 statistics). To keep the study
manageable in size and context and to retain an in-depth qualitative perspective, I focused on the management culture of the Education Department through the experiences of 21 women who voluntarily left their jobs between 1991 and 2001. A criterion for selection was that all women had worked, prior to leaving, in the central office of the Department. The work of central office focuses on ministerial issues, issues of policy, policy implementation, curriculum initiatives and special projects at a systems level.

While investigating the experiences of women in management and leadership, I placed a greater emphasis on identifying outstanding ability and performance than was evident in the women in management literature to date. The research is intended to highlight the women’s exceptional capabilities as managers and their ongoing potential contribution to leadership and change in the workplace. The loss to the organisation is significant, not only in terms of equal opportunity for women, but also in terms of the cost of losing experienced senior managers and workers of outstanding potential. Current research emphasises the importance of workplace diversity and valuing the contribution of women and minorities if organisations are to survive in an increasingly complex and global world (Karpin Report of the Industry Task Force on Leadership and Management Skills, 1995; Recommendations of the Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995).

As the researcher I identified the 21 women, in some cases guided by my insider knowledge of their leadership achievements and at other times guided by recommendations from within the research group. For the first cohort I used a qualifying questionnaire (Appendix 1) to confirm their high potential in leadership and management. I commenced the interviews in 1998, interviewing fourteen women in the first cohort. In 2001 and 2002, I interviewed 7 more women (second cohort) as I wanted to find out if more recent stories held similar themes; if the issues that had surfaced were ‘still there’. I also wanted to extend the sample to include some indigenous Australians and interviewed two women of Aboriginal/Torres Straight Islander background who had previously worked in the central office of the Education Department. Two of the 21 women had not left the Department but one had vowed never to return to the central office environment and the other began to actively plan for her retirement, renegotiating her work boundaries in a marked attitudinal change. Another woman was on secondment to a public service job outside of education and expressed her desire not to return to the Department.
I was interviewed as part of the first cohort. As a woman who had left the Department, my leaving became the primary impetus for my research, so I decided to include myself as one of the interviewees. I was interviewed by a colleague (outside the sample) who was an experienced interviewer and who understood the feminist intent of my research.

Saturation point was determined when I had reached women across a range of job levels, from project management to executive management (multiple samples of each) and when I began to preempt the themes that were arising in the interviews. Although every interview was unique and there would always be differences in the stories that I heard, there were also many similarities and strong themes that began to emerge. The similarities and differences were equally fascinating and my aim was to explore the richness of the data whilst keeping the project manageable.

The research questions are based on the work of Bellamy and Ramsay (1994) who designed a study for the federal government’s Woman’s Employment, Education and Training Advisory Group. They investigated the experience of female managers in the private sector (in New South Wales and Victoria) to identify elements of the glass ceiling which resulted in stalled careers. The questions do not deal simply with women’s lives but with women’s lives within the context of a patriarchal world. I used similar questions to investigate the existence of, and possible effects of, the glass ceiling in the public sector, in this case a public education department. It focuses on why women, especially those demonstrating outstanding performance, do not ‘rise to the top’ but generally remain at low to middle levels in organisations (in this case an education bureaucracy). In addition it asks why, when some women do make it into executive management ranks, they too almost inevitably hit the glass ceiling.

Data collection and research questions

A questionnaire and a semi-structured interview (Appendices 1 & 2) were used to collect individual and organisational data from the sample of women. The questionnaire was designed to provide me, the researcher, with evidence of past achievement and current leadership ability as well as some basic demographic information about the participants and their former organisation. Relevant statistical and background data was gathered from the Equal Employment Opportunity section (now incorporated into the Policy section) of the Department; from the Women in Leadership Committee (I was a member intermittently over a two year period) which was operational during the ’90s; and from a
review of reports and documentation concerning women in promotional, leadership and management positions.

Most respondents answered the questionnaire in writing; 8 others, including all 7 of the second interview cohort, answered the questions in the course of the interview. These were choices made by the interviewees who were generous with their interview time and sometimes preferred to talk rather than write responses. Finding time outside the interview was an issue for some, especially in the 2001-2002 sample, perhaps indicative of ever increasing time pressures at work. Also, by 2001 I had been working on the research project over the course of two to three years and was familiar with the emerging themes and more efficient at covering demographic data within the course of the interview.

A semi-structured interview approach, suited to inductive, qualitative inquiry provided an in-depth, “detailed description of context and what people actually say and do” (Locke et al. 1987, p. 84). Interestingly, as Reinharz (1992) points out, feminist phenomenological interviewing requires not only “interviewer skills of restraint and listening” but “interviewees who are verbal and reflective” (p. 21). I was excited by the fluency, complexity and richness of the data, and by the stories and experiences revealed by the participants who were open and reflective in their responses.

The purpose of the interview was to attempt to enter the other person’s perspective; to explore the thoughts, intentions and behaviours that we cannot directly observe (Patton, 1990). As already mentioned, this style of research also recognises that the detached, clinical model of interviewing is unrealistic and not conducive to the sharing of experiences. Through careful listening, which allows the interviewer to introduce new questions as the interview proceeds, “the interviewer, the interview, and the study become interviewee oriented” (Bart & O’Brien cited in Reinharz). The contradiction between rationalist claims for scientific objectivity and the subjective approach of feminist research, which strives for openness and engagement, was pointed out by Ann Oakley in 1981. “She advocated a new model of feminist interviewing that strove for intimacy and included self-disclosure and ‘believing the interviewee’” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 27). Oakley (1981) explained that feminist research requires:

… that the mythology of ‘hygienic’ research with its accompanying mystification of the researcher and the researched as objective instruments of data production be
replaced by the recognition that personal involvement is more than dangerous bias—it is the condition under which people come to know each other and to admit others into their lives. (p. 58)

The interviews ranged in length from 75 minutes to 2.5 hours, the average time being 90 minutes. Some interviews continued informally after the interview or were followed by a second shorter interview or telephone call to clarify or extend points of discussion. I also used email messages for clarification of demographic data, for confirmation of meeting times and for comment on, or clarification of, particular ‘sensitive’ quotes. Once all of the interviews of the first cohort of 14 women were completed, transcribed and potential themes identified—providing rich data for the thesis—I convened a focus group of interested participants. This half-day workshop gave the interviewees an opportunity to comment on a paper, *Women in Leadership: Diversity at Work* (Peters, 2001), that I had written for the Tenth International Women in Leadership Conference. In the paper I identified themes and issues arising from the interviews, focusing in particular on perceptions of merit in the corporate culture. The focus group workshop also provided an opportunity for the women to meet together and compare and contrast experiences which led to their leaving employment with the Education Department, and to ‘catch up’ on their stories of moving on. Most of the women had met previously and some had kept in regular contact so the discussion was lively, friendly and ‘comfortable’, based on a shared and significant experience of leaving the same employer.

The research process provided the opportunity for highly capable women to speak openly and freely about their experiences and to reflect on those experiences. This research is about listening to their stories. The aim was to explore, in as much detail as possible, each woman’s experience of work at systems level in a large educational bureaucracy. In trying to establish and understand both the circumstances surrounding their departure from their employer and their sense of themselves as leaders or managers, the women were asked to examine a number of issues and themes (see also Introduction p. 5) based on the work of Bellamy and Ramsay (1994). In summary these are:

(i) *Separating* – the conditions and events surrounding their decision to leave.

(ii) *Career prospects* – how their career path looked at the time of leaving.

(iii) *Authority figure* – issues surrounding how they were related to as authority figures.

(iv) *Status and power* – how was it when they first started to ‘climb the career ladder’?
Organisational culture – how would they describe the culture of central office?

Life balance – what expectations did the organisation have, for example, hours expected to work, availability outside regular hours?

Support – who supported them in their career advancement and was there other support that would have been valuable? What were the effects of restructuring on career progress?

Value and Validation – times when they felt their work was properly valued and times when it was not.

Dissonant Perceptions – did it appear that ‘management’ believed that women received the same career development opportunities as men? Did the interviewees have the same perception?

Conclusion – what could have been done to keep them there?

(Adapted from Bellamy & Ramsay, 1994)

In particular, my interviews highlighted reasons for the women’s choice to leave and investigated the organisational structures and practices that presented obstacles to women’s advancement through management ranks. Using intensive, semi-structured interviews and listening carefully “to attitudes and feelings, those non-quantifiable things that are not usually covered in social surveys”, the interviewer can get at ‘subtleties’ embedded in women’s speech and body language (Barrington & Gray cited in Reinharz, 1992, p. 24).

The sites where I interviewed the 21 women varied from executive offices to inner city cafes, to a home office with kitchen renovations in progress, a multi-purpose office complete with children on school holidays, and around the coffee, dining or meeting table, either at home or at work. One woman was working outside Western Australia at the time of interview. The women seemed relaxed and open in their responses while also making an obvious effort to be open-minded and fair in their interpretation of events. Only one woman seemed guarded in her responses, tending not to express any personal dissatisfaction and being circumspect in her interpretation of the masculinist culture. Another denied any influence of discrimination in her career, eschewing any link to possible victim status. Both had left the highest executive management positions in the Education Department, moving on to other career opportunities.
Selection of participants

Twenty-one women who had voluntarily left the Education Department of Western Australia in the period 1991 – 2001 were interviewed to determine their reasons for choosing to leave, where they are now and possible organisational initiatives that might have resulted in their staying with their former employer. The women selected for the study were of various ages, differing marital/partner/single status and family responsibilities, and from early leadership, middle, or senior managerial positions. I included myself in the early leadership group of 5 project leaders/education officers employed in Level 5 positions. As is typical of managerial women as a group (Bellamy & Ramsay, 1994), apart from two women who were of Aboriginal heritage – Nyungar and Torres Straight Islander – the participants were mostly of white Anglo-Saxon descent. Salary levels were not significant to the study which refers to the women according to public education sector position titles or job levels. Based on my background knowledge of the women, I considered them all to be highly capable. For the first interview cohort I used checklists to identify their learning, behavioural and emotional characteristics based on notions of giftedness. By the time I interviewed the second cohort, I had adjusted my focus to place less emphasis on giftedness and more emphasis on notions of leadership influenced by conceptions of gender, culture and power.

My selection of the interviewees was guided by my experience in recognising individuals of high potential. However, rather than aiming to present a case for giftedness, I am pointing out the high management potential of my sample. The selection was influenced by my sense of their competence and confirmation of this by recommendations from other women both within and outside of this study. During the interview process, the women, in individual ways, demonstrated that they were articulate, intelligent, sophisticated in their understanding of management practices, knowledgeable about the education system, concerned for social justice, and reflective.

Of course ‘competence’ is a highly subjective term and, like intelligence, defined by the audience or the community within which it is measured. There are endless debates on intelligence, or on what makes a good leader or manager, and in a postmodern sense the concept of ‘truth’, in the sense of an ‘all-encompassing world view’ is challenged as ever changing, as influenced by the reader, context, time and space (Roseneau, 1992). Postmodernists also “argue that the modern science practice of doing away with 'me', 'I', 'we' merely creates the illusion that there is no omnipotent narrator … to give the illusion
of objectivity … when actually the researcher as subject is always present” (Roseneau, 1992, p. 49, citing Richardson). As a researcher and participant in the research I am influenced by my own values and beliefs, which in turn affect my ‘story’. I am interested in a wider understanding of talent, beyond that which is narrowly defined in schools and workplaces with little understanding of diversity.17 I am concerned for the recognition and nurturing of human potential so that, through such care, both men and women can contribute to growth and change in themselves, their relationships, and society.

“Discourse about a better world serves … to stir the imagination, calling on the intellect of a people to examine and attend to its circumstances … [with] the power to forge new ways of being in the world … to build a just and equitable society” (Howley, Howley & Pendarvis, 1995, p. 216).

Demographics of sample

The demographics of the interviewee sample reflected the general profile of women in leadership and management positions in the organisation. The questionnaire revealed the following demographic factors (see Table 1):

Date of leaving

The bulk of the sample left between 1991 and 1996 (14), with a concentration of departures in 1994 (4) and 1995 (4). This was a time of restructuring within the Education Department. The previous large restructure had occurred in 1987 and there had been reasonable stability from 1988 through to 1994 (W5).18 However six women left between 1991 and 1992. Another 4 left between 1997 and 2001. There were at least five leadership changes between 1991 and 2001, accompanied by various degrees of restructuring. In 2001 another restructuring process was commenced, but not completed until 2003 when the Department of Education was amalgamated with the Department of Training.

Two women stayed. However one decided never to return to the central office working environment (choosing to work at district level instead) and the other began to actively

17 Few definitions of talent take into account women’s relative distance from the mainstream of their societies’ achievement centres (Noble, Subotnic & Arnold, 1996). Men are advantaged by socially constructed conceptions of eminence linked to their prominence in public life and by a history of claims (now discredited) to the ‘natural inferiority of women’ (Hollingworth, 1914; Peters, 1994a).

18 Forthwith W denotes an interviewee in my research study; the numbers 1-21 denote particular interviewees.
plan for her retirement, reassessing her psychological and physical (working hours) commitment to the organisation. Two of the women who had been with the organisation for nearly 20 years returned for a short time after making the decision to leave. One had left a senior position in 1997 then returned in 2000 for one year of contract work; another, a project leader, left at the end of 1995 and returned to a district position in 1998. She left again after three years. Both women confirmed that their initial decision to leave was the right one for them. The figures in Table 1 record the dates of their initial departures.

Age
Of the 21 women in the study, five were aged between 30 and 39 years, nine between 40 and 49 years, two had just turned 50, and three were between 50 and 59 years at the time of leaving. The two women who talked about career change and retirement, but stayed with the Department, were in their fifties at the time of assessing their options.

Years of service
As employees in the Education Department the women had accrued quite extensive years of service. One woman completed 3 years of service, one women 5 years, six between 8 and 12 years, two between 13 and 15 years, one approximately 16 years, and nine over 20 years. Many of the women (13) had been with the Education Department of WA for all of their years in the paid workforce with at least two women having reached 35 years of service. Some had prior interstate experience in education – one woman for five years, two for over 20 years. Other women had prior experience in the Public Service – one for two years, another for over 10 years and another for over thirty years. One woman had worked between 5 and 10 years in an independent school and the Public Service, and another had varied career experience spanning approximately 20 years. Whilst with the Education Department most leave taken by the participants was constituted as good service as it was approved leave within a designated timeframe e.g. maternity, study or travel leave. A few women had taken more extensive leave (a number of years prior to their central office appointments) due to family responsibilities, relocation for spouse’s career or career change.

Single / Partnered
Seven women were single, eight were divorced or separated and one was widowed. Five were married. Of the eight who were divorced, three were re-partnered at the time of
leaving. The total number of women living as singles was 13 (10 without children) out of a total of 21. These figures indicate that the incidence of those with no immediate family responsibilities was high, as discussed in the following paragraph.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Date of leaving</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991-1992</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993-1994</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995-1996</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997-1998</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999-2000</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Still there</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age at leaving</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average</strong></td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Range</strong></td>
<td>30 - 59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total years of service in Educ. Dept.</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average</strong></td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Range</strong></td>
<td>5 – 20+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total years of service in the paid workforce</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average</strong></td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Range</strong></td>
<td>13 – 20+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level achieved</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 8</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive management</td>
<td>4 (including 2 CEOs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Career breaks over working life</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternity leave / Family commitments</td>
<td>11 (some combined with study)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study leave</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Career breaks in Education Department</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>21 (approved leave counted as good service)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Highest qualification</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Living with partner</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Children</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 12 years of age</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 12 years of age</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cultural heritage</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal/Indigenous</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent/s born in non-English speaking country</td>
<td>1 (confirmed response)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian born, white</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>New career</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own business</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Established organisation</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Children

Two women had children under 12 years of age and nine had children over 12 (three had one child, four had two children, three had three children and only one had four children). One woman with a young child stated that she had strong support from her husband who had basically ‘subordinated his career’ to take the primary parenting responsibility. A number of women commented that they had pursued management careers only when their children had reached their teenage years and above. The other ten women (nearly 48%) had no children, a high percentage of the sample, reflecting research which indicates that women managers are more likely to be single or divorced and less likely to have children than their male counterparts (Cass, 1983; Davidson & Cooper, 1992; Limerick, 1995; Bagihole, 2003). One woman, at executive management level, stated that she had deliberately remained single and childless in order to develop her career.

In their research on women and men in organisations, Cleveland, Stockdale & Murphy (2000) cite a Canadian study where:

… 61% of women agreed that advancement in their organisations depended on putting their careers before their personal or family lives (in contrast, only 44% of male chief executives said the same thing). Over 40% of the senior female managers in this survey made the choice either to postpone having children or not to have them at all, and 19% decided either to delay marriage or not to marry. (p. 269)

“The [current] phenomenon of a dramatically declining birth rate is sometimes called the ‘baby bust’ – in contrast to the post-world War II ‘baby boom’, from 1946 to 1963, during which Australia’s birthrate soared” (Summers, 2003, p. 44). The fertility rate – the number of babies a woman will bear over her lifetime – is the lowest in Australian history, falling steadily from 3.6 in 1961 to 2.0 in 1977, 1.9 in 1993, 1.8 in 1996 and 1.73 in 2001 (Summers, 2003). Anne Summers (2003) attributes this baby bust to much more than the increasing choice made possible with the introduction of the contraceptive pill in the 1960s. The raised awareness of young women to the negative career consequences of having a child is influenced by facing possible pregnancy discrimination; having to give up their jobs, or at least cut back on them; suffering significant loss of earnings from which, over a lifetime, they will never recover; having difficulty finding quality, affordable childcare; and the knowledge that they will almost certainly shoulder most of the responsibility as primary carers. In contrast, men expect to be able to have families and still enjoy their careers. Increasingly, so do women, who are “no longer prepared to sacrifice themselves at the alter of maternity, or to be doormats for their families”
(Summers, 2003, p. 59). It is now well recognised that family issues, including decisions to marry and especially when or whether to have children, dramatically affect career development for women (Cleveland et al., 2000 citing Betz & Fitzgerald). Moreover, given the significant growth in dual-career families over the last few decades, and the reliance on dual-incomes, decisions regarding childbearing may become increasingly more important for both partners (Cleveland et al., 2000).

**Education level / Qualifications**

High academic achievement was evident in the group. Twelve of the women held postgraduate qualifications and some women continued with postgraduate qualifications after leaving. All of the participants had completed an undergraduate degree (Bachelor of Education, Bachelor of Science or Bachelor of Arts); some had more than one degree; two had completed Honours. Two women had postgraduate diplomas in business; one a postgraduate diploma in computer studies (following undergraduate qualifications in mathematics) and another a Graduate Diploma in Health Sciences. Seven had Masters degrees in Arts, Education, Management, Policy, Educational Administration or Business Administration (one had a Master of Arts as well as a Master of Education). One woman had a PhD and another commenced work on a PhD after leaving. Another three commenced work on Masters degrees after leaving (or planning to leave). Many of the women also held other teaching qualifications such as a Diploma of Teaching, a Teacher’s Higher Certificate or a Teacher’s Certificate.

**Remuneration / Job level**

At the time of leaving two women were Chief Executive Officers, two were Executive Directors, one a Director (Level 9) and another three were acting Directors, Level 8 or 9. There was one Superintendent/Director and one acting Manager at Level 8; and an acting Manager at Level 7. Three were Consultants, Coordinators or Officers in Level 6 positions. Another two, who stayed but made adjustments to their career aspirations, were Officers/Project Leaders at Level 6 (they later moved to Level 7/8 management positions). Five were Education Officers in Level 5 positions, all managing special projects. As a summary, of the 21 women, four were in senior executive positions, another three at director level, two in upper middle management and the remainder in middle and lower management and project work.
The following statistics (Table 2), indicating a gender breakdown of management personnel, were collected by the central office Women in Leadership Program. In 1996 most women in the organisation were not in line management positions and were employed at Level 5 and below, with over 68 per cent at Level 1 (actual figures for Levels 1-3 not available). Participation rates at higher levels reduced from Level 5 onwards, with only token representation at Level 9, the executive management level. This had important implications for women in leadership, as Levels 5 and 6 are significant feeder groups into senior management and other leadership roles (Women in Leadership Development Group, 1996).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 5</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>65.6</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>34.4</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 6</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>69.0</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 7</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>60.7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>39.3</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 8</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>84.2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>88.9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director General</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

More recent statistics (Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2004) indicate that of 65 staff (of a total of 34,954 employees) at salary range 9 and above, 71 percent are men and 29 percent are women. However, these figures are not directly comparable to the 1996 statistics as the Department of Education combined with the Department of Training in 2003, thus making it difficult to isolate Department of Education statistics.

The 2002 statistics (Table 3), collected prior to this amalgamation, indicate that representation at Level 9 and above (average 20% female) is very small considering an organisation that is nearly 70 percent female. Level 9 is where the Senior Executive Service (SES) commences. From there the scales are not called levels, but Class 1, 2 and 3 to indicate senior executive status. Despite a distinct improvement in middle management (due to a restructure which saw all of the original Level 9 director positions

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*Women in Leadership* was an Equal Opportunity initiative of the Education Department in the 1990s (ceasing with the disbandment of the EEO Branch in 1998), arising out of the recognition that whilst women represented 73 per cent of the Department’s employees, only 19 per cent were at level 6 or above (1995 statistics). This was a decrease of 5 per cent on 1994 statistics when 24 percent of women employees were in positions of leadership (Women in Leadership Development Group, 1996).
abolished and recreated as Level 8 positions), a marked increase at Level 6 (consultant, non management) and an evening out at Levels 4 and 5 (non management), women are hitting the proverbial glass ceiling and staying predominantly at the bottom of the pyramid. Women still comprise over 68% of all Levels 1, 2 and 3 (non management) positions.

Table 3 Education Department Public Sector Management Act Employee Numbers
(4 December 2002)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 1</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>69.3</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>29.5</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>70.5</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 3</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>68.3</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 4</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 5</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>50.5</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>49.5</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 6</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>35.8</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>64.2</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 7</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>51.4</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>48.6</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 8</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>56.8</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>43.2</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>77.8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class 1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>77.8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class 2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class 3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>80.0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director General</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These recent figures reflect global patterns that indicate increases in the numbers of women in middle management positions whilst participation remains problematic at senior levels. However, Australia performed poorly against other industrialised countries in a 2001 ILO survey (Wirth, 2001) which indicated that just 1.3 percent of [chief] executive positions in Australian companies are held by women (Summers, 2003).

Job area

The women worked in the areas of policy; curriculum; personnel; human resources; operations; professional development; EEO/equity/social justice/special needs; and in projects with Equal Opportunity/social justice links. Significantly, most had strong social justice and equity links in their central office career experiences and were involved in the policy implementation of these areas. At the time of leaving seven were working in positions that included responsibility for EEO or Social Justice areas.
Cultural heritage

Two women in the sample were Aboriginal. One woman described herself as a multi-racial Aboriginal person:

I call myself a multi-racial Aboriginal person, because my father is Aboriginal from the Torres Straight Islands – a mixture of Torres Straight Islander & Indonesian. My mother is from Darwin and she is an Aboriginal person who is a mixture of Chinese, Filipino and Aboriginal. I am the sum of all those parts.

The father of the other was Aboriginal Nyungar, while her mother was a white Australian, of English descent. Another woman had parents who were born in a non-English-speaking country; the remainder was of Anglo-Saxon Australian parentage.

Data interpretation and analysis

To extract and analyse themes emerging from the qualitative responses, content or thematic analysis was used. Content analysis is widely used in qualitative research to allow for the extraction of significant themes. It allowed for “a disparate set of responses to be placed in some order against a backdrop of emerging or established research” (Bellamy & Ramsay, 1994, p. 63). The commonality of the experiences was explored through frequency analysis. However, consistent with feminist and phenomenological research principles, the aim of the research was to explore the experiences of the women, not to essentialise their experiences or to make significant inferential statements.

Suspension of judgment is critical in the early stage, or epoche, of phenomenological investigation and requires the setting aside of the researcher’s personal viewpoint or at least a recognition of preconceptions (although the extent to which this can be achieved is debatable) in order to see the experience for itself. Following epoche, the second step is phenomenological reduction in which the researcher holds the phenomenon up for serious inspection. Its elements are dissected, uncovered, defined and analysed and the researcher develops enhanced or expanded versions of invariant themes, interpreting meanings and obtaining the subject’s interpretation if possible. All elements and perspectives of the data are treated with equal value, then organised into meaningful clusters. The final step of phenomenological analysis involves the development of a “structural synthesis” in which the interpretation of the deeper meaning of the experience for the individual will be described, in an attempt to reveal the essence of the phenomenon (Patton, 1990).
However my research is not pure phenomenology. In combining a phenomenological approach with a feminist and reconceptualised critical research methodology, I have integrated my critical interpretation (influenced by theoretical understandings) into the interpretive process. Although the phenomenological experiences of the participants are revealed through the data collection and sorting processes, my interpretation is influenced by a critical research methodology which “attempts to connect the everyday troubles individuals face to public issues of power, justice, and democracy” and, in doing so, recognising “an ideology of privilege and entitlement for empowered members of society” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000, p. 289).

As pointed out by Dortins (2002), interviews can be viewed as ‘living conversations’ in which the interviewer and the interviewee negotiate on several levels to produce a shared meaning. Moreover, the process of transcription is “a transformative process, a bridge between interview and analysis across which data, as well as the interviewer-researcher, are re-orientated towards the process of analytical reading” (p. 207). Dortins (2002) cites a warning from Kvale that transcription as a translation from spoken to written; from living and personal conversation to a ‘frozen’ text, can position the transcriber-translator as a traitor. This is where I find the reflexive nature of feminist methodology useful. As the researcher I aim to position myself, quite openly, as part of, and as a critical influence on, the research.

Through the process of inductive analysis, natural variations occurred. Themes, patterns and categories emerged, either through categories articulated by the participants or through terms developed by me, the researcher. These categories were checked for ‘completeness’ and once saturation was reached, closure of the interview process began (Patton, 1990), followed by draft writing, ongoing analysis and interpretation, and reporting.

**Ethical considerations**

Ethical concerns of autonomy, privacy and integrity were addressed to the best of my ability. Ethical issues included ensuring that the welfare, worth and dignity of the participants was respected; that consent was given; that there was no deception or secrecy; that the right to withdraw at any time remained with the participants; and that they had the right to remain anonymous (AARC, 1993). The research project was granted approval by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Murdoch University.
It is important to ensure that participation in the research is not a damaging experience. For example, anonymity is paramount as revealing the identity of the individuals involved in the research could seriously affect their future career prospects. However, Riddell (1989) suggests that, despite precautions, it is impossible for anyone doing research to be able to give an absolute guarantee of anonymity. This problem seems insurmountable and is of great concern. Riddell illustrates the difficulties when she says, “It would cause me great sadness if any of the women … who confided in me about the injustices they experienced in the course of their careers were identified and punished yet again for daring to criticise” (p. 94-95). In recognition of the importance of protecting the women in this study, the thesis focuses on the issues and does not personally identify the women, their former positions or their current positions. The findings are grouped in themes rather than individual voices.

Ultimately, the ethics of feminist research demand that the work should be useful to women (Riddell, 1989, p. 97). As Duelli Klein (cited in Riddell, 1989) points out, “the basic demand of feminist research is that the work should be not simply on women, but also for women” (p. 80). “[A]n emancipatory, critical social science must be premised on the development of research approaches which empower those involved to change as well as understand the world” (Lather, 1991a, p. 3). It is therefore important that feminist research is not only a sharing of experiences but that the research is used in some way to change the position of women in society (Riddell, 1989).

The emancipatory intent of feminist research has always been of primary concern, but as pointed out by Kincheloe and McLaren (2001), the assumption that the researcher can emancipate the participants is now questionable. Lather, too, is careful to point out that she uses “empowerment to mean analysing ideas about the causes of powerlessness, recognising systemic oppressive forces, and acting both individually and collectively to change the conditions of our lives” (Lather, 1991a, p. 4 citing Bookman & Morgan; also citing Shapiro). The notion of emancipation seems, inadvertently, to assume some superior status on the part of the researcher, when, in fact, learning occurs between researcher and the researched in reciprocal ways. I would prefer to think that my work has shared benefits for both the participants and myself; that we have grown together in understanding through taking part in the research process. I have been enriched by the experience and feel privileged to have worked with such talented, questioning and thinking women.
Other concerns raised by Riddell (1989) include the ethics of raising ‘highly charged topics’ and then walking out leaving them unresolved and offering no solutions. This concern was addressed by giving the women themselves the opportunity to make the recommendations for improvement in the treatment of women in leadership and management. Similarly, Maynard and Purvis (1994) point out that a major concern for feminists has always been with the process of conducting research:

Questions about the inevitability of a power dimension to the relationship between the researcher and the researched, about the ethics of research practices, and matters of exploitation and control have featured prominently in the debate. (p. 4)

Stanley and Wise (1993) are also concerned with the power dimensions of the research relationship. They advocate approaching the inevitable power relationship by laying open, and making vulnerable, the researcher. “It therefore involves displaying her actions, reasonings, deductions and evidence to other people” (p. 168). By revealing methodological details, the purpose and perceived limitations of the research, and my own personal bias, I attempted to address these issues. Kirby and McKenna (1989) believe that “it is essential to state your assumptions and thereby contextualise yourself in the research … The researcher becomes another subject in the research process and another dimension added to the data” (p. 53). They suggest that one way of accounting for the influence of the researcher is to record both the research you are doing and your reflections on it as you move through the research process. They emphasise that:

In all research it is necessary to record both the information sought and gathered (the content) and how the research is done (the process). In researching from the margins, conceptual baggage is a large part of that record … Writing your conceptual baggage allows you to identify, at a later point in the research, whether any pre-established goals, assumptions or responsibilities may be overly influencing how your research is developing. (pp. 49-52)

Kirby and McKenna (1989) explain that as the researcher moves through the research process she may gain new perspectives on ‘old’ ideas. This technique, known as layering, allows the researcher to continually account for herself in the process. I think this self reflective process is a strength of feminist research but the danger here is that feminists and other ‘researchers from the margins’ are expected to soul search more than so called scientific researchers. Examining one’s conceptual baggage should be part of the process of all research, indeed part of managing in any context. Self-reflection is vital to growth and understanding – of ourselves and others.
Maynard and Purvis (1994) point to other concerns, such as the stress of doing research, particularly on sensitive issues, and the possibility of feeling more confused the more one delves into the research question. The impact on research participants is also of concern. Participants may feel vulnerable in terms of the information they are revealing and concerned at the possibility of its misuse if the information fell into the wrong hands. These are sensitive issues to be considered throughout the research process. Building trust is vital and assisted in my case by being known to a number of the interviewees prior to the commencement of the project. Working in the same organisation allowed for a crossing of paths in various networks and work-related events and meetings. My own reputation as a project leader and education specialist may have reassured the participants – all of whom were senior to me in the management hierarchy – that I had a good understanding of education and social justice issues.

Reliability and validity

Lather (1991) offers a reconceptualisation of validity appropriate for research that is openly committed to a more just social order. She cautions that the job of validation is not to support interpretation but to find out what might be wrong with it. She discusses four ways of developing valid or credible research designs including triangulation (trustworthiness which includes using multiple data sources); face validity (inviting participants’ reactions); construct validity (guarding against imposing theory on the research) and catalytic research. In explaining catalytic research and its capacity for enhancing personal growth, Lather (1991) cites the work of Reason and Rowan as well as Brown and Tandom. She explains:

Catalytic validity represents the degree to which the research process re-orients, focuses and energises participants towards knowing reality in order to transform it. The argument for catalytic validity lies not only within recognition of the reality-altering impact of the research process, but also in the desire to consciously channel this impact so that respondents gain self-understanding and, ultimately, self-determination through research participation. (p. 68)

I worked with research participants who were highly capable and experienced in leadership and management. Nearly half of the sample (47%) had occupied senior management or executive management positions, including two executive directors and two CEOs. The interview process revealed that the participants had obviously reflected quite extensively on their experiences leading up to, during and after leaving. I can only
hope that through the processes of questioning and interviewing they felt validated in accounting their stories, thus validating my work as researcher.

One of the ways that Lather (1991) talks about the reflexive nature of critical inquiry is through providing "an environment that invites participants' critical reactions to our accounts of their worlds" (p. 64). This reflexivity is “operationalised by recycling description, emerging analysis, and conclusions back through at least a sample of respondents” (p. 67). In 2002 I held a focus group workshop to provide feedback to the first fourteen participants and to test the ‘resonance’ of my interpretation of their stories and descriptions of the workplace culture. I asked questions such as: Does the research resonate with your story? Does the research correspond with your personal view of your experiences? Could this research act as a catalyst for action?

The focus group provided a collegial and social setting for the sharing of ideas and feelings, and a validation of shared experience. Compared with individual interviews, the advantage of focus groups is that they make it possible for the researcher “to observe the interactive processes occurring among participants” (Madriz, 2000, p. 836). Another advantage is that the facilitator can allow the conversation and interaction to flow among participants, thus decreasing the overall influence of the researcher (Madriz, 2000). In this way I was able to elicit responses to my work and received valuable feedback on some preliminary findings. I also felt an energy, perhaps a catalytic response, as the women interacted and discussed issues raised from their shared experience.

Following that workshop I decided to conduct further interviews to test that the research findings were still current, or if the major themes had shifted. What I found was that the major themes continued to surface but that I became more aware of divergent issues, ways in which stories differed, as well as ways in which they converged. I became more open to contradictions and tensions in the research.

What really matters in feminist research is the way in which the results are used to answer substantive questions about the nature of oppressive (and privileged) social structures, “Unlike traditional methods, critical methods are directed towards breaking down taken-for-granted concepts and rebuilding them into new entities” (Sarantakos, 1993, p. 64). Including the participants in the research process reflects elements of participatory action research which is “a process in which people deliberately set out to contest and to
reconstitute irrational, unproductive (or inefficient), unjust, and/or unsatisfying (alienating) ways of interpreting and describing their world (language/discourses), ways of working (work), and ways of relating to others (power)” (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000, p. 598). Add to this the definition of a criticalist as a researcher or theorist who attempts to use her or his work as a form of social or cultural criticism and a picture of resistance and emancipatory intent (in the sense of liberation and reform) emerges (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000).

To guard against the dismissal of feminist work as biased, high standards of academic rigor must be employed. One important way to strengthen a study design is through triangulation. This can mean using several kinds of methods or data, including using both quantitative and qualitative approaches (Finch cited in Riddell, 1989; Patton, 1990; Lather, 1991). Although I cannot claim to have fully triangulated the research, I did use multiple data collection techniques. A questionnaire was used to obtain demographic information on the participants, including indications of high potential for leadership and background information on the Education Department. Information was also gathered on any affirmative action policies or initiatives and the percentage of women in management in the organisation. The questionnaire was both quantitative and qualitative in design, background questions presented in a multiple-choice format, for ease of analysis in comparing demographic and employment information across participants. In contrast the interviews were qualitative, open-ended and semi-structured, using a list of prompt questions to encourage in-depth exploration of experiences.

According to Riddell (1989), data gathered by the use of multiple strategies can be sensitive to lived experience whilst “enabling more generalised statements about relationships between variables to be made” (pp. 92-93). In addition, the use of combined techniques such as interviews and workshops in conjunction with questionnaires ensures that what has been termed ‘hit and run’ research is avoided.

Revealing my own bias is consistent with the intent of feminist and critical research to reveal the influence of the researcher on the research. No work can be entirely value free (Finch cited in Riddell, 1989). In fact, disclosing the inevitable bias or personal beliefs is more open and less dangerous than pretending to be value free (Sarantakos, 1993). In many respects bias could be viewed in a positive light. My contextual and personal experience, in the same workplace as the research participants, enhanced my
understanding of their stories and gave me the passion, the empathy and the motivation to pursue the research. Including myself as one of the 21 participants obviously influences the research findings but it also allows me to be part of the research community in question (acknowledging the intersubjectivity of interviewer and interviewee)\(^{20}\) and for my voice to be heard in context.

The interview questions were based on a review of the literature and on my own concern at the under-representation and undervaluing of women in management, both in the Education Department and in the workplace in general. Introductory notes to accompany the initial questionnaire revealed the intention of the research and the feminist context.

How to decide what is true or valid is a question feminist researchers have in common with all social scientists. But, as Acker, Barry and Esseveld (1983) point out, feminist researchers differ in their conception of validity:

> We are not interested in prediction, but adequate reconstruction. We conceive of this at two levels. The first has to do with adequacy of interpretation and involves selection, organisation, and interpretation of our findings with the help of our social theory. The other level of concern is with the adequacy of our findings. We want to know that our research results fairly and accurately reflect the aspects of social life that we claim they represent. (p. 431)

In working towards a sociology for women, valid interpretations require that the active voice of the subject should be heard in the account; that the theoretical reconstruction must be able to account for the position of the researcher in the research; and that the reconstruction should reveal the underlying social relations in the situations and daily lives under study. By giving ample opportunity for the exploration of the women’s experiences and for the active voices of the subjects to be heard, I tried to address the question of validity. I was also aware, in the words of Rosanna Hertz (1997), “that the accounts they tell have been constructed through the dialogue that my respondents created in conjunction with me” (cited in Gergen & Gergen, 2000, p. 1027).

Within traditional epistemologies, emotions are perceived as disruptive and subversive, clouding the reason of the scientific investigation. In contrast, feminist epistemology sees emotionality as the product of culture and thus as amenable to ‘rational’ analysis as any other culturally influenced behavioural form. Stanley and Wise (1993) explain that “it banishes the myth of the dispassionate and unemotional ‘scientific observer’, by locating

\(^{20}\) Merleau-Ponty, 1962
an experiencing feeling subject at the centre of all intellectual endeavour” (p. 193). The feminist idea that emotion is vital to systematic knowledge about the social world allows the researcher to gain a more holistic interpretation of experiences.

The complex question of validity and reliability is addressed in the following quote by Patton (1990):

> The validity and reliability of qualitative data depend to a great extent on the methodological skill, sensitivity, and integrity of the researcher … skillful interviewing involves more than just asking questions. Content analysis requires considerably more than just reading to see what’s there. Generating useful and credible qualitative findings through observation, interviewing, and content analysis requires discipline, knowledge, training, practice, creativity, and hard work. (p. 11)

Patton (1990) explains, as have many feminist researchers (Riddell, 1989; Lather, 1991a), that the credibility issue for qualitative inquiry depends on three elements: rigorous techniques and methods of data collection and analysis, the credibility of the researcher and a philosophical belief in the phenomenological paradigm. LeCompte and Goetz (1982) remind us that while “attaining absolute validity and reliability is an impossible goal for any research model” (p.55), investigators can conscientiously balance the factors enhancing credibility within the context of their particular research problems and goals. Add to this Lather’s (1991) concept of catalytic validity as self-determining and transforming and a picture of the validity issue for feminist critical research emerges.

**Summary**

In summary, the research process is based on a critical research paradigm grounded in feminist theory and influenced by poststructuralist readings, drawing on phenomenology to capture the lived experiences of the research participants. Guba and Lincoln (2000) talk about the shifting boundaries between paradigms, a paradigmatic equivalent of the ‘blurring of genres’ (Geertz cited in Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p. 167) where the various paradigms are beginning to ‘interbreed’. Thus the influence of feminist thinking, phenomenological methods, action research, critical theory and postmodern paradigms can impact simultaneously on research methodology and “researcher conceptions of action within and for the community in which [the] research is carried out” (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p. 164).

How individuals make sense of their lives and experiences is a primary research focus.
Highlighting the centrality of the personal in feminist research enables narratives and accounts to be collected, many in the ‘social actors’ own voices, language and words. In postmodern feminist research the shift is away from cognitive, behaviourally-focused empirical work toward more reflexive, language-based, interpretive practices (Lather, 1991a). Thus affective consciousness and theoretical understandings impact on the researcher’s interpretation of everyday lived experience. In addition, issues of reflexivity foreground the impact of the researcher on the researched, highlighting cultural and historical influences, personal investment in the research, choices of literary texts, various biases, avoidances, surprises and ‘undoings’ in the course of the research (Gergen & Gergen, 2000).

Certain basic assumptions underpin a critical research paradigm including:

1. all thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations that are socially and historically constituted;
2. facts can never be isolated from the domain of values or removed from some form of ideological inscription;
3. certain groups in any society are privileged over others;
4. oppression is most forcefully reproduced when subordinates [and superordinates!] accept their social status as natural, necessary or inevitable; and
5. oppression has many faces e.g. class, race and gender (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000, p. 291).

Another basic assumption of the critical research paradigm is that “mainstream research practices are generally (often unwittingly) implicated in the reproduction of systems of class, race and gender oppression” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000, p. 291). Kincheloe and McLaren caution that research that concentrates on only one face of oppression such as race, class or gender can obscure the interconnections between them. I am aware that the voices in my research are primarily (although not exclusively) those of white women and that my intentional slant on the research is from a gender(ed) perspective. However, I am constantly reminded of the links between all oppressed groups – commonalities abound. For my research to be ‘authentic’, I can recognise the limitations of my own perspective, experience and expertise and be open to the limitations of interpretation. But it is my aim, in working from the margins, to provide a different voice and add to existing research into gender, power and organisational/management culture.
My experience in gifted education is linked to the notion of working from the margins, as is my activist feminist stance and my commitment to equity. My understanding of disadvantaged groups has developed over the years and is best explained in this quote by Arnold, Noble and Subotnic (1996):

> The study of women and the study of giftedness are both somewhat marginalised academic fields with characteristic themes and issues ... Both fields, for example, struggle with accusations of elitism and face charges of excluding minorities. Feminists and educators of the gifted work to foster optimal developmental conditions, largely through changes in social institutions. (p. 7-8)

Being guided by a feminist consciousness and conducting feminist research leaves the researcher open to criticism and attack, just as speaking out for the gifted places advocates in a similar position. Social justice issues require strength of conviction and an understanding of representing a minority voice. Striving for social and institutional change is often pure hard work, discouraging, slow moving and ongoing. This research aims to support women who dare to ‘rock the boat’ by doing things differently.
Questioning the corporate culture

I always felt there was something going on behind the scenes ... with the blokes. I felt that there was the meeting you attended but then there’d been another meeting before, or there was going to be another meeting after, in which the boys would really make their own decisions. — W7

You could tell the position by the size of the pot plants. The upper level managers got a whole tree. We got none! The greenery around you symbolised your position. The whole concept of the managers on the top floor, the workers in the middle and the stores, etc. on the ground ... It was very hierarchical. — W4

This chapter makes the case that the metaphorical glass ceiling is linked to the corporate culture of organisations. A corporate culture is constituted through the ideology, attitudes and beliefs of a group of people generally located at and near the top of organisations and institutions. It is expressed in terms of shared symbols, language and practices (‘how we do things around here’) through which gendered power relations are sustained (Newman, 1995). In my thesis I refer to the corporate or organisational culture as the dominant culture or ‘personality’ of the organisation (Hatch, 1993; Schein, 1990). The centrality of the masculine tradition and the normalisation of masculine working styles (Acker, 1990; Cockburn, 1991) supports a dominant culture in most organisations, now commonly referred to as a ‘masculinist’ culture (Blackmore, 1999); a culture that advantages men (Eveline, 1994). A masculinist corporate culture is produced, supported and reproduced by men advantaged by a gendered working environment in which the normalisation of the masculine tradition is taken for granted and rarely acknowledged. A ‘peak’ managerial culture permeates the ethos of the organisation (Currie et al., 2002). Some women (and most men) take advantage of this culture by embedding themselves in the masculinist ethos whilst others resist in a variety of ways.

Historical links to the domestic and private world of women and the public world of men have been reproduced in the workplace, particularly in education, where women are seen as the nurturant carers and men as the custodians of administration (Blackmore, 1993). In the particular case of the education bureaucracy, dominated by women at the lower levels and by men at the top, a culture based on power and control through hierarchical status is of advantage to those accepted as part of the ‘in group’. Members of this in-group are
supported and protected by ‘the boys’ club’ of which they are members, excluding those who are different, non-conformist or resistant. However, there may be sub-cultures within the broader culture, voices of resistance, pockets of collaborative teamwork and even disempowered factions cast out by the current ruling faction.

In the central office of the Education Department, women are segregated both horizontally and vertically with few women in senior and executive management positions and more women in operations, human resources and areas with social justice links (although these links have diminished in recent years as an economic rationalist imperative cuts to the ‘bottom line’, leaving little space for equity and justice). In the school system in general women are more often located at the bottom of the hierarchy, employed as classroom teachers while men still dominate the principalships of schools (primary schools being particularly patriarchal in their makeup with a predominance of female teachers usually led by the few men who have entered the primary system). This then feeds into the central office as appointments are made from schools into administrative positions.

In my review of the literature on women, management and organisations (Chapter 2), I confirmed that organisational leadership is still dominated by men, that education bureaucracies perpetuate these male hierarchies, and that the normalisation of male language, culture and management styles continues to advantage men and disadvantage women. In a critique of university cultures which echoes the literature on organisational culture, Currie, Thiele and Harris (2002) conclude:

The most valued activities … are those that reflect male patterns of socialisation: individualist rather than collective, competitive rather than cooperative, based on power differentials rather than egalitarian, and linked to expert authority rather than collegial support. (p. 1)

They add that the rapidly growing influence of globalisation and accompanying neo-liberal discourses during the nineties and into the new millennium has meant that traditionally masculinist cultures have taken on a managerial ethos which is even more competitive, aggressive and entrepreneurial.

**Deconstructing the glass ceiling**

The glass ceiling metaphor is useful in describing the invisible barrier that most women continue to knock their heads against when seeking advancement, particularly beyond
low to middle levels of management. However ‘glass walls’ can be even greater impediments to career development than glass ceilings (Lopez cited in Still, 1997). Glass walls are the horizontal barriers in organisations that prevent (mostly) women from moving between functional and support areas into line management positions. Furthermore, ‘sticky floors’ (Laabs, cited in Still, 1997) hold many women in low level, low paying, stereotypical ‘female’ positions so that hitting the glass ceiling becomes a remote possibility. In The End of Equality, Anne Summers (2003) challenges the accuracy of the ‘glass’ metaphor which implies that women can smash through when in fact so very few do. And when they get to the top it ain’t easy! As my thesis confirms, women in leadership often face opposition and resentment rarely directed at a man.

Elizabeth Ramsay (1995) points out that the term ‘glass ceiling’ “hides in a metaphorical abstraction the actual activities and events which constitute that barrier” and “distracts attention from the human agents responsible for that behaviour” (p. 183). She emphasises that the behaviour which men use to exclude, marginalise and undermine women in management should be exposed to public scrutiny, analysis and challenge. For this to occur she recommends managerial women talking to each other and sharing the precise nature of their experiences in an atmosphere of trust and respect, so as to generate words or terms to name and describe these behaviours. Similarly, Morley (1999) talks about the increasingly subtle ways in which dominance is achieved and maintained in institutions. She points to feminist and micropolitical analysis to label elusive yet discriminatory practices. My research attempts to highlight these behaviours through a process of listening, sharing, reflecting and drawing out similarities and contradictions in the stories of women who, through their own management experiences, have explored and questioned the corporate culture.

Greedy institutions; addictive organisations

In this chapter I also want to use two terms, the greedy institution and the addictive organisation (see also Chapter 2) to help describe the corporate culture of the central office of the Education Department within which the research participants worked. These terms seem, in part, to reflect the organisational climate as described by many of the women in my study.

The term, the greedy institution, was used by Lewis Coser in the 1970s to explain the demands placed on monks, Bolshevics and Jesuits by institutions “omnivorous” of their
loyal workers. Similarly he used the greedy institution to describe the demands placed on wives and mothers within the institution of marriage. “He explains that such institutions do not themselves coerce participants into total commitment. Rather, there is something about their nature that attracts voluntary compliance”, loyalty and the total energy of their members (as quoted in Currie et al., 2002, p. 141). This behavioural and psychological involvement, even at great personal cost, is particularly applicable to managers and other salaried employees whose membership obligations are typically open-ended (Ashforth & Mael, 1998, p. 92). Commenting on the private sphere, Weedon (1997) says that a poststructuralist deconstruction of discourses relating to power and powerlessness can help us to understand the appeal of the family, to understand why women so willingly take on the demanding role of wife and mother. Though often subject to male control, the position of wife and mother also offers forms of power, for example, “the power to socialise children, to run the house and to be the power behind the throne” (p. 19). The same could be said for the appeal of organisations where both ‘the powerful’ and ‘the powerless’ have something to gain by remaining loyal to the institution which demands so much from them.

The idea of the greedy institution has been extended by Franzway (2001) to describe trade unions and their demands on their loyal female workers, and by Currie et al. (2000, 2002) to describe the greedy institution of universities. Currie et al. link this to an elite masculinist culture which thrives at and near the top of organisations, pointing out that it is women who are more likely to find difficulty meeting the demands of long hours and sacrifices when they also face the conflicting demands of the family, another greedy institution.

Franzway (2001) explores how we reconcile the contradictory demands from the public and private spheres of our lives, noting that, paradoxically, some of the most greedy institutions are the trade unions which fought for the eight hour day in an effort to humanise working life. Franzway notes that Coser’s concerns have been amplified over the last thirty years with (not so subtle) shifts in the meaning of institutional greed, linked closely to neo-liberal economic reform. Now the ‘greed’ is a demand for ever increasing workloads and for workers’ unbounded time in a new economic climate where lack of long term job security corrodes trust, loyalty and mutual commitment (Sennett cited in Franzway, 2001). Thus, being tied to the institution is a subtle process. Rather than
exerting absolute control of its ‘inmates’ (Goffman cited in Franzway, 2001), the greedy institution relies on the voluntary compliance of its loyal and committed members.

The women in my thesis echo some of these concerns and confirm that there is indeed a tiredness, a sapping of energy, for women in leadership. However, it is not so much work-family conflict that brings about this malaise (although for some it is a contributing factor), as the energy it takes to swim against the tide in an environment antagonistic to the recognition of female talent and ability. In describing why they left, the women talk about the educational bureaucracy and a corporate culture that ‘uses’ female talents, dedication and loyalty to get the work done, to further advantage the privileged few. They talk about a conflict of values, their desire to make a difference, to do things differently, and to reject alien institutional values: values that support careerism and self-promotion in favour of a concern for education and human lives.

The arguments inherent in the concept of the greedy institution and associated voluntary compliance are similar to those outlined in the literature on addiction. These arguments explain the cover-up and protection behaviours of codependents – partners and children of alcoholics, gamblers and other addicts (Mellody, Miller & Miller, 1989; Stafford & Hodgkinson, 1991). The term addictive is extended to encompass organisations by Anne Wilson Schaef and Diane Fassel (1988) who describe “why we overwork, cover up, pick up the pieces, please the boss and perpetuate sick organisations” (cover). According to Schaef and Fassel, loyalty to an organisation can become a ‘fix’ when individuals become preoccupied with maintaining the organisation, out of touch with their own personal morality and often completely burned out by their work. Loyalty to the organisation becomes a substitute for living one’s own life. In short, the addictive organisation repeats patterns of dysfunction such as addiction, control, and codependence leading to excessive loyalty, cover-up and workaholism. “Often, persons who come from dysfunctional families find their organisations repeating the same patterns they learned in their families. Even though these patterns feel familiar, they do not feel healthy” (p. 1).

Schaef and Fassel (1988) explore “how the structure and functions of addictive organisations tend to perpetuate and patch up problems instead of facing and solving them” (p. 8). They explore the problems created when a manager or a key person is an active addict; when many nonrecovering and codependent employees are inevitably replicating their dysfunctional family systems in the workplace; when the organisation becomes the central (addictive) force in employees’ lives; and when the organisation
itself is exhibiting processes and behaviours common to individual addicts. Schaef and Fassel describe the characteristics of addiction in organisations “as evidenced in dysfunctional communication, gossip, fear, isolation, dishonesty, suppressed feelings, sabotage, projection, disrespect, confusion, control, denial, forgetfulness, self-centredness, dualism, grandiosity, and planning as a form of control” (p. 8). In their work with many church organisations they made a link between martyrdom and workaholism: “The good martyr is the typical codependent who works selflessly for others and never attends to his or her own needs” (p. 135). They also recognise the altered state or adrenalin high which can come from immersion in work, leading to feelings of transcendence which they claim can lead to neglect of life outside work and a loss of spirituality.

Jean Lipman-Bluman (1994) asks what it is about the human condition that propels people, either individually or in groups, to enter into power relationships, in either a dominant or subordinate position. She asks, “And why, despite their genuine distress and protestations, do both the powerful and the powerless perpetuate these or substitute analogous relationships?” (pp. 114-115). She talks about the costs and benefits for the less powerful. The cost is compliance with those who occupy the dominant position in the power balance. This compliance is governed by rules and rituals which may be simultaneously painful and reassuring, as in a marriage relationship or the church. Lipman-Bluman explains that a sense of predictability and security for the less powerful can be reassuring (the benefits) but warns that even rigorous adherence to the prescribed behaviour and beliefs of the powerful cannot guarantee lasting security (Lipman-Bluman, 1994).

The images of the greedy institution, the addictive organisation and dedicated loyal workers, willing to sacrifice all for the institution, resonate with some of the interviewee comments recorded below. These women questioned the bureaucratic rules and rituals and the need to play the organisational games in order to ‘get on’. They eventually chose to leave what some described as a dysfunctional or ‘sick’ organisation; an organisation governed by the hegemonic discourse of patriarchal management practices; an
organisation dominated by those (mainly privileged men) unwilling to change the patterns of the past and resistant to those who questioned it.

The frustrations of bureaucracy

The central office of the Education Department is the bureaucratic centre governing public schools across the state (in metropolitan, country and remote locations). Although a policy of self-governing schools was introduced in the late '80s (Better Schools, 1987), schools remain accountable to the centre in terms of finance, performance measurement, curriculum and policy implementation. Senior and executive management positions in central office are mostly held by men (see statistics, Chapter 3) and it is within this masculinist, hierarchical and bureaucratic environment that the stories of the research participants are located. Furthermore, there are increasing mechanisms of governance, commonly justified by the rhetoric of accountability or economic efficiency, which keep workers and teachers compliant to the existing structures and standards and unable to effect pragmatic adjustments to a complex and changing world. Many women are uncomfortable operating in abstracted ‘objective’ structures, preferring to deal with situated judgments involving interpersonal relations rather than logical principles (Gilligan, 1982) and generally find that relationally centred operating styles are not favoured in male-dominated bureaucracies like the Education Department.

All but two of the women nominated the corporate environment with its dominant masculinist culture as a major barrier to their progress and an important contributing factor in their decision to leave. The two exceptions were senior executives who acknowledged the masculine tradition, one referring particularly to her decision to remain single so as to avoid past structural barriers to career progress, but neither ascribed their decisions to leave to any form of gender discrimination. However the majority of the women felt alienated from the corporate culture due to its hierarchical nature, masculine dominance and processes of “homosocial reproduction” (Kanter, 1977). Added concerns were located within the bureaucratic context: the rule dependent behaviour, conformity, lack of risk taking or openness to new ideas, political game playing, the existence of factions, and women’s exclusion from influential networks. And all but one expressed frustration with a culture that seemed to value individualism and careerism over the educational endeavour.
W1 saw two distinctly different elements to the culture of the Education Department; one the culture of committed teachers in schools and the other the dominant male culture common to management, particularly in central office. She describes the point where women are confronted by the culture and how it works against them:

There are probably two elements I’d like to comment on about the culture. My experience of teachers, by and large, is of very committed, passionate, professional sort of people. They care about their kids, they work incredibly long hours, they get a lot out of their jobs, they do a really tough job for a long period of time … that’s one thing that characterises the culture for me.

Then there’s another completely different part of the culture and that is a male culture. The culture in central office that is really negative and crushing and I think the reason a lot of women leave. You only experience this … you get to a point and you come smack bang up against it and that is that really male competitive anti-intellectual, anti-women, anti-all those good things that I described about teachers – passion and collegiality and people skills and probably all those feminine things in many ways – the culture is really antithetical to that … Very rule dependent … it’s hard to generalise because it’s a huge organisation – it usually relates to people in leadership positions – so it’s not a consistent culture across the organisation.

Here W1 seems to be referring to the peak masculinist culture described by Currie, et al. (2002) as operating at the top of university hierarchies and benefiting those (mainly men) in positions of power and privilege. It is a culture that values managerialism over people skills, devaluing things linked to the feminine. W7 described the central office environment of the Education Department as very hierarchical, unhealthy and dysfunctional, referring to the concept of the ‘addictive organisation’:

I had known for some time that it was an unhealthy environment for me personally and that, generally speaking, the central office environment was pretty dysfunctional. I read that book by Anne Wilson Schaef and Diane Fassel – I think it’s on ‘addictive organisations’ – and I concluded that it met the criteria.

W12 was concerned about the controlling culture of central office and could not understand the mismatch between the rhetoric of good education and poor people management practices. Her concern for good people management was representative of the sample, a theme described in more detail in Chapter 7.

I don’t know where the power of control comes from and I guess that was another reason for my leaving because I couldn’t get a handle on it. You couldn’t influence it or change it. It’s just very mysterious … In an industry that’s got to be people-based and is about people, people management doesn’t rate at the end of the day.

She decided it did not represent the things that she valued:
The corporate culture is not about collegiality, it’s not about collaboration, it’s not about risk taking, it’s not about working together to improve the quality of education. Which is a bit scary really when you make a grand statement like that.

W21 also discussed the mismatch between management and ‘the educational endeavour’. She was particularly concerned about the competitive self-serving environment, factionalism and a lack of collaborative effort or shared vision. She attributed this competitive environment to both a lack of direction from the top and a long history of divisional teams:

So the culture of central office is not a sharing one, not a collaborative one, not a culture that is focused on the entire education endeavour. It is basically about saying, “My little bit is the most important bit”. I see the mini sections in central office as being locked in competition for the market share of schools’ attention. People from central office go out to schools and say, “Pick me!” Within central office there is an absolute expectation, if you are working within a team, that your line manager will be locked in rivalry with the other line managers and that this rivalry goes all the way up to the executive. And that one executive director will be dismissive of another and so people knew – expected – that they would have to be loyal to their particular executive director, rather than to the educational enterprise that we all should be engaged in.

I think that it is a two-way creation. It’s not just the fact that executive directors in the past were not helped, driven, impelled, by Director General leadership to work together. It was also that the people in divisional teams, because they expected that there would be division, were amongst the first to find it and encourage it … I tried hard to work in a much more collaborative way. I think also that X21 [a male colleague with a more collaborative focus] tried hard too and one of the things we were talking about was shared accountability for things so that several executive directors would have a shared vision.

Like W12 and W21, many of the interviewees commented on aspects of the culture that conflicted with their own values. The following montage of responses indicates that many defined success in terms of connectedness to others.

[Successful management is] having the ability to communicate; support, encourage and recognise efforts of the team; believing that everyone has strengths and something to contribute; valuing the worth of others; facilitating and supporting others; leading people through the implementation of change; involving people in change and achieving results; channelling individual and sectional interests to common corporate goals; being able to see the big picture and make it happen; developing ideas, problem solving, exploring …

Yet they saw the typical ‘successful’ manager in the central bureaucracy as self-interested, aggressive and competitive:

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21 Forthwith X denotes any anonymous male; Y denotes any anonymous female.
Fairly overt ... rapacious, self-interested and pretty aggressive, competitive, wipe out anything that stands in the way, trample on anything that gets in the way. But I think that’s pretty shallow and short-term kind of success and that’s not how I define success ... but they would see themselves as being incredibly successful. W1

Thus, understandings of professionalism and good management, at variance with the dominant culture, caused much dissatisfaction among the interviewees. As pointed out by Blackmore & Sachs (2000), there are growing tensions arising out of new regimes of strategic management (corporatisation, marketisation and managerialism) that assume different understandings about what it is to act professionally. ‘Being professional’ in a bureaucratic, technical sense can be quite different from ‘being a professional’ in an education sense, linked to an understanding of what it is to be a good manager (Blackmore & Sachs, 2000). Professional identity can be under threat and personal values transgressed in work environments that are competitive and individualistic, at odds with (feminist) discourses linked to advocacy, support and equity.

The women who had been marginalised and sidelined as a result of a restructure (see Chapter 8) were concerned about the lack of honesty in the process, at the silence surrounding their displacement. The issues of value and trust were raised repeatedly:

[The organisation] does not value the people who work for it either individually or as a group. It seems incapable of doing so. One of the ways you measure value is if you are trusted and where there’s no trust there’s no value. It’s almost a textbook case on what not to do. I mean, I have read human resource magazines and books and it [the Education Department] is always my benchmark of awfulness, if you like. W7

According to Schaef and Fassel (1988), communication in addictive organisations is used to establish and maintain power bases in the service of the ego; change is introduced for the sake of change; and manipulation and intimidation are common practices. The women in my thesis were frustrated with the dominant culture within the central bureaucracy and as the dysfunctionalism became more and more apparent, they decided to leave. Nearly 50% left to establish their own small businesses or consultancies where they felt that they could be more influential in determining the culture of the organisation while others joined organisations that were more attuned to their beliefs and values.

A masculinist culture

“Education management, like management elsewhere, is largely done by men, and is therefore defined by men ... [and] preoccupied with practices more likely to be
experienced and valued by men” (Ozga, 1993, pp. 2-3). Women feel exploited in a culture that rewards those playing the game, with rules and practices set up by men, for men. Many questioned the productivity of highly visible senior managers. W3 spoke about the bureaucracy as ‘masculinist’, committed to the status quo and concerned more with ritual than getting the job done:

I guess the Education Department sees its archetypal successful person as someone who is fifty-five, in a senior position, wears a suit, has a great deal of authority, is not committed to change, is committed to stable process and is a low key, laid back, responsible, mature, quiet person [each word stressed] … very skilled at the bureaucratic game, which means you can’t actually do anything because a bureaucracy is a big organisation.

I’d say masculinist … a bureaucracy is an entity that has its own personality that’s very male oriented, very hierarchical, very committed to the status quo. The form and ritual is important – things like – if you’re sincere, you have to be there all the time. You mustn’t do anything, mind you.

Jill Blackmore (1999) explores the masculinist culture in educational administration and focuses attention on the advantage for men within such cultures. She cites the work of Cynthia Cockburn (1991) which draws our attention to the investment most men have in maintaining existing gender relations: “They generate institutional impediments to stall women’s advancement in organisations. At a cultural level they foster solidarity between men and sexualise, threaten, marginalise, control and divide women” (Blackmore, 1999, p. 128). Amanda Sinclair (1995) refers to the exclusivity of the Australian executive culture and the silence surrounding its ongoing dominance and elements of resistance to women. Similarly Schaef and Fassel (1988) claim that the white, patriarchal male system is destructive and continues to exist because we all cooperate with it and that even our thought patterns are in the language of the male system that rewards lies, secrets and silences on the part of women. The silence means that the advantage for men is never openly discussed:

Although the men in management knew the boys’ club was at work – they select, coach and protect the person they want for the job – they couldn’t believe that I would confront the issues. On the surface there was a pretence that everything was OK but when I took the issues to Equal Opportunity they were talking about me behind my back. I would have much preferred to have the arguments out in the open. They were scared their game playing would be revealed and they knew most women wouldn’t, or couldn’t, speak out for fear of losing their jobs or eliminating any future chances of promotion. W13

In response to my request for elaboration, some of the women expressed their alienation from the culture metaphorically:
For me it was a bit like a dying marriage … if you know what I mean by that? There is some good stuff still there but there is day by day atrophy … sticky bits that are holding you there but … moving on. W1

In terms of a metaphor I’ve always seen the Department, central office in particular, as trying to navigate shark-infested waters [laughter]. I’ve always seen myself as trying to steer the ‘good ship curriculum’ or the ‘good ship human resources’ or whatever … I envisage … one hand on the wheel and trying to look ahead so I don’t crash into any rocks … but also conscious of behind there are some people on the deck of the boat. There are also some people on the raft that’s got a few strings coming apart and tenuously held on by rope to the good ship. There’s a few people left on the desert island back when, and there’s a few in the water with the sharks circling. I’m on deck – one hand on the wheel and one hand … holding the ropes. W1

A metaphor – looking into ‘Silver City’ – seeing your reflection on the outside, but once inside you have disappeared. One teacher said to me, “As a young teacher entering teaching you turn from a young person to 40 years old on entering the staff room.” W4

The two women who did not cite the masculinist culture as a major reason for leaving were both in senior executive positions22. W2 explained that although past structural barriers had prevented her from pursuing her desired career path, the barriers had since been removed and she was now free to follow that path, albeit outside of the Education Department. However she was sympathetic to the difficulties faced by women in a system where merit was traditionally assessed on line management experience (typically in country postings and ‘coming up through the ranks’) as she personally had made deliberate gender influenced choices to advance her career. As her words indicate she was very aware of the potential difficulties for girls, both in their years of schooling and beyond:

Let me say first up that I didn’t leave through any dissatisfaction, so that might be interesting for you. I left because I have never had the opportunity to be the principal of the school because when I was coming through in my career women were not able to apply for a principalship …

[I left because] the opportunity was there, I could see, I’d got progressively more interested over the last eight years or more about how do you enhance education for girls, how do you stop able girls just being passive receivers of schooling. I was seeing that in co-ed classrooms time and time again; I got really interested in how girls learn and all of the stuff relating to that … [also] believing that the principal is the key person who’s going to make a difference.

22 As the most senior women in my sample it is quite possible that the power and influence attached to their positions lessened the impact of gender discrimination, at least in its more overt forms.
In addition, because her career had been very much dedicated to making a difference for children in schools she had become increasingly disillusioned with what she termed the politicisation of bureaucracies:

Yes it was not without its frustration, now that was not unique to the Education Department by any means, it was across most agencies and across Australia, it was just that politicisation process. But for me, for whom contact with schools, accurate information, trying to really understand what it was like there, was so important – to convey that to the government of the day … frustrating.

Her dedication shone through as she said with passion: “Oh! Look! The authority, the power, the pay, the status are nothing to me and they never have been, [they] just don’t count at all!” Despite her denial that gender influenced her decision to leave, W2 did however acknowledge the influence of the boys’ club and the cloning effect which resulted from male managers sponsoring young males in their own image. She said that it was a culture that had grown up through an almost exclusively male history and that as a woman planning a career in management she was an exception to the rule. She noted that it was through Affirmative Action that things began to change:

… When women [eventually] started to be appointed, I’m quite convinced, they were the token women at the start, because it was a government requirement that women be appointed.

W20 held a completely different view, absolutely denying any influence of gender. Her story differed significantly to the accounts of the other women in the study. By the time she came to the Education Department women had been infiltrating leadership positions for more than ten years so her appointment, although unusual, was not groundbreaking. She came to the system as an experienced executive manager, with a career ranging through the public service and education sectors. Her views seemed to fit with the current managerialist and corporate approach to management. W20 felt that she had been able to pursue a structured career path of her own planning, in contrast to many women in the sample who stated that they had not planned their careers but taken opportunities as they arose. Her experience in the Education Department came a number of years after that of W2 and her different perspective was evident, reflecting the more rational, economic and political approach to education that developed as the ’90s progressed. When questioned on organisational culture, her views were different and definite: leaders could create the culture through choosing the team they wanted.

The broad answer is that it doesn’t matter what the culture was – culture is determined by behaviour and if you put a team in place which has high expectations
of outcomes and good behaviour, then the culture will follow. I think that people can sit back and wank on too much about culture saying, “Isn’t it hard?” and “How can we change this?” instead of saying, “Culture is just behaviour”. Choose your teams appropriately and the right behaviour will follow.

The important thing within an organisation is to treat people with respect. Stuff probably went on that I didn’t have a clue about, but I wasn’t there to delve down into fine detail. I had a big agenda to run for [the government] and I was given three years to do that and to get that right. I had to have the right people in place and make sure that they knew exactly what was expected of them in a performance based contract, and then get on and do it.

She was not concerned about shedding staff to make way for her selected team – just get rid of them – reshuffle, recruit new people, according to a ‘rule of thumb’ numerical formula to make the new team:

I never go into a job unless I am quite clear that I can recruit my own team … that’s all part of the planning you have to do before you move into a senior job … I think any [senior/chief executive] worth their salt doesn’t whinge about “Look I’ve inherited this lousy mob therefore I can’t do my job”. You get rid of them, you reshuffle, you recruit new people. I have always had a rule of thumb that when I move into an organisation I look at people policies and resources (budget) and the team of people. You try to keep a third of them, try to recruit a third from outside and try to recruit a third from elsewhere in the organisation; find people who haven’t had a go.

When asked if the shedding of people was a difficult process she responded that appropriate government processes absolved any difficulty. Just do it.

No there is no reason why it should be difficult because every government has a process for redundancy and restructuring. So you just go and do it.

W20 seemed to have less personal investment in the job than the other interviewees. Perhaps this is linked to the new style of leadership where a senior executive can be hired from interstate or overseas, come in, do a job for two or three years and move on. While usually a masculine model, perhaps there is a new wave of women willing to accept the challenges of such an appointment. However this thesis suggests that many women find such a hard line difficult to follow and that when attempting to operate in a more masculinist style are likely to feel at odds with their own values, which are more likely to be relationally and connectively driven (Fletcher, 1999; Eveline, 2001). “Indeed, one of the reasons why women are said to leave large organisations is that they have little choice but to conform to a well-established model of leadership” (Sinclair, 1998, p. 111 citing a study by Pringle; see also Marshall, 1995b; Stuart & Barerra, 1996; Moore & Buttner, 1997) in the masculinist tradition.
The hierarchy

A masculinist, hierarchical culture is competitive, with an emphasis on positional power, status and climbing the career ladder of ‘success’. Yet despite the male hegemony the gender lines are blurred, with some women joining the procession.

I was certainly very conscious of the male hierarchy in the Department generally … there was no getting away from that, and there was no getting away from what meetings that were run largely by men were like, and all of that stuff that has been written about in terms of masculinity and bureaucracies – male oriented organisations. It’s a masculine world, it’s a world of people climbing upwards and having their career in front of them first, but you know it’s not just a male tendency. I think we have to be realistic and realise that there are women who behave that way too. W5

It was in the interview discussions of bureaucracy, hierarchy and the corporate culture that the underlying theme of a politics of power emerged. This theme was articulated forthrightly by one interviewee who felt that her career with the Department had been highly political, influenced by both her gender and her race. She summed up the culture of central office in terms of power, control and male domination. She also referred to the female manager’s double bind as described by Jamieson (1995):

Central office is what I call the ‘den of iniquity’. I’ve always said that I would write a book called Silver City. Everyone runs because I mention that. Central office is like the control centre of the Department. It is a den of iniquity because it is about politics and about power. It’s very male dominated and the women who go into central office either have to act tough like the men or act compliant and play the stereotypic role of women … so either way they are controlled by the men. Because the women who become like men won’t do all the dirty jobs that the guys won’t do they get run down like you wouldn’t believe. The other group wants to be accepted by the men so they basically do what the men want them to do … W18

Many of the women recalled, not without humour and a touch of cynicism, the delineations of the hierarchy. There were offices on the top floor, offices with windows and offices with pot plants. As explained by Collinson & Hearn (1996), there are many signs that can simultaneously signify the power of both ‘manager’ and men, such as the size and position of personal offices, the office furniture and displays of artwork, pot plants or technical equipment.

… it was very much a hierarchy, [about] status. Did you have a parking space, did you have a big desk or a small desk, did you have a window? They were issues [for the men], whereas for us, they weren’t an issue … and you had to bow and scrape to whomever was in the line. W10
Eleven of the 21 women interviewed stated that their area was seen as marginal due to links with equity, social justice, human resources or training. Although they believed passionately in the value of their work, they also believed they were isolated because of their marginalised staff positions. According to Bellamy and Ramsay (1994), this concentration of women in functions outside the central decision-making, or core, of the organisation can result in further marginalisation and plateauing of a woman’s career. Isolation from organisational career structures and organisational power groups was identified as a major barrier to progress by Kanter in the ’70s and Powell and Still in the late ’80s (Powell, 1990; Still & Guerin, 1987). The placement of women in these positions frequently results in stereotypical preconceptions concerning the skills and competencies of women. In particular they are often seen as unsuitable for the more prestigious (in the male view) line positions. Bellamy and Ramsay highlight the dilemma:

Being marginal is to be in a position of not being clearly rejected, but not fully accepted. DiTomaso, Thompson and Blake (1988) showed that women are often marginalised by being assigned staff positions where they get stuck, unlike fast track men who stay in positions temporarily for wider experience. (p. 43)

W5 commented on the marginality of the social justice area, housed in the basement with no windows:

Certainly the Social Justice area was always very heavily populated with women … They’re the areas that are always problematic when it comes to funding; they’re the areas that generally are not the path to promotion for people; they’re just not the areas that you get the prominence in. They’re not the big flag waving ones. It wasn’t only by accident that Social Justice was the area that was on the basement floor in this huge area with no windows. I mean it was sidelined as an area.

The hierarchical nature of central office had an impact on W9’s ability to get things done:

I found too, towards the last two to three years of my working there, the line management increased. I know they kept talking about flatter structures and everything like that. I believe the line management now is far more hierarchical than it was twelve years ago. By the time I left there were four [line managers] who were all good people, but instead of having to deal with one person to get a decision, you had to wait for it to go up and back down the line.

W11 found that the lack of support for project officers was an issue linked to the value placed on this type of work which was mostly carried out by women. The responsibilities in leading a project were high yet the recognition (and status) within the hierarchy was low:

The support whilst doing the contracts – I think it was non-existent really. I felt like I was sitting alone at a desk with a candle, working away … I felt that there was a
Questioning the corporate culture

culture, a sort of sexist behaviour, we’re all boys and lads together. I had the
smallest desk in the area, the smallest desk in a very public prominent place. The
working conditions were appalling. I had no PC; it wasn’t made clear if I had any
administrative support. In fact, I didn’t for quite a while although I was executive
officer to a very high level committee … I used to work very long hours … I just
felt the conditions I was working in were unacceptable. Eventually I told the
committee that.

Unwritten rules and bureaucratic games

Many of the women commented that the culture was very rule dependent. W14 referred
to the unwritten rules, the codes and the reluctance to admit to unjust practices. This was
an observation supported by many other women in the study:

Unwritten rules … I think men have that encoded in their socialisation as boys –
don’t mix with losers, don’t nurture, all that kind of stuff. The language! I had a
male professional assistant at one stage, and he said, “W14 we’ve got to be one out
and one back” and I didn’t have a clue what he was talking about. He was actually
talking about a race metaphor being one out, one back. The unwritten rules are
things like ‘competition is good’; ‘cooperation is weakness’. Changing previous
injustice … unjust type decisions, and coming to a win/win situation instead of
going to the Equal Opportunities Commission is seen as like a heinous crime …
basically don’t ever reverse your decisions.

Others talked about bureaucratic games and the unwritten rule that you had to be seen
working, and working long hours. The theme of ‘being there’ emerged again and again.
Reports of working like a lunatic tied to the desk evoke images of the greedy institution
and the addictive organisation. Moreover, a culture of overwork and ‘presenteeism’
(Morley, 1999; Cooper cited in Saunders, 1996) can work in favour of men who have
fewer family commitments and the comfort and camaraderie of the boys’ club to sustain
them at work.

Theoretically in the bureaucracy you could do [the work] at home if you wanted to.
But you would be foolish to because being seen in the corridors, being seen slaving
over your desk, is important and I don’t think you can separate those perceptions
from the reality … I just knew that if I wasn’t there, it didn’t pay off for me. It
wasn’t enough to work like a lunatic. I had to be there; I had to work like a lunatic
and be there. A lot of the things that hold the Education Department together are
bureaucratic games. And [being seen] is just a bureaucratic game that’s part of the
culture. You’d have to give that organisation a heart transplant for that not to work.
W3

You’ve got to be there … if you’re really committed to the organisation. Even if
you’re on leave you’ll come to work, and if your name wasn’t in the book for
coming in over the weekend, what are you? The hours were big … you had to be
there. It’s such an old fashioned view of the work place and based on the power and
control thing: “You can only be legitimately working if I can see you here in the
office and your commitment to me is going to be shown by how long you flog
yourself at that desk.” W6
Whilst jobs often made excessive demands on time flexibility in return was difficult to find. One senior manager found that her request to attend a conference, which would contribute significantly to her career development, was denied. Trust was an underlying issue, linked to power and control, as was the greedy institution and its dependence on a huge output from loyal and capable (female) workers:

I found that because of the pressures of the job, and they were enormous – the workplace was huge, we never had enough staff – it was an absolutely outrageous workload that I had to do. I had no time for attending the odd development course or seminar, I had no time for that in the whole time I was there which I found very frustrating.

… I decided I wanted to go to a conference in the USA – a really relevant conference. I put up a proposal that I take leave, my own time, to go off on this course. I was going to pay my own airfares and all I wanted was for the conference fee to be paid and it was rejected. I was just outraged. I could not believe it! Here I was in such a senior position, not asking for airfares and junket trips, just a conference … I just found it staggering because this was an Education Department for God’s sake! The reason they did not want me to go was that they became so dependent on individuals and the work – the excessive work load of those individuals – that they couldn’t bear to think I wasn’t going to be there for a couple of weeks. W6

W12, who managed projects, found the workload quite acceptable. But, like W6, she felt there was a lack of trust in how she managed her time. The desire to be trusted as a self-managing employee was a common and recurring theme:

… the workload was not an issue; what was an issue for me was being accountable for the use of your own time. So the guilt of having to whip off to a doctor’s appointment during the day … you made up the hours [even though] you did your weeks away on PD. I was confident in my own mind that I was being fair to the organisation, but always the questions, “Where are you going?” Lack of trust about how you worked your time and what you did with the time. You had to be there ‘at work’ to be working, which is a silly notion.

W1 summarised the dynamics of a work environment where the processes became an end in themselves. The constraints that a rule bound culture places on actually making things happen can be comfortable for some and extremely frustrating for others. This phenomenon is explained by Merton (cited in Kanter 1977) as an overconformity to the rules and ritual in bureaucratic organisations (characteristic of the ‘bureaucratic personality’) which foster dependency and lack of action through graded careers stressing seniority through relatively small incremental advances. Substituting the means (the rules, the forms, the procedures) for the ends (goals, purposes, underlying rationales) is a response to a sense of powerlessness engendered through such bureaucratic structures.

“The behavioural responses of powerless ‘leaders’ to their situations … in controlling
behaviour, rules-mindedness, and territoriality” (Kanter, 1977, p. 195) can be frustrating for those who choose not to play the game. In the following quote the theme of self-serving individualism emerged again with an expressed regret at the lack of value placed on the educational purpose of the organisation.

… a careful, conservative type culture … I suppose they’re kind words. You can get to a point where the regulations and the procedures, and the acts and the regs. that come from that, and the procedures that come from that, and the policies that come from that, and the government position that comes from the other … that can become very constraining. It can also, in some people’s minds, become an end in itself and therein lies a worry. I guess that also colours the culture, and a way of operating, and the sort of people who feel success operating in that type of way. It can be very distancing from the dynamics of educational experience.

Gatekeeping: Exclusion from influential networks

Traditionally men have controlled the highest administrative jobs in education. Control has been maintained by limiting change and by repeating past patterns. Hill and Ragland (1995) look at the historical barriers to women holding leadership positions and quote Marshall and Mitchell who state that:

The ‘system’ fostered selection of new administrators who resembled their sponsors in attitude, philosophy, deed, and, in many cases, appearance, hobbies, church affiliation, and club memberships. In addition, successors were expected to mirror tightly defined concepts of administrative competency. Such a selection process resulted in the new mimicking the old down to nuances of behaviour. (p. 10)

Hill and Ragland (1995) talk about men as ‘gatekeepers’ and the power of male networks in the job selection process. They explain that women are not usually privy to decisions made outside the work setting, such as those made on the golf course or over drinks after work. Women are rarely considered when men in positions of power not only frequently decide finalists for other positions, but also quite often determine their own successors:

With men dominating gatekeeping, deals are often made and agreements cut before many women know positions are available … What usually happens is that selected ‘golden boys’ or ‘young turks’ are carefully positioned on the ‘right’ … committee with the right people. They then are groomed to meet demands and specifications that they will meet further along in their career … Often women have been denied these experiences … (pp. 11-12)

The women I interviewed revealed similar concerns, citing their exclusion from influential male networks as contributing to their sense of isolation and limiting their career prospects. As they moved through the ranks resistance took on more subtle forms. Feelings of being in the spotlight were real for the lone female at senior management
level (Bellamy & Ramsay, 1994). The sense of being the lone female intensified when decisions were obviously made in the ‘meeting outside the meeting’ to which they had not been invited. “Often issues were caucused and decided upon by key (male) members prior to meetings” (Blackmore, 1999, p. 134). Fiona Kautril, (quoted in Stevens, 2000), Director of Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency, says breaching the barriers of informal male networks is a priority as such networks remain bastions of long-practised exclusion. Like many of the women I interviewed, her experience is that decisions are already made prior to the commencement of the formal meeting.

The meeting before the meeting

As noted above, informal decision-making in men only forums often occurs before the formal meeting which then becomes mere window dressing for decisions that have already been made. W7 explained how she was made to feel irrelevant to the decision-making process:

Even though you might have had a position of some authority it was almost like window dressing, nobody took it seriously; there was just this sense that you were almost irrelevant in those forums.

Although she was at executive management level and included in most of the formal decision-making, W6 knew that she was excluded from the informal discussions:

I was excluded – certainly from informal decision-making processes. I was present at most of the formal decision-making … you’re always conscious of … other discussions going on that you were not a party to … They used to play cards – a bunch of guys who would regularly have card nights apparently – and it took me a while to know what was going on and various deals were done … They’re very into that sort of stuff.

W21, also in executive management, albeit a number of years later, saw it as overwhelming gender discrimination and was laughing in frustration when she said:

There was a fairly regular informal meeting that pretty much happened in the evenings after I had gone home. When I went home at 5.00 it was seen as running out of puff, seen as not very good; when I went home at 6.00 it was seen as not very good either, because that was when the real business of the day was going on (between 6.00 and 7.00). I’ve got to say, had I stayed on until 7.00 the real business would have been done between 7.00 and 8.00!

So in the formal meeting it’s all over. Absolutely, pre-decided and announced rather than available for discussion … And there were things that were not even announced as being decided – they simply happened! [humour]. And so you had to think to yourself, “Am I going to make a fuss about this?”
W12 felt that the meetings were status based, exclusive, premeditated and pointless. She was a valued member of working parties but not selected for the important strategic management groups:

… it’s a cultural thing. You have status-based meetings; you don’t have people with the right expertise type meetings. Quite often you’d be pretty sure that things were stitched up before the meeting happened, and the right people were asked to the meeting to reinforce the view that needed to be reinforced. Lots of suits at those meetings, not very many colourful frocks! And again, I was asked to be on heaps and heaps of working parties; [I was a] valued member of working parties but perhaps didn’t quite have the experience or expertise to be on some of these more strategic groups [irony]. Doing the work … proven experience in the area … really didn’t matter at the end of the day.

… when you haven’t got a critical mass of women or a critical mass of people who think differently, when you don’t have meetings that encourage debate, when it’s a pre-determined case … why have the meeting? Do away with meetings. Stop the rubbish.

W16 described how a new line manager (who wanted to create his own team and was keen to eliminate employees with a history of experience in central office) held meetings which had degenerated to a forum for lower level trivial decision-making. This strategy seemed to be linked to networks which operated outside the formal meetings.

Well a lot of that [exclusion] is not overt. But certainly there was … the network that they had. So they would find out information, and information of course … knowing new information is regarded as very powerful. So you’d have to find out another way or you wouldn’t be told. It wasn’t passed on.

But of course at that stage, in the years before I left, a lot of those sorts of meetings [information sharing where contributions are valued] simply weren’t being held. You weren’t having meetings to discuss things … if you had a meeting it was to talk about whose turn it was to do morning tea or something like that. That high level stuff was missing; your opportunities for that sort of discussion were actually gone … I suggested at one stage that we start having them [meetings for idea sharing and debate], but [the manager] told me there was no need to. When you come under somebody who has his view, doesn’t want to know your view, and basically doesn’t have that [management ability] … [frustration].

I felt that the previous two people I worked for, both the manager and the director, valued your contribution … you contributed not what you thought the people wanted to hear; you gave honest advice … your contribution was valued no matter what you did really … it was always included. But when you’re submitting to somebody who doesn’t work like that, then you think, “I might as well leave”.

Withholding information

Withholding information is a strategy aimed at disempowerment for those outside the power group. The tactics are subtle, yet obvious to the women who can ‘see’ what is going on. W12 explained the tactics of exclusion, often disguised as mateship banter (and
therefore difficult to expose), and saw them as an indicator of an unhealthy working environment:

… the indicators for me would be a tightening up of access to information. A forgetting to tell you when important meetings were on. So all those subtle things that undermine your credibility … the exclusion from information I count as exclusion from strategic decision-making processes.

I go back to the image of the locker room cabal … all jocular, funny, ho, ho, ho, but very exclusionary to women. They could like you on a personal level, but on a strategic level, or if the discussion got sensitive, you’d be physically closed out. The withholding of information and the lack of sharing of information I think is critical and a really strong indicator that that is not a healthy environment. The covert and inconsistent ways decisions were made could not lead you to have any confidence in the decision-making structure. And yes, I guess I was just confident enough by then that I said no, I don’t want to be part of it, I can actually do without this. I don’t want to have to continually try and change it any more.

She was tired of the games but learnt that for women to survive in a male dominated culture they must be strategic:

… I got smarter about saying, “I’m happy to come to that meeting and speak on that issue. When is the meeting?” So [my strategy was to] take back the control on what I was doing and how I was doing it. Mind you, in the training and development that I conduct now, I tell people to be strategic. Align your people; lobby your people before a meeting.

Being heard

Other women found that the men just wanted to be heard and endless point scoring prevented any real decisions from being made. Meetings became mere instruments for being noticed and in the process women became invisible:

I certainly was aware of men being more prominent in meetings just because of their numbers but also because they were heard more in the meetings that I went to. W5

So I found [an] obviously highly intelligent, articulate group of people in senior management positions. But in meetings what I saw was just endless discussion and debate and point scoring cleverness, and very little capacity to be decisive. And that has the effect of making you feel suspended like everybody’s absolving themselves of any responsibility for anything. People were not strong on management and decision-making. W7

If I’ve got something I really believe I want to say, I say it. But if I don’t, I can’t take up air space. I can’t just take up air time like some people do in meetings … I get frustrated with that. It’s a combination of being a woman and the way I operate, that I felt at times I’d been dismissed … because you didn’t always speak up, because you just didn’t talk for the sake of talking, you weren’t seen to be as important or as impressive as people who did. Very often it was the men who did that … some people just talked for the sake of talking. Because that’s the culture
The dominant male voice is normalised in both the public and private space. Historically women were socialised to defer to men; teachers give more time, attention and praise to boys (Spender, 1989; Walkerdine, 1994). Men expect to be heard, dominant males are heard over males of lesser status, and all males benefit from the ‘patriarchal dividend’ (Connell, 1995), the advantage they gain simply by being men. Moreover, many women decide that ‘talking to be heard’ – to dominate – rather than having something worthwhile to contribute, is not a game they want to play.

The boys’ club

Many feminist researchers have written about the pervasive influence of the boys’ club, the metaphorical centrepoint for informal networks and a training ground for young lads coming up through the ranks. The participants in my research spoke of men bonding over after-work drinks, card nights, shared sporting interests and a shared early career history in country schools. For example:

He [a senior executive] was from the old school, he was brought in to consolidate – he’s part of the old boys’ network. There are strong links in [this state]; it’s a small state [in that sense]. In education people went to school together, teachers’ college together, played sport together … W15

Like many of the women, W11 talked about the boys’ club culture, linking it to conservatism and (school) rule bound behaviour:

And I think there was very much this boys’ club … it’s a very male [but] not a macho male culture. I don’t mean macho and perhaps not a lot of offensive jokes and that sort of thing … it’s more a conservatism that you could feel … it was a sense of they’re rule bound … we are teachers, we have rules. There’s fairness and their idea of being fair was treating everyone the same, even if the rule itself had an indirect effect on one group, for example, women. There’s this rules bound school-teacherish approach to things which, looking back, was … very narrow.

Interestingly W15 picked up on the same theme of conservatism:

One of the things I’ve been thinking about in relation to the culture of the Education Department is that, yes, it is a masculine culture, but it isn’t a macho masculine culture. I always think somewhere like … the Department of Training is much more aggressively masculine. But the Education Department, because there are so many women, and because of the nature of the work – teaching young children – it’s not that aggressive, overt, masculine culture. So for that reason I think it’s much harder to change … it’s much more subtle I suppose …
W13 realised that you had to be sponsored by the boys’ club to get a promotion:

I was so naïve at the beginning. After a year of observing the culture [in central office] and another six months going for jobs, I realised that merit was not enough. You had to be sponsored; they had to tap you on the shoulder and tell you to go for it. Without that you could come second or third, but you would never win the job.

I recently met a senior manager from central office. He said to me, “The higher I get in the organisation, the more I realise that getting a promotion has nothing to do with merit and everything to do with who they want for the job. With a few exceptions, all of the applicants will be capable of doing the job, so the one they want will be chosen regardless of relative merit. So I’ve been putting more time into my job lately, in preparation for the next restructure. With an election imminent, and the restructure that is sure to follow, I just might jag a promotion.”

Once again I realised that the men are busy planning their careers while the women are usually completely wrapped up in their jobs, shouldering more than their fair share of the work (at home and in the workplace), leaving little reserve energy for strategic career planning. Perhaps we need to let the boys do more of the work and take some time for ourselves. The trouble is, with all the planning in the world, winning the job when you’re an outsider is impossible.

Like W11, W10 was concerned about the pervasiveness of a culture, similar to schooling, where whole groups adopted a particular mode of thinking which she termed ‘groupthink’.23

Yes it was definitely a male dominated environment. The culture was very similar to schooling. It was pretty much a school type atmosphere in that you respected the principal and you were told what to do and you did it. And there was bullying and you had to really survive. But the most scary thing I found was the groupthink pervaded and I guess this is part of the culture as well. If you take [an example], particularly in Human Resources, in staffing … there was a particular groupthink that existed which was that teachers were painful, whinging, complaining, pains in the neck … So we had that particular groupthink and they’d bring in someone new … someone new and wonderful and positive who had a focus on the client, which was in fact the teachers, and within months they would be indoctrinated into the groupthink. W10

W7 also theorised around the issue of schooling and the ‘authority of the teacher’ being carried through into management practices:

I can tell you one theory I have that contributes to it [male domination]; it’s not the whole answer but I think it’s an interesting thought. We have in that organisation a group of people, largely from schools, who have never in their careers as teachers been required to develop the skills for creating equal adult relationships. If you were a teacher in a school, you exerted your authority not through your talent or your quality but through a formal legislated relationship: “You’re the kid, I’m the boss, the book says so, also I’m bigger than you are.”

23 Janis & Mann (1977) explain that “[r]esearch on team behaviour in organisations supports the conclusion that diversity of backgrounds, perspectives and values is an asset that protects the group from the hazards of ’groupthink’” (cited in Sinclair, 1993).
So we have a whole heap of people who come into that organisation who have developed management styles that are based on that kind of authority structure, a very formal, hierarchical structure. Modern management says we work in teams of equals but that’s not their experience and so I think most of them, particularly the men, find it extremely difficult to make the transition. In fact they don’t even necessarily see that there’s a need to. So I really do think that they take bad habits from their school days into this organisation and they really don’t know how to relate to other adults in an equal kind of way, especially to women.

W21 linked the old boys’ club to resistance to change and resistance to new ideas. She described leadership based on a conservative education agenda and strongly linked to self-interest. Opportunities for women were almost non-existent, particularly in the late '90s when the old boys resumed control of the leadership.

Oh the old boys! A deeply conservative approach. New things were not valued. It was basically the conservative education agenda that says that all you have got to worry about within the organisation is the efficient management of schools through processes of external review. Rather than ensuring that everyone is on board about a shared and fairly uplifting view of public education, rather than investing in substantial PD for your leaders, rather than looking for quality potential leadership in the whole diversity, rather than having an inspired vision about curriculum, about online learning, about a whole bunch of things … these things for me are what makes quality leadership. What I saw in X was leadership that was basically about no change at all and making people feel good about resisting change. It was called the ‘bringing them home strategy’ and so a whole bunch of people benefited from the bringing them home strategy. [After moving Y aside] people who were district directors in [country locations] or way out there were all brought home. Absolutely the boys’ club! It was a period when no women got opportunities.

I made my feelings about this clear and so did [a male colleague]. It was a period where opportunities for women were extraordinarily confined … In that time [two years] there were twenty-three or twenty-four SES [Senior Executive Service] opportunities and I think four went to women and at least two of those were to the same woman. Comfortable … for the old boys. It was not only seen as bringing them home, it was also seen, to some extent, as bringing the geriatrics home.

W18 felt that the dominance of the boys’ club affected both men and women. Women who wanted to get on had to ‘join the club’ but nevertheless were given the difficult and unpopular jobs that the men did not want. According to Kanter (1977), women who want to belong can play the stereotypical roles of mother, seductress or pet. A variation of these stereotypical roles is the iron maiden: “If a token insisted on full rights in the group, if she displayed competence in a forthright manner, or if she cut off sexual innuendos” (Kanter, 1977, p. 236), she could be labelled tough, an ‘iron maiden’. But, as W18 explains, both the ‘nice’ women and the ‘hatchet women’ (honorary males or pseudo men, see Greer, 1973) are used to men’s advantage:

They are either nice or seen to be the hatchet women. The [hatchet women] have to make all the hard decisions and tell the principals and district directors to just do it,
Chapter 4

and stop complaining. They [the men] give the difficult jobs to the women and they usually hold the jobs that make them, the men, look good. That’s a pretty harsh criticism of central office but pretty accurate nonetheless. It’s all a boys’ club, and the women who get on want to be in the boys’ club.

Cloning

“Organisations, largely through normative control, foster images of not only how one should act but also of what one should value and believe and how one should think” (Ashforth & Mael, 1998, p. 114). Thus, in organisational cultures dominated by masculine values, gender is located not only at the behavioural level (the gender we do) but at a deep symbolic level (the gender we think) (Gherardi, 1994). Currie et al. (2002) explain that “the gendering of organisations enters people’s conceptual apparatus, forming and sustaining the way in which they think about organisations and their own part within them” (p. 46). Linked to the way we traditionally think about management, dominated by images of heroic leadership and historical patterns which reinforce the tendency to ‘think manager, think male’ (Schein, 1975, 1976), is the phenomenon commonly known as cloning: the process whereby men in power tend to recruit and promote ‘up and coming’ managers in their own image. This phenomenon was identified by Moore (1962) over forty years ago, when he “warned the business community about the threat to organisational creativity inherent in a system of ‘homosexual reproduction’, in which the man in the grey flannel suit creates successors in his own image” (Vinnicombe & Colwill, 1995, p. 87).

In her illuminating and groundbreaking text, Men and Women of the Corporation, Rosebeth Moss Kanter (1977) builds on Moore’s description of the ‘bureaucratic kinship system’ and Thompson’s work on uncertainty in organisations, to describe how management circles are closed to outsiders through a system designed to foster social homogeneity and social conformity. She calls this a system of homosocial reproduction which reinforces bureaucracies as “social inventions that supposedly reduce the uncertain to the predictable and the routine” (Kanter, 1977, p. 48). However Kanter highlights the impossibility of removing uncertainty, even in the most perfect of machine-like bureaucracies, due to other elements in the environment, interdependent parts, and human interconnections. Even in the most impersonal of institutions the ‘problem’ of trust remains, the ‘uncertainty quotient’ that causes (corporate) management to become so socially restricting. Echoes of Coser’s greedy institution (1974) are evident in Kanter’s observation of management homogeneity which attempts to eliminate uncertainty and difference:
To develop tighter inner circles excluding social strangers; to keep control in the hands of socially homogeneous peers; to stress conformity and insist upon a diffuse, unbounded loyalty; and to prefer ease of communication and thus social certainty over the strains of dealing with people who are ‘different’. (p. 49)

Thus institutions “infuse our lives with a semblance of control and orderliness through highly structured arrangements”, differentiated roles, norms, rewards and sanctions which create a sense of order and predictability (Lipman-Blumen, 1994, p. 122). But when this structure, stability and predictability benefits the usual male custodians of our institutions, a system geared towards the reproduction of power and advantage emerges.

Many interviewees in my research study expressed their frustrations with the reproduction of male power through the processes of cloning. They cited many examples in the Education Department.

Only a certain sort of person is promoted and developed. I think you’re now getting more clones than you would have even in the past. W9

…I’d say it had something to do with who you knew …there were certainly connections that were required – you needed to be well known … W10

…I my sense was that there was a huge cloning process that had been going on in that organisation for a very long time. And every now and again somebody slipped through that was a little bit different but then they were put squarely in their box. W7

W1 described the male advantage. She felt that it was much easier for men to be noticed as they were merely reinforcing old patterns:

It’s a different task [for men] because in a lot of instances they’re not really [consciously] upwardly managing, they’re just reinforcing a pattern that is already there. They’ve been hand picked as clones and they are expected to deliver … so they show that’s what they’re doing. As a non-clone you have a much tougher job.

W2 explained the history which had supported the perpetuation of an almost exclusively male culture:

It was a culture that had grown up through almost an exclusively male history. It was a culture that had been perpetuated by men appointing men and I always thought there was a clone in there … you had young, able, enthusiastic, conspicuous men who were made quite early in their careers, through special promotions, principals of small country schools.

In the small country schools they had an opportunity, if they were worth their salt, to be conspicuous, to do things, to be ‘great fellas’, and when the more senior members of head office visited, of course they were impressed. And these people were the ones; the next step was special promotion to a superintendent. So there was a
cloning because it was the way the boys’ network was perpetuated. That’s my perception … a perpetuating of a culture almost devoid of women at that time.

If you’d had a diversity of men it would have been different. But you were bringing through a similar age group, a similar propensity, a similar ambition, all of those things. These people were by definition highly ambitious, so they had all the techniques that enabled them to be seen by whomever they needed to be seen by … the whole thing … I travelled long distances in the same cars with these people. I thought I got to know them pretty well and I was struck by their similarity and their similar motivation and the way they operated. Then I saw them when they went into head office on a Friday afternoon once a month to meet with the more senior people … it was a real perpetuation.

Managing up / Impression management

The ‘art’ of managing up or ‘impression management’ 24, which many women find distasteful (Rudman, 1998; Morley, 1999), is successful largely because it is condoned by those in power – usually men who themselves may have 'made it' through excessive self-promotion and cloned behaviour. Often women are encouraged to emulate male behaviour, to learn to be more assertive, to promote themselves, but how often do we question such behaviour?

It seemed that the women I interviewed focused their energies on getting the job done and making a difference for education in contrast to many of the men whom they observed putting an enormous amount of effort into impressing the boss. Similarly Sinclair (1998) and Marshall (1995b) found that the women in their studies relied on persistence and professionalism rather than emulating the high degree of competitiveness and toughness they saw in their male peers. “Doggedness, hard work and a track record are the underpinnings of this kind of [leadership] influence, the less glamorous alternatives to charisma” (Sinclair, 1998, p. 118). Whilst the habit of ‘pissing in pockets’ 25 was abhorrent to all of the women, they also acknowledged the need to gather their sponsors and ensure that management was more aware of their achievements. However, there was a strong feeling that ‘toadying to the boss’ was not the ethical way to go about it.

I’m a jolly good fellow

W2 was in a position to observe the behaviours of men out to impress the boss and felt that it was an accepted and approved way of how the boys’ club worked:

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24 A strategy of self-promotion more normative for men than for women (see Rudman, 1998).

25 An Australian colloquialism meaning to behave obsequiously towards someone (The Macquarie Dictionary).
Questioning the corporate culture

In my observation from a distance … you needed to be one of the boys, up and coming and all that sort of thing. They had role models; there were plenty of role models for them to see how you did it. You made sure you invited someone from head office to every possible thing that you did out in the woods and you wrote them letters, saying this is marvellous and I did this and so and so did that. So they were always making people above them aware of “I’m a jolly good fellow” … even had there been a critical mass of women I doubt they [the women] would have worked in that way.

I was not the slightest bit impressed with conspicuous consumption, in fact almost went right against it. Being conspicuous to your superiors and always wanting to send twenty-five letters a week saying “Isn’t it great I wrote this brochure and this book and I just thought you’d like a copy of this picture of me shaking hands with so and so; these twenty-five kids all adore me and this is a big colour picture and I’ve got more if you want them. So I could only assume that … before my time, that must have been part of the culture. It was a legacy that obviously was working; either that or they were trying to work out how you woo the new bird.

… I find it anathema, absolute anathema … I’d like to hope that as [an executive manager] I was as aware of excellent work that was being done by people, by men and women, without having to have it flashed in my eyes every second minute. It turned me off.

She went on to describe her idea of a successful manager; a person who helped others to grow:

My idea of success wasn’t that. It was someone who really got on with the task, made a difference to schools, worked to engender job satisfaction and success amongst the people with whom they worked or for whom [they] were responsible … took a really genuine interest in growing those people, it was more about that.

Another woman, on corporate executive, described the ‘pissing in pockets’ approach so despised by many of the women. They saw men who put huge amounts of energy into getting the boss on side:

… there were the young, ambitious men, the ones who would come and see you, all bright eyed and bushy tailed, to tell you about the wonderful projects they’re working on and the great ideas they’ve got … you know ‘a suck’ basically. And there were a lot of them … the irony of that was that the more someone came to tell me those sorts of things, the less respect I had for them. Particularly when you see one guy claiming his role in a particular project and the next day someone else would come in and claim the same thing. And that happened on a number of occasions … “I’m deeply committed to human resources and I’d like to make my career path here” [with the intended outcome] that I would say, “Let me see what I can do for you” and then they’d probably go next door and say, “I’m deeply committed to curriculum …” W6

W14 talked about male executives who managed up with almost complete disregard for peers or subordinates:
So if I think of a person, say a contemporary, I would think of somebody like X. What he does in that hierarchical culture is that he sucks up, he manages up, he doesn’t care how he comes across to people who are peers or subordinates. In terms of subordinates they must do what he says … he’s got that body language, he points the finger. He was nearly howled out of principals’ meetings because of those kinds of behaviours.

[People like him] put a lot of time into anticipating what the crisis points of their leaders are and how they can help solve [the crises]. They do a lot of that which I actually think is OK and I tell women to do that now. But what they also do is they make themselves the hub of some gossip, they carry the latest, they know who’s had a little kind of affair here and there and they peddle in that. And they are the first to know who’s made a boo-boo. So any competitors — they will have files on fairly high achieving politicians or aspirant people, they’ll know the sins of those people in that sense — they know the ’goss’.

W9 questioned the real motives (the self serving intent) of ambitious managers who made themselves highly visible:

I can think of one particular male … it was more because they were trying to prove themselves … they just wouldn't give you that same level of autonomy. They would interfere rather than being able to give the autonomy [to allow others] to be able to get on … to do something. [This type of manager] could be seen to be more ambitious. Not that there’s anything wrong with being ambitious, it’s the way you go about it and what the cost is along the way, the way you deal with people on the way.

They take kudos for themselves, they would always be seen to be involved with the right people, and be seen to be contributing, just to be seen, to be very visible. To me it’s “Why are you doing it, what’s your motivation? Is it that you’re doing it because you really believe in what you’re doing or is it because you’re doing it just for your own ends?”

**Transient values**

Linked to the practice of impression management was the transience of values, an insincere approach of espousing the latest to get ahead. W4, W6 and W9 and W15 found the professed commitment of some managers to the latest educational reform very superficial:

I think there’s a fear … and it might be endemic in the public sector at the moment … It’s like: I’m going to say the appropriate things to the boss; I wouldn’t dare say anything that wasn’t going to keep me in good standing, no matter what the boss says. If the boss says, “Look I just want you to tell me what you’re really committed to” [the answer is] “I’m committed to kids and schools and attaining student outcomes” [laughter]. Well that might be part of it, but what bit of that really gets you going? W4

The whole management culture was based on control of people … the ability to control careers. So … even if they passionately believe something, if they think it’s going to mean that their career is destroyed for the rest of their lives they’ll express a different opinion [but] I was not someone he [my manager] could control. W6
[The typically successful manager] was a person who was willing to be very visible who got involved in high profile activities, didn’t necessarily want to be involved in projects or branches that actually worked to achieve a specific purpose. It was someone who would always be seen to be at the cutting edge or whatever jargonist term you want to use. Not necessarily what they might have believed in yesterday, or professed to believe in yesterday, but could espouse something else tomorrow if that was where they saw they wanted to go … W9

In a recent example, one interviewee talked about a female line manager who exhibited a masculinist authoritarian style, influenced by the new managerialist culture, which looked to constant change and the latest fad for career boosting potential.

She presented at a conference on the topic of ageism but did not practice [what she preached]. She chose the topic to get on, because it was strategic, a current issue – not because it meant anything to her. [In fact] she was dismissive of older staff. Studying the effect of age but only as a career move, even though average age of teachers is 41 years … There was a lot of dissatisfaction that she presented it; there was no acknowledgement of the team effort. W15

Women behaving differently

Throughout this thesis, the theme of women wanting to make a difference for education – a real contribution – surfaces time and again. This focus on making a contribution (see also Marshall, cited in Sinclair, 1998), contrasts with the traditionally male focus on self-promotion and visibility in the interests of career progress. However, “[t]his tendency not to be driven by the need for personal status and recognition has some costs for women who are reluctant to blow their own trumpet[s]” (Sinclair, 1998, p. 115). W14 explained the differences in male and female behaviour:

… basically what happens is the women don’t cross your door because they think you’re too busy. Young men do cross your door because they know that striking a good rapport with you will be to their advantage. And they do that at times when you just want a little break from the ministerials or the inquiries to premier and they bring you a patisserie or something like that. So they build up that kind of linkage with you; they laugh at your jokes at conferences; they sit in the front row; it’s very hard in that busy milieu to ignore that attention, and that goes a long way.

Women stand back, they’re quite shy. There’s a wonderful thing with Dale Spender who spoke at a conference [about] all the young men who came down and talked to her in the question time to the extent that in the end she got on the table and said, “I don’t want to talk to any of these people who are here now, I want to talk to all the ones who are sitting back there and thinking ‘she’s already given an hour’s speech’. Come talk to me!” So, you know … the kind of the sociology of that environment.

W3 also saw men and women operating differently: men putting themselves forward and women hanging back, ‘submerging ego’ (Marshall, 1995b). There was general agreement among the women (confirming the research on attribution theory) that men tend to
overestimate their worth and women tend to take a more realistic view, to the extent of underestimating themselves. W3 also pointed out that our judgment of behaviour has to do with how we perceive competence, and whether a particular competence is in an area that we respect. Her view could help to explain why the dominant culture values ‘playing up to the boss’ and why women find the same behaviour offensive:

I know that I formed a view that men and women operate very differently in bureaucracies. One thing I really remember is, if there was ever a promotional position coming up in my directorate, the blokes would come around and tell me why I had no other choice but to appoint them. The women would come around and ask if I thought they should apply, or whether that was presumptuous. So I formed this opinion that male behaviour patterns were much better suited to bureaucracies.

This view serves to highlight the difficulty for women when they do move into positions of power. The alien environment that they find themselves in can deflect their time and energy and erode their authority. The first woman in a position of authority is often the lone woman, the token (Kanter, 1977), expected to be all things to all people, as well as a role model and mentor for other women. A man in a similar position of power has many role models and usually a like-minded executive team to support him. If he does it the way it has always been done, he is managing in safe territory and is not threatening the status quo. There were a number of women in the interview group who commented on the extreme difficulties for the first woman in the role of CEO, especially as her main focus was on education, as opposed to playing political games:

While Y was there, they were just being so awful and horrible to her that she just had to devote so much time to her own existence [but] the mere fact that she was there was a wonderful role model for many people and a breath of fresh air. I mean I’ve only heard of things and she’s such a person of integrity she would never ever talk about the things that would happen to her. She’s just such an amazing woman. But there are still people in there today who should accept responsibility for her choice to leave, and it was not through professional and ethical means that they operated. I think that sort of says it … undermined, constantly undermined. W12

Y was subject to unbelievable pressure, I believe, right from the beginning – from the men – and was seen to be … she helped promote things like the HR push led by Y [naming a female executive director]… And she really did try to listen to others and … she was trying to do the best for education … Underneath she was vulnerable to the power plays and the backstabbing and that’s what got to her in the end. She … couldn’t cope with that sort of game. I question now, and who am I to say this, but I wonder if the people at the top (not all of them, but some of them) … I wonder how many of them are trying to do the best for education, or just doing the Government’s bidding? W9

I feel that Y was much more an educator than a bureaucrat … and I think that [was] one of the problems … I think she … commanded a lot of respect but … she probably wasn’t political enough [in that environment]. W8
Striking a balance: Finding sponsors

The research participants’ strong focus on servicing schools and commitment to getting the job done meant that time for ‘managing up’ was limited. Some of the women reflected that their intense commitment (and quality outcomes) often went unnoticed, whereas finding sponsors brought rewards. W8 said that the type of person likely to be successful in climbing the corporate ladder was:

Somebody who managed upwards, who made sure they were noticed. Most of them were fairly laid back, the ones who weren’t too intense [laughter]. So maybe there’s a flexibility there – if I put something positive on it – that is rewarded, rather than being very intense in one area … Being a good bloke, being the sociable person who was seen and you know, slap you on the back and saying, “How are ya?”

She explained the fine balance between a focus on servicing schools and keeping a profile in central office. She reflected on how she could have made herself and her position more visible within the corporate environment:

… we deliberately did try to concentrate on servicing schools and teachers rather than getting embroiled in what was happening [in the hierarchy]. But in a lot of ways that probably was to the detriment of infiltrating [our branch] through the hierarchy and through other branches within the Department … When I look back and if I’m critical about where my career did go, or my position went, it is that probably I didn’t put enough time into that.

Although she didn’t enjoy the necessity of having to ‘manage up’, W1 also reflected on how she could have done it differently. She realised that she had been so engrossed in getting the job done and that she hadn’t enlisted her sponsors. She assumed that achieving excellent outcomes would in itself be sufficient to gain recognition. In the culture of the Education Department, it was not enough. W1 had observed the men gathering their sponsors and realised, too late, that if her efforts were to be recognised she would have to do the same:

… I think what went wrong is that, and I take some responsibility for this, I didn’t do enough about selling and marketing upwards, communicating what it was I was doing. I was just getting on and doing it and then suffered from people not a) understanding and b) recognising what it was I had actually achieved or done.

… so while I might think it’s totally obvious, clearly my experience tells me that it’s not the case and I haven’t ever done enough talking to the people, finding the sponsors, working with the sponsors, so that you have a number of people who understand and value what you’re doing and will support what you’re doing. But after a while it just gets tedious and you get engrossed and involved in what you are doing and you neglect that. And then when the chips are down no one – the key people who should know – understands, values … you can’t expect them to because they haven’t been kept [informed].
While W1’s self-reflective analysis is commendable she is looking very much to the ‘mould the women to fit’ model for change. Being more like men may not be the answer when so many women indicate that they deplore excessive self-promotion, objecting to its apparent success as a career improvement strategy, and despairing at the undervaluing of educationally focused work.

**Change, restructure and more restructures**

Many of the women talked about politics: ‘big P’ and ‘little p’ politics. Change was political. For example, restructures to accommodate change of government and new economic rationalist management models, and change to accommodate ambition (demonstrate that you have implemented change and you will get the next promotion). Change for the sake of change seemed paramount. People moved on before their new plans could be tried and evaluated, before outcomes could be measured. The constant restructuring meant instability, a constant loss of corporate knowledge and the wheel being reinvented many times. The loyalty, so important to the greedy institution, is tested in times of uncertainty and constant change:

> … new people coming in all the time in senior positions, wanting to change. We’re obsessed with change. Not too many people say, “Now let’s keep this as it is because it’s only been in place a couple of years, let’s give it a bit more of a try.” If there’s any sense it might work differently or that someone might get some kudos from having it re-organised … wham! Off it goes into a reorganisation. W5

In an organisation that is constantly restructuring the world of work is unpredictable – you can get your head shot off. Restructure has other motives – get rid of people, opportunities, Clayton’s behaviour. When coping with unpredictability you do only what has to be done. People won’t invest if there is no guidepost to the future. Minimalist work will be done because the job may not be there tomorrow. Yet research and innovation is essential [to a healthy organisation]. W7

W9 could look back on changes in the Department and acknowledge that the first wave of change (in the 1980s) was healthy. However, she felt that the number of changes since then have been more difficult to reconcile. Repeated change, motivated by individualism and self-interest is destructive to the corporate memory and leads to inefficiency, loss of knowledge and the reinvention of old ideas.

> Everybody was expendable. In fact they don’t care about their corporate memory. I’m not just talking Education Department. I’m talking about any government organisation, any big organisation. I don’t know how much people valued the corporate memory and what happens when you loose that and how you keep repeating the same things, again and again. And if you clean something out too much, you lose people who have a memory of how things can work.
[Change and restructure] every couple of years now. This is just my perception. I believe originally when it all began to happen in the ’80s there really was a belief that it was time for a change, it needed new direction. I believe that the people who did that, they themselves believed that. I think what has happened now – when you come into a position of high authority in a government department you have to be seen to make a mark. And one way to be seen to make a mark is to restructure, realign, change, to bring your ideas into bed. Say look what I did, look what I was able to achieve, look at the changes I’ve made! It didn’t matter if those changes were good. Well, it does matter … W9

There seemed to be change for the sake of change:

Ironically two re-structures later it all came back again at a much bigger and higher level. W7

And ‘instant change’, focused on short term results:

It’s also about ‘instant change’ … I think it’s a very Thatcherist vision of change … sweep away and sweep something else in its place. But change takes such a long time and my view of the leader is someone who keeps the eye on the goal, maintains that clear, coherent vision, but shapes it accordingly … That’s what I thought leadership was about – that once a vision had been agreed collectively then you worked very hard to help others come on board, and as others came on board it got shaped and changed … and gaining the resources to ensure that people are supported, but not supported for ten minutes. If you are going to see real change, you have got to support for ten years … Fundamentally [my view was that] you were in there for the long haul, for a sustained supported change … winning hearts and minds, helping people to learn and grow as you learn and grow yourself. W21

The irony of the constant change and restructuring was that there seemed to be no real change in behaviour; traditional attitudes and values still reigned:

… the whole process [new district structure] was so autocratic … and so once again, although they’re creating these new structures, there’s a message going out from central office that doesn’t place enormous responsibility on those [district] directors to manage in a non-autocratic way. Maybe they can do that and I hope they can, but there’s still that residue of men in Silver City who don’t have that kind of history. W7

With the devolution of responsibility to schools, central office positions linked to EEO and social justice disappeared as the ’90s progressed. As Blackmore (1999) points out, the loss of so many women, especially from positions linked to equity and justice, has meant a loss of institutional knowledge in these areas, placing gender issues on the back burner:

Devolution to schools in most systems has meant the ‘hollowing out’ of middle management, as … curriculum and professional development support staff have been sent back to schools while finance and policy… have been retained at the centre … The simultaneous process of hollowing out and outsourcing … has led to
the dissipation and loss of significant professional and educationally informed experience and knowledge in equity reform, generally resulting in institutional amnesia. (p.13).

The ethical implications of change for the sake of change and the loss of people who think differently are examined by Fullan (1999) who uses complexity [chaos] theory to explain the importance of finding a balance between innovation and existing practices. He highlights the difficulties of maintaining the moral purpose of educational reform. Whilst recognising that innovation is often motivated by politics and careerism, he concludes that most people would agree that the ultimate purpose of education is to benefit all students. However it is important to recognise that many reforms, especially equity-minded reforms, are not in the short-term interests of those in privileged positions. He examines the two primary reasons why achieving moral purpose is complex. “One concerns the dynamics of diversity, equity and power; the other involves the concept and reality of complexity itself” (p. 1).

Firstly, moral purpose cannot be achieved unless we develop mutual empathy and relationships across diverse groups. Yet there is a tendency to keep people different from ourselves at a great distance. Drawing on other research, Fullan (citing Oakes et al.; Slee, Weiner and Tomlinson) points out that studies of school effectiveness tend to concentrate on management issues rather than deep-seated issues of power and equity. His second point is that rationally constructed reform strategies do not work. “The reason is that such strategies can never work in the face of rapidly changing environments” (p. 3). He uses complexity theory to explain that the link between cause and effect is difficult to trace. Change unfolds in non-linear ways, paradoxes and contradictions abound, and creative solutions arise out of ambiguity. Brown and Eisenhardt (cited in Fullan, 1999) explain how an understanding of complexity theory can be used to judge the effectiveness of an organisation in managing change:

Complexity theory began with an interest in how order springs from chaos … The argument is that too much structure creates gridlock, while too little structure creates chaos. A good example would be the traffic lights in a city. If there are no lights, traffic is chaotic. If there are too many lights, traffic stops. A moderate number of lights creates structure, but still allows drivers to adapt their routes in surprising ways in response to changing traffic conditions. Consequently, the key to effective change is to stay poised on the edge of chaos. Complexity theory focuses managerial thinking on the interrelationships among different parts of an organisation and on the trade-off of less control for greater adaptation. (pp. 5-6)
A tolerance for ambiguity and difference, healthy debate, empathy, creativity and flexibility are essential elements for managing real change. Effective change also requires negotiation, planning, implementation, hard work, long term support and relationships built on trust. Restructuring for the short term may bring immediate personal gain (and power) for the privileged few, but can alienate many.

Factions

One of the defining features of central office was the factionalism between the various sections and groups. A faction is any relatively organised group that exists within the context of another group and “competes with rivals for power advantages within the larger group of which it is a part” (Belloni & Beller, 1978, p. 419). The sharing of information and recognition of the value of working across diverse groups were practices confined to small pockets and not part of the dominant culture. Eva Cox (1996) talks about factions in the political world of cabinet ministers and parliamentary decision-making, “Their workplace is very time demanding and clubby, with relationships between groups, such as factions, replacing most other forms of friendship” (p. 90). Similar practices occur within bureaucratic cultures.

Crises and tribalism

Discourses of the A team and the B team, and comparisons to ‘marriage breakups’ and ‘warring tribes’ highlighted the factionalism (and the dysfunctionalism) of central office. These behaviours are reminiscent of those described by Schaef and Fassel (1988) in their work on addictive organisations. W6 saw that the factions between the various departments and a continual state of crisis were the norm:

… there were always the factions … like this is human resources and corporate services and curriculum and each one was fighting for its own turf. We were continually in crisis, crisis mode over something … an industrial action or it could have been anything … it was like, “Good the focus is off our department, thank God”, instead of, “How can we actually work together and stop these crises happening?”

She also saw individuals ‘shifting camps’ according to perceived opportunities and where the action was happening. To get ahead, the typical aspiring manager would change allegiance to gain power:

The promotion they expected or the transfer they expected didn’t happen and suddenly … it’s almost like a marriage breakup … I don’t love you any more and I
don’t like those ideas. I used to watch these reshuffles occur … there would be these
groups that formed around say (a particular executive director), a whole bunch of
people who were followers of his … and depending on where the opportunities were
lying and how the politics were going they might move to a camp that looked as if it
was going to move quicker and faster.

Yes it was like warring tribes … they would be eyeing off the other tribe … if you
really thought the other tribe was going to win you might take a few trinkets over
there and try and get in with that group. It was really naked when I was there
because people used to talk about it … about the A team and the B team. It was just
childish stuff … like you have in schools, grades of people and who’s teacher’s pet
and who’s not. It was individual objectives rather than common goals.

W17 described the ‘silo mentality’ that she recognised as about ownership and empire
building rather than sharing:

[In central office] it was very much a silo mentality where people don’t talk to each
other. But I did rock the boat there a bit because I am very open and I will get people
together and talking across [sections] and I don’t have any great ownership. I think
if you want to get on you’ve really got to have that ownership, whereas I was very
sharing. I think that’s very feminine as well, that you don’t worry about building
your own empire, that you really do care about education and making a difference
for students.

Like Fullan (1999) W7 believed that most people had the best interests of children at
heart, but somehow, in an atmosphere of political point scoring, the ideology of ‘what’s
best for the kids’ got lost:

… one of the defining features of the place is that there’s the in-crowd and the out-
crowd or … the A team and the B team … and very little sense of people working
together towards a single purpose. The attempts to build empires were unbelievable
and from what I gather they haven’t improved, if anything it’s probably gotten
worse. It’s a tragedy, because I think most people … well I like to think most people
who do come in from the school environment, come in really keen to do something
for kids. But it’s such a political environment that unless you are in the game, those
attempts usually don’t succeed. Somehow or other you end up being almost forced
to participate.

W3 saw impressive policies but dysfunctional operations characterised by tribalism and
factionalism which divided the organisation. She found these practices archaic, yet, like
W7, she felt that joining a faction was almost essential to survival in a bureaucracy:

I think bureaucracies are rife with that sort of activity, particularly the Education
Department which I think must be one of the more Neanderthal bureaucracies … I
think it probably still is. The tribalism and the factionalism and the emotion that
drives what happens I find extraordinary. I mean you read all this stuff about how
bureaucracies are wonderful instruments for rational policy implementation and so
forth. That’s all true on one level but when it actually comes to operating they’re not
like that at all.
I think it’s not only a gender thing … I don’t think it’s only men who are prone to that, that’s what I meant by factional … in fact, to survive in a bureaucracy you need to get into those groups, otherwise you become picked off … There was no policy harmony so we didn’t really get our act together as a corporate group … and I thought, “Well I’ll just do my bit and they’ll do theirs”. But of course that doesn’t work in an organisation. What it meant was increasing separation in the work; so that was the strategy really, to have less and less to do with each other, which of course is fatal when you’re trying to manage an organisation.

She also realised that the factionalism was so deeply imbedded in the culture that it continued even when there were women in positions of power:

…I was disappointed when [the women in senior management] continued the tradition of factionalism, but I don’t think they had any choice. By the time you get to those positions you’re locked into the deep structural … An organisation like the Education Department is so heavily structured that any particular incumbent has very little opportunity to do anything but cosmetic changes.

Like W6, W11 spoke of individualism as opposed to cooperation. Interestingly, she echoed W3’s words when she noted that women could be caught up in the factional behaviour:

…the majority of managers were ex-teachers and how that manifested itself was … there was a strong cult of individualism. So I call them ‘mavericks’, cowboy types … very little team building and very little corporate spirit. There were very much in-groups … and … I have to say, I saw this happen with women as well. I saw men and women make sure they appointed the people they wanted and I’m talking about public service positions …

W8 noted that the lack of harmony was obvious to teachers in schools who saw duplication of effort or conflicting demands from central office staff visiting schools:

I think it was very segmented … that’s my perception … I didn’t see any great cross sector cooperation … across central office. And yet we were often dealing with the same people and similar issues in schools and districts. And how often did we hear, “I wish you people at central office would get your act together because we had somebody out here [talking about the same thing] yesterday”.

A different perspective was voiced by W20 who won a position in executive management in the latter part of the nineties and seemed quite comfortable with the competitive culture:

There is a difference between a dysfunctional organisation and an organisation having a culture and factions and so forth – of course people are going to have factions, it’s based on the footy team or who owes you favours or what subject area or whatever, so factions are a normal part of organisational behaviour and they don’t normally get in the way of achieving your goals.
But W5 was representative of the majority of interviewees when she described the corporate culture as a damaging culture. Damaged people just quietly slip away, usually with no formal acknowledgement or celebration of service (and loyalty) to the greedy institution. In contrast, ‘a certain type’ learnt to back the right winner and change sides to survive:

I think it’s a very damaging culture for a lot of people. I think there is a lot of lip service about caring for staff, about caring for people and about equity, etc., but I think it’s a difficult culture for anyone to change. I’ve seen a number of CEOs try it. I think the relationship of central office to schools and districts had never been well established, established in a fruitful way. I think there are great divisions. I think there are great divisions between the various sections in head office; there were divisions within divisions.

It’s a very competitive environment, I think it’s an environment where people are worried about their positions, and so they should be, because it’s forever changing. Maybe I’ve been influenced by my own experiences but I guess that’s all you can judge on. I’ve just seen so many people leave there in a damaged way, in a hurt way. I guess there are some people who leave central office and celebrate their departures and celebrate their careers, but I think there are fewer and fewer of those. I think a lot of people just quietly slip out … I don’t think it’s a healthy culture.

But I think it’s more of the situation as to who you align yourself with and who happens to be in power at the time and whether you’ve backed the right winner. I think there are some people who have survived in there because they’ve actually been very clever at switching their backing and quickly aligning themselves to the new horse that’s going to win.

However, she reflected on the precarious nature of this masculine image of success, the uncertainty of ‘backing a winner’ and ‘the impossibility of removing uncertainty’ (Kanter, 1977), even for those who were adept at changing teams for survival.

I think for a long time in there you could almost predict if so and so became CEO or executive director, who would follow in line. So I think there’s been these sorts of groupings, these clans almost working upwards. But as soon as one of those go … I can think of people immediately who suddenly lost favour and yet they would have typically been the sort of person you’d describe as a person who [would make it]. But you change the person at the top or you change the person in charge of an area and you’ll find it cascading all the way down.

Either you back the right winner or you learn who would make it to the top. You know their candle’s been blown out pretty quickly when someone else got to the top position. So I think a certain type learns pretty fast how to switch sides – curry favour with the new person. You might think someone’s a shining light and upwardly mobile, [then] they make a mistake, all sorts of things can happen, and they’re suddenly gone. It’s pretty precarious. W5
Scapegoats and military links

Mistakes were viewed by competitors as something to be celebrated and it was important to find someone to blame if something went wrong. In this way risk taking was discouraged:

… that was another thing I didn’t like about the culture; it’s always this looking for scapegoats, whereas here [new job] if something goes wrong, whoever instituted it, it’s basically a badge of honour to come up and say, “Well I take full responsibility for what happened” and then explain your reasons. But there it was like, “Oh it wasn’t me, it was him.” Mistakes were not tolerated. I made one mistake, a fairly mild mistake I thought … and yes, for my efforts I had a review of this particular decision instituted and an external person brought in to review it. Very embarrassing and totally unnecessary … you try to scapegoat someone in the Department and on that occasion it was me. W6

Mistakes were seen by your competitors as something to be really celebrated. How did they view your so-called mistakes? They were really thrilled to bits about them. W14

Interestingly I felt that if you made a mistake you were damned whereas in education … if a student makes a mistake that’s great because it’s a learning opportunity. I didn’t see that carry on into [central office] a lot … it certainly wasn’t presented as a learning opportunity so I guess you would think twice about taking a risk because if you did fall on your face … the fact that you took the risk would not be valued against the outcome. W10

W14 linked the hierarchical and factional culture to a military mode of operation. The allegiances within the particular ‘tribes’ were strong and exclusive:

Well the culture is hierarchal; it’s very male; it’s quite military. It’s diluted military and you get these chains of command; you get the colloquialisms of ‘watch your back’, ‘cover your ass’ type stuff that the men talk about; you even have initials for that. They had initials that come from the military, which are things like ‘situation normal – all fucked up’ (SNAFU). They had other ones like ‘rank should always have its privilege’, those kinds of things.

So it’s hierarchical and it’s also territorial: “You’re on my patch – get off it.” It’s got little kinds of teemsy allegiance stuff, so even if that organisation was totally male you would have tribal stuff between the men, [for example] the men who put social studies together, the men who put science together, the men who had been on a particular scholarship, the men who’d been in the airforce and so on … for a while there most directors general had to have worked in the military, had to be return servicemen, and they had to have been in the airforce.

Similarly W13 noted the advantage for men who had qualified as secondary teachers, those who had done secondary social studies or physical education training courses together – a hierarchical advantage over primary teachers, especially women primary
teachers aspiring to central office positions – a bond that was advantageous in the job selection process:

There was a chain of senior managers, directors and executive directors who were all secondary, all social studies or phys. ed. and usually [same state] background. Naturally when the jobs came up they looked for a young bloke with similar credentials.

Women in power: A window of opportunity

There was a brief period of time in the late ’80s and early ’90s where a chain of women were in power. They were able to provide the support for each other that men take for granted:

There was this wonderful period in which I reported to a female executive director who reported to a female CEO who reported to a female Minister – quite incredible actually … I mean I don’t know if it made a whole lot of difference in the end to what happened but it was quite an irony, an irony to be appreciated, because I can’t imagine it happening again. W7

I thought Y, who came in as executive director, was very supportive. She actually worked in a similar role to the one I was in, in another organisation, earlier in her career and she was very good in terms of mentoring and support. That was probably the only time … Well, interestingly, the whole line was [female] … That was for a very small window of time … to have a whole line of female management was just remarkable. And I just liked working for all of them. I had a fantastic working relationship with all of them. It was great!

… by the very nature of the fact that they were women, [they] had some understanding of the issues, because they would have had to live some of them themselves. Whether they had an academic understanding wasn’t really the issue. Knowing that they would have at least been empathetic from having been through some of the struggles themselves was quite good. Plus it’s always easier, well I found it easier, to talk to them … W10

Apart from that window of opportunity, when equity, supported by Affirmative Action policies, was high on the agenda, the reality for women in senior positions was that the environment was unsupportive. Women were seen as outsiders, as a threat to the status quo. A senior executive described her feelings about the corporate culture and her need to find a more supportive environment for her career development:

I think that there were people who desperately wanted me out of that role and worked fairly hard to make it occur. In the end they didn’t succeed. I left when I chose, not when anyone else chose, but I was always aware of that.

I was not particularly happy really at any time while I was there … well obviously you have to give a place a chance and I did. But within the first year or two I was thinking this was not really the culture that I wanted to work in and whilst I wasn’t
going to do anything immediately, my senses were tuned to other opportunities should they arise.

The culture was distinctly different. Prior to then, I’d been in maybe four or five different work cultures and in each culture you can detect the differences. Some you fit in with more than others, but the Education Department was clearly one that I didn’t identify with and didn’t want to identify with, so that was a bit of a difficulty for me. So setting that aside … I was fairly successful and there were achievements along the way that I was proud of and happy with. I was on the Corporate Executive at the time for the last two years of the appointment and was working directly with the Minister prior to that. So yes, it was probably the most senior that you could be other than and being CEO really.

I decided enough of the trying to change myself to fit in with this culture. I don’t actually want to do that; I’ll look for a culture or another opportunity where I can be what I want to be. So ultimately, the job here came up and I really thought long and hard about it because it was a backward step and I’d never been one to take backward steps. At the time it was a backward step but … it’s just been so fantastic. I had to think very seriously about it … then I thought, no, I don’t want to go on living like this in a culture where my values are so different to the values I see around me. W6

Reflection

Questioning the corporate culture was the main thread that tied the stories together, indicating that the research participants were alert to the gendered nuances of the bureaucracy. As Gherardi (1992) points out, the everyday cultural ambience of an organisation tells us a lot about its underlying structures and symbolic order. The women I interviewed were questioning, thinking differently and (the majority) finally leaving a work environment that did not fit with their values. They identified the micropolitical processes at work that blocked career progress for many women, including themselves. They questioned political game playing, factional politics, unwritten rules, gatekeeping, the exclusiveness of the boys’ club, the greediness of the organisation and the hierarchical management structure. They recognised that withholding information and keeping people in the dark is a very effective marginalising tool. Informal decision-making between members of the boys’ club and conferring before the meeting puts women at a disadvantage, particularly when they are outnumbered. In *The Women's Power Handbook*, Joan Kirner and Moira Rayner (1999) encourage women to caucus and to organise their numbers before a meeting, to object if the decisions are virtually foregone conclusions manipulated by the men and to insist on the right to discuss proposals or to defer a decision until adequate information is available. One woman in my thesis commented that she now teaches women to lobby before the meeting, to align their supporters and to discuss tactics. Women are consciously devising strategies to survive in an organisational climate which favours men.
The self-interest and careerism of so many men in management, lack of recognition or reward for the achievements of women, and change and restructuring as strategies to keep the men in power, highlighted the male advantage. Over and over the theme emerges of women doing the work and men taking the credit through excessive use of impression management. The greedy institution demanding more and more from its workers is challenged by these women who question the cost to both education and themselves. They question the personal consequences of work in a bureaucracy with its traditional rituals and new managerialist influences. Like Sennett (1998), they ask how mutual loyalties and commitments can be sustained in institutions that are constantly breaking apart or continually being redesigned. The words of W4 summarise the cost, for men as well as women, of working in a culture that conflicts with personal values:

Central office … a culture where men were tapped on the shoulder. It was not a risk taking environment; it was filled with ‘grey’ men. X did not succumb [at first] but he has now … grey from not rocking the boat. It’s sad.

Making a difference was particularly difficult for the first women in executive management positions as the expectations were high, both from women who were looking for role models and support, and from men who wanted to maintain the male power base. And there were differences in the way the women viewed the culture and how they worked within it. Women at and near the top either resisted the masculinist culture (but were eventually worn down by that resistance) or modified their behaviour to ‘fit in’ or to survive, thereby both changing the culture and being changed by the culture. One senior executive talked about being on the outer, defined as the ‘other’, struggling to survive in a masculine environment, and the frustration of not being able to make a bigger difference for women. Another, a chief executive, denied any influence of gender in leadership and distanced herself from ‘women’s issues’. She was an exception and perhaps indicative of the increasing influence of the managerialist and rationalist approaches of the nineties. Others expressed frustration, internal conflict and an ethical dimension linked to constraints on their preferred management styles (see Chapter 7). Women in middle and lower level management were inspired by female executives who operated in an inclusive style but confused and disappointed when some women in positions of power seemed to make little difference to the dominant culture.

There were men who were also marginalised by the masculinist culture. As the women in my thesis are quick to point out, “exclusionary forces cannot be neatly arranged along gender lines” (Harris, Thiele & Currie, 1998, p. 146). And as Connell (1995) has
highlighted, there are multiple differences, tensions and oppositions between hegemonic masculinities and complicit, subordinated and marginalised masculinities. The women in the research sample were aware there were exceptions to the rule:

Oh, I’d say that there are many men that found themselves enormously frustrated in that environment. X has to be one of the most talented principals around the place … he is one of the most enthusiastic, hard working, energetic, optimistic people you could ever care to meet. Just a wonderful man in general, [who] does great things in the schools. He had to spend the last couple of years largely in central office and he said the lack of trust in the place … he was totally disillusioned. Now for someone like X to be disillusioned, central office must be even more of a horror show than when I was there. W7

Through their outstanding leadership all of the women were able to make a difference, especially during the brief window of opportunity when government and education policies supporting equity and social justice were high on the agenda. Yet when the tide turns and we hear the cries, “What about the boys?”, rocking the boat becomes exhausting. There are penalties for speaking out and doing things differently. There were one or two who felt that they had completed their contracts in executive management and were in control of their choices. Yet finding a more supportive work environment became a quality of life decision for the majority of these talented and articulate women in management.
Balancing act

*I have yet to hear a man ask for advice on how to combine marriage and a career.*
— Gloria Steinem

*... you had to take home just so much work. I used to try to avoid going into the office so I could be around the kids ... but I reckon I was doing about 90 hours a week. So that meant I had to get up at 4.00 in the morning and do three hours of work before I went to work ... that’s the only time I could find to get the work done ... if I ever had a Sunday off, I would almost feel as though I’d taken long service leave.*
— W6

Balancing career and family

Most of the women in this study talked about their lives being out of balance when they worked in the central office of the Department. However, despite the personal cost and the strain on relationships, they did not cite family commitments as a major reason for leaving the bureaucracy. This is at odds with the traditional understanding of women as unable to take on managerial work due to their onerous private responsibilities related to care: domestic responsibilities, wifework (Maushart, 2001), childcare and aged care. Although approximately one fifth of the sample had significantly limited their early career progress due to domestic responsibilities, others had made choices to place career first. In the few years prior to leaving their employer, the women with children (mostly mid teens to adult) were at career and life stages where they could manage both work and family commitments or had support within their relationships to do so. Thus, at the time of the study, all of the interviewees were able to lead relatively work-centred lives (see also Acker & Feuerverger, 1996).

However, one interviewee was not alone when she pointed out that whist being sidelined was foremost in her decision to leave, the opportunity to spend more time with her young daughter helped confirm her decision. Similar sentiments were expressed by two other...

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26 In a study exploring some of the consequences of the gendered division of labour in universities, Acker & Feuerverger interviewed 27 women in faculties of education in Canada and found that many of the married women had husbands who were retired or worked from home. The interviewees’ comments also indicated that they thought that their jobs were incompatible with juggling the demands of a young family; the older women expressing great empathy for the dilemma that still existed for women who tried to combine motherhood and academic work.
women in the sample. Others did not believe that the extensive hours were conducive to a balanced life but accepted them as a deeply embedded part of the culture. The women with children were able to make the time commitment that their jobs demanded. Therefore, the stereotypical perception that women forego careers in order to spend time with family does not apply to the women in this study. However, most of the women talked about the impact of marriage and family, either from the perspective of remaining single to pursue a career; from a position of admiration for women who combined career and family; in retrospect (the negative impact of marriage and family on early career development); or, in only one case, the balancing act of managing a child under five and a senior management position, albeit with a very supportive partner.

Kerr (1994) found in her study of eminent women that they had the ability to integrate multiple roles in their lives, as leaders in their field, as wives, as mothers and/or as companions. Although the dilemma of multipotentiality for women can be over commitment, finding a balance is possible. Kerr says that most of the eminent women in her study who were also mothers were as committed to parenting as they were to work. Most of them made use of nurses, governesses and household help, making sensible choices as women leading busy lives. While Kerr’s eminent women came from a wide range of social and cultural backgrounds, a major omission in her discussion is the question of social class privilege and its impact on their lives. However, she does illustrate outstanding women using their talents in multiple ways. According to Kerr (1994), the women were not overtaxed ‘superwomen’ or martyrs, but strong women who decided, boldly, to live life to the fullest.

The women in my study managed multiple roles capably. It was significant, however, that ten women had no children and that, at the time of leaving, only one woman had a child under five. Another two had children in primary/early secondary school. Most of the women with two or more children revealed that their children were in advanced stages of secondary school and beyond. The typical pattern for women with children is that they often wait until the children are well past primary school age before working in full time administrative positions with longer hours of work. As one senior manager observed, “Most of the people that I worked with either didn’t have kids or their kids were well and truly grown up” (W5).
Six of the women had never married; one stating that she had made a conscious decision not to marry for the sake of her career (this decision made more than 30 years ago at a time when marriage for women was rarely questioned). Others did not discuss sexual preferences or reasons for not marrying as these questions were beyond the scope of the research. Two participants talked about care for aging family members but at the time of interview were able to commit to full-time work responsibilities. Another 7 were separated, divorced or widowed at the time of interview. The high proportion of unmarried or separated women in the sample – and the high number either without children, or with older children – matches the findings of other research studies, such as a Victorian Department of Education study by Blackmore (1999) which revealed that “[t]he pattern continues to be that most female principals are single or without childcare or domestic responsibility” (p. 78). Bagihole (2003) found that women in non-traditional occupations (working in male dominated environments) were less likely than other women to have partners, less likely to have children, or, if they had children, were more likely to have only one child.

One interviewee, who had held a number of executive positions before taking on a top position in the state education system, felt that a mother’s place was with the children when they were young and was encouraging her own daughter in the same direction. She seemed to support the traditionally accepted view that childcare responsibilities reside with the mother. However, despite having parenting responsibilities during her executive career (teenage and adult children), she was quite definite in her understanding of the division between work and family. As evidenced in her management style and her belief that gender was not an issue (see Chapter 4), she was quite aligned with the masculinist view that family takes a back seat to big job responsibilities. Her view serves to challenge the commonly held perception that women will always place family first:

> I think if you take on a big job, then the balance you find is within work, you forget about family – not forget about them, but your work is your priority – you have taken on a big challenge and I did that for twelve years. Sure you can be hijacked by family: things will go wrong, family life, people can die, kids can get into trouble … family takes priority when it needs to but the [main] priority is your job. I think that people who fret about balance are saying I’m not sure if I really want to be at work in this job or I want to be cocooned at home with my family. Look, if you’ve got a big job then you have made that your priority ahead of your family. It doesn’t mean that you don’t love, care and protect your family, but you are not spending the whole day with them, you are running with your job. My career didn’t take off until I was in my early forties … and I had my kids in my late twenties. If you’ve got small children, then someone has to be home looking after them. I’m a bit old fashioned about that. W20
Like nearly 73 percent of the interviewees in the study by Currie et al. (2002), there was a general acceptance by the women in my study that sacrifices had to be made, that you had to work outside regular hours, even weekends. Family life and leisure time were affected. There were sacrifices to be made in order to do the job well:

As my children grew up, I could then spend more time on my career and I did things that I wanted to do. I often stayed late at work; I was often the last person to leave the office. It wasn’t because I wanted to look good, it was because I wanted to learn more and I wanted to be really clear about the knowledge and experience that I had. I’m not a person who wastes time doing busy stuff or in order to look good. I am a person who believes in flexibility of employment so as a boss I gave my staff the flexibility to go to a sports carnival or work from home when the kids were sick.

W18

I used to work quite long hours, plus if there was the Ministerial Council meeting you’d actually find that you’d come in on weekends simply to do the job. I think that’s ... pretty common throughout. It certainly wasn’t unusual ... It wasn’t every weekend, but there were times I would resent spending Sunday afternoons in there. But generally I wanted to get the job done and do it properly, so I did it. W16

The costs

Despite working the hours necessary to do their jobs well, many of the women interviewed for my thesis reflected on the imbalance in their lives whilst working in the central office of the Education Department. The work was often described as all consuming. This was particularly stressful for the women with children, a stress rarely experienced by men who traditionally have wives or partners to take on primary care responsibilities. Like the women in Acker’s study (2003), many found they had to compromise on sleep and/or time for themselves. W11, a single parent, was grateful that her twelve year-old son was overseas while she worked long hours on time consuming projects in central office. She was concerned at the lack of recognition of lives beyond work and linked the transience and insecurity of central office appointments to a lack of care for individual workloads:

Well things got really out of balance for me when I went into central office … I ended up working very long hours to get these projects done – two, three or four month projects – very long hours. And I couldn’t have done the [name deleted] project in the end unless my son had gone overseas four months before me to go to school in [the UK]. Really I couldn’t have managed because I was working long hours and getting home quite late … and I’d be on the phone at home at night … so I really worked very hard.

There are ways … they just need to get better at ways of recognising people’s lives out of work. I think a system like central office where people don’t own their jobs, where they’re very disempowered to start with, doesn’t encourage a culture that values the person, let alone the lifestyle outside work.
Balancing act

W5 also talked about the uncertainty of the central office environment (a recurring theme in this thesis), the temporary nature of appointments and the resultant destabilising influence on the people who worked there:

There’s still a lot of things that are not sorted out … how districts operate, how central office operates, how central office relates to schools, whether it does relate to schools, how they communicate. I think there are big issues still. And then on top of this you’ve got this personal thing happening all the time because people are never sure how long they’re going to be there. So it’s not a recipe for a good cultural environment – a good working environment.

W7 explained how family relationships suffered when the job was all consuming:

… at the time my marriage was on the rocks and in fact I’d have to attribute, to some extent, the time and energy I was putting into the Department over the years … as contributing to the breakdown of my marriage. It was all consuming and I wasn’t able to give proper due to my family and that was one of the reasons I was keen to get away on study leave, to try to redress that. In the event it turned out to be too little, too late.

I spent a lot of time at work; I had to take work home; I would occasionally work on the weekends. I spent most of my time in meetings and I never got to do my in-tray until everybody else went home … I guess I was able to always be very polite and friendly; I never lost my temper in the organisation [but] I realise now that I would go home and I just didn’t have anything left. I … was expected to be there for [my husband] but I was totally emptied. And there was my relationship with my children – I think to some extent being compromised by all that baggage I was bringing home from the Education Department.

It’s hard to [know where to] place the onus of responsibility but now I have a fantastic job and I no longer have a husband. I come home to my kids and maybe it is a mess but we just sit down and have a chat. We get on fantastically well, we’re good friends, and I’ve just come back from ten weeks away overseas and it’s quite obvious that they genuinely missed me as a person, not just as a cook and cleaner. Thank God I’ve left the Education Department, that’s all I can say.

At executive management meetings, attended mostly by men with wives at home, business could extend well outside normal working hours. W6 reflected on a difficult meeting that went until 9.00 at night (see Chapter 6), made all the more difficult by her primary responsibility for her children. She concluded that story by saying that there was never once any consideration or questioning, such as, “Is it OK to continue going?” Her workload was huge, up to 90 hours per week. To balance work and family she had to radically compromise on sleep and would often get up at 4.00am as well as working on Sundays. And she had to work out strategies to distance herself physically and emotionally from the job in an attempt to escape the greedy institution.
Two women with children talked about the need to deny the existence of family in order to fit in with a culture that did not recognise responsibilities outside work:

Life balance is absolutely not allowed. You cannot have life balance and be a successful bureaucrat in the Education Department, or you couldn’t in those days (mid ’80s to early ’90s). When I was pregnant I tried to make sure it didn’t show because if it did people’s attitude to me in the organisation would become very avuncular and, in fact, … I did not get a position on the Beazley Committee because I was pregnant at the time. And [the Director General] told me that to my face and so having children and being pregnant was a big ‘no’ at that time, a big career negative. So I spent a lot of time making sure that people didn’t realise I was a mother or pregnant or whatever. W3

It would be irrelevant that I had children, no concession was ever given … if they wanted to have a breakfast meeting then it would be a breakfast meeting; if they wanted to have you going till ten at night then we’d do that; if they wanted me to be there at weekends – [there were] many expectations that I would attend functions or conferences that would go for the weekend. We used to go away with the corporative executive for the weekend probably once every three months or so. Yes, so there was no consideration. I rarely had a weekend to myself. [Family] got in the way because that took up time when you could be working. W6

The women without children and women with children beyond the junior and middle school years had great empathy for those with childcare responsibilities. They understood the need for supportive domestic relationships (as is the norm for most men) to sustain the commitment demanded by an organisation structured on the premise of traditional family life:

I worked with colleagues who found it incredibly difficult and I would have to say they were often compromised – being at work and feeling shocking about being at work because there were sick children or whatever. Yes, and those women tended to have solid supportive partnerships because the work place wasn’t giving. Something had to give … there had to be some sort of family support to enable them to, for example, go away for Professional Development – doing PD for a week at a time around the state. That doesn’t happen by chance. W12

I don’t think I could have done either of these jobs if I had a young family. I’d have to do it very differently … I don’t think you would choose to do this job if you had children who were coming home from school at 3.30pm, or [if you did] arrangements would have to be made. I guess that’s why I stayed in teaching so long, because I had to be there for the children. Once they were gone, and I had that opportunity, then I was quite happy to work the way I am now. W17

… I perceive [working women with children] with absolute admiration. I never understand how people manage to deal with all those facets of their lives. [I’m] full of admiration. W2

Easy for me – I just had to get someone to feed the cat. W5
In retrospect many of the interviewees were concerned at the escalation in workloads as
the economic rationalist imperative and culture of surveillance gained prominence in the
'90s. Although the rhetoric surrounding family friendly work practices has also gained
prominence, the actual progress has been slow. Corporate cultures continue to place
unwarranted emphasis on long working hours and even where family-friendly work
options exist (such as working from home or job-sharing) people are loath to use them
lest it be taken as a sign that they are not serious about their work (‘Women’, 2001). And
it is usually women who bear the guilt about extra time away from family:

I think everyone is working too hard … I think there needs to be a balance. It’s said
to us as managers – how important it is to have your own life away from work – and
I say it to my team. Somewhat rhetoric isn’t it? … I can’t see it calming down. I
think we’ve done it to ourselves to some degree, the expectations have kept on
rising, we’re all driven … Having seen me, my daughter certainly wouldn’t become
a teacher. And looking back I think I could have spent more time with family, less
study … W17

Although she did not have children, W2 held a high profile position and recognised the
importance of time management in retaining some balance in her life:

[Work] could have been 24 hours, seven days a week without any doubt whatsoever
… So the time management really did become important and trying to keep some
balance in your life became really important as well. You needed to do it very
consciously … I certainly took my annual leave every year. They sound silly things
but it would have been very easy to say, “I can’t possibly take annual leave this
year.” I consciously did that [and] I tried unsuccessfully, well with some success,
[to find out] what would happen if I tried to keep weekends free. W2

Like good teachers who care for students, good managers practise caring or connective
management. However the ‘caring agenda’ can lead to a gendered division of labour as
many women take on relational work (see Acker & Feuerverger, 1996; Fletcher, 1999)
rarely tackled by men. Managing in such people centred ways takes time with the
resultant high cost to families, relationships, health and personal well-being. The women
in my study, with or without children, reflected on life choices, the all-consuming nature
of their work and the normalisation of masculine work patterns. Contributing further to
the high workload was the time required to manage in an interactive, people centred way,
the preferred style for many of the interviewees. An open door policy often meant that the
administrative work had to be done outside work hours. So long days were followed by
the work taken home:

I didn’t have any family responsibilities so it wasn’t really a concern to me
[personally]. I put in extremely long hours. I really didn’t have a life. I was very
committed to the job; I worked from 7.30 in the morning until 5.30-6.00 at night; I
even went in on weekends at times. But that was my choice at that time. Interestingly when I made the decision to leave that was one of the things that also made my choice for me. I just decided there was more to life … there’s more to life than you running around in the wheel … I don’t think I paid any attention to my own personal life at the time so I think in terms of my family and friendships I think they just got put very much on the back burner. W10

That’s something that I’ve reflected on more since I’ve left. While I was part of it I wasn’t particularly conscious – it was just the norm. But since I’ve left I’ve become aware that people work incredibly long hours, a huge demand on their time, deeply committed to what they do, but it’s such a normal expectation … I didn’t realise until I was off the treadmill as it were, that there was a different life and there was a different way to organise your work life. I mean for years I took home a briefcase full of stuff – even when you finished the day late you take home a whole briefcase full of stuff – and you would come in the next day and show up incredibly early. Because you’re running an open door policy and you’re working with teams and you’ve got meetings and people coming into your office all the time. That’s how I prefer to do it. The legacy is a massive amount of stuff that doesn’t get attended to, but has to be attended to sometime, so that’s the ‘take-home’. W1

It was part of the culture to be seen, to arrive early, to work late. This was a culture that suited traditional men whose wife took most of the responsibility for family, thus supporting her partner in his career development. This contrasted sharply with the situation for women with children who postponed their career development until their children were older or, in a few exceptional cases, had an unusually supportive partner or a ‘stay at home’ husband. As explained by Morley (1999), overwork and ‘presenteeism’ [or ‘presentism’ as coined by Cooper (cited in Saunders, 1996a)] are examples of the internalisation of coercive power relations linked to changing economic and organisational cultures.

But the women in my study were not concerned with looking good. They worked long hours to meet the demands of the job, and to manage huge workloads. Many felt that they worked harder than most of their male colleagues (see also Acker & Feuerverger, 1996); the division of labour was skewed. As explained by a number of the interviewees, a collaborative, consultative and connective style of leadership, vital to good management, compounds the time commitment. This invisible, but essential relational work, like housework, can often fall to women:

That year [of restructuring and change] I had every single person, including the men, all crying at some stage. If I had been a man, in this role as manager, I would not have had that – coming in here and expressing their feelings. I think that is quite draining … you carry that as well as managing the job, the hugeness of it. You are also being mindful of those people – and I think they share more about their problems outside than they would with a male … it’s that nurturing thing that comes out, and I think that’s an added burden, or added dynamic … [but] I think it is part
and parcel of good management, being mindful of your people and your team, looking after their welfare. W17

And stress is a factor when the demands of work reach impossible levels. W21 talked about the complexities of juggling multiple interactions at senior executive level:

A characteristic of the role was that I was never able to pay attention to anything in a very sustained way so I had to be able to switch sometimes fifteen, sixteen times a day, from one thing to the other. I might finish meeting someone, then I would meet someone else and straight away I would have to remember what I talked about with this new person the last time and pick up the conversation without missing a beat, otherwise people think that you don’t care about what they do. But what it meant was that sometimes I felt like I wasn’t in charge of my work, that it was in charge of me. W21

As these stories reveal, the balancing act was difficult, but to do the job to a high standard these women were prepared to put in the hours. It was often only in retrospect that they questioned the enormity of the workload and the quality of life that resulted from the inordinate amount of time devoted to work. A relational management style, an open door policy, taking time to deal with people issues at work, took patience and time, and contributed to the sense of exhaustion expressed by many.

Early career influences

Three women explained that earlier career decisions had been influenced, and their choices limited, by placing the needs of relationships and family first. They exhibited interrupted career patterns as opposed to the linear career development more common to men in traditional line management positions. Some had been limited in their career development by decisions not to go to country postings (a past requirement for permanency and access to promotional positions) or not to take on administrative positions earlier in their careers due to family commitments. A husband on a higher income can mean that the wife’s career becomes secondary as she carries most of the weight of family responsibilities, including childcare and ‘wifework’ (Maushart, 2001). Traditionally this pattern has been considered the ‘normal’ path for most women in permanent relationships. However these women were a minority in the sample. The women who had attained senior management and executive positions usually had few interruptions to their careers either because they remained single, did not have children, or had supportive partners or carers while the children were young (sometimes a partner who worked from home or had flexible working hours enabling the primary focus on the woman’s career).
The real problem for women who have taken extended career breaks is recovering from that position on returning to the workforce. Gaining permanent status as an employee in the Education Department was, until recently (late 1990s), contingent upon several factors, such as a promotional transfer system, full time employment, tertiary (4-year) qualifications and, significantly, demonstrated capacity to go to a country posting. Without this mobility, many temporary teachers (mostly women) found permanent status out of reach. So these women often chose alternative pathways, forgoing leadership positions (which were dependent on permanent status) and consequent line management experience, which was so vital to gaining promotion through the system. W9 explained:

... during the previous restructure in 1987, when they really turned the Department on its ear I was given the opportunity to apply for District Superintendent. I made a choice not to go, to not choose the country. Now I know that affected my career ... because of my home life and circumstances I made that choice knowingly ... and I think a lot of women make choices like that still. So what you do then is choose; you go in a different direction as a result of that life choice.

Another research participant, whose children were now adults, talked about putting her career on hold while the children were young because her career took second place in her marriage to a successful executive. She moved away from her extended family support network to follow her husband’s career, thereby reducing her options for childcare, interrupting her study and following the traditional path for many years:

It took me many years to realise that I had been conditioned to follow the traditional path of supportive mother and wife. The financial security provided by a husband in executive management actually held back my own career development. I was a temporary teacher ... I worked part-time at first and because my job came second to husband and family, I couldn’t move to a country teaching appointment to advance my career. It is impossible to regain those years in career terms. I have had to find other ways of developing my leadership abilities, but those other experiences of leadership have never really counted in a hierarchically structured organisation. W13

W4 told of the difficulties of juggling family and work commitments and the energy required:

27 All of these structural barriers were removed in the period 1996-1998 following a comprehensive analysis of gender equity in promotion (Saunders, 1993). All promotional positions are now available on merit only (Barrera et al., 1999). The removal of the 4-year qualification requirement was significantly influenced by an EEO case (1994-1995) that I initiated. Ironically, I had recently completed my BEd (with High Distinctions in all subjects) but was denied access to a promotional position because the final results had not been published. As a result my job application was deleted by the chair of the selection panel. After one year of negotiations the case was conciliated in my favour and the job was readvertised. I did not get the job.
The traditional woman’s role of supporting a husband’s career, and children, took energy. Women get exhausted with the double role. Surviving as a mother, bringing children up well … I had to balance home and work – my priorities were governed by things like meals, set times. There was no career management on my own part or by others.

She talked about the need to move on from a relationship where she was expected to play the supportive role at the expense of her own development:

One personal relationship narrowed my life. I finished the relationship with some regrets but I needed more.

One woman who made a conscious decision to remain single in order to pursue her career, highlighted the impact of gender, particularly in the early years when structural barriers meant women were denied access to management positions. She wanted a career in education at the time when women had to resign on marriage and when even single women were denied access to school principal positions. Although the structural barriers to women gaining promotion have been removed, the effect on early career was significant. “Women of this generation required particular resilience and drive to enter and remain in the academic workforce at a time when not even lip-service was paid to the idea of equal occupational opportunities, and when women were often presented with the choice of marriage or career” (Cass, 1983, p. 124). In making a definite choice of career over marriage W2 was conscious of being one of a few women at that time applying for promotional positions and described the resultant acceleration of her career. But she talked about male advantage and the contingent nature of women’s careers (a theme raised by many of the interviewees):

The critical start for me was making a decision that I would go career and not marry and that was the quite conscious decision because it was an either or at that time. If you married you lost your seniority and hence you went backwards career wise. As a married woman you couldn’t apply for promotional positions so there was a conscious decision. So I made the decision to go career wise and by doing that I joined a small minority of women who by default were destined to have more rapid career advancement because we still had gender-linked positions at the deputy level. So you could actually get to those as your first career step [and] you had enormous acceleration of career. Then you had to sit there because there was nowhere else for you to go because you couldn’t be a principal. So I really applied for positions as they came up, had a head of department and then several deputy positions and then I did have to seriously think career because there wasn’t the automatic step after that. I consciously chose career over marriage.

Of course you didn’t know [your career direction in the sense that men often do] … When you met young men at teachers’ college, and I taught at a teachers’ college, they could tell you exactly what they were going to do. They were going to be a Class 4 principal, then get their Class 3 and work towards … they had a whole range [of strategies]. Of course, when I started, women – except for junior primary –
weren’t principals. You did a bit of path finding yourself and I think it actually made it quite interesting.

Research on family life in Australia, conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (Edgar, 1997) and a study by Newspoll (Niesche, 2000), confirms that women still shoulder most of the responsibility for household domestic chores, even in relationships where both partners are employed in work outside the home. The survey by Newspoll revealed that while Australian husbands or de facto partners “know household chores are a shared responsibility, they dramatically overvalue their contribution”. Most men seem to think that “waving a feather duster around the lounge room or putting some plates in the dishwasher makes for a fair share of the housework” (Niesche, 2000). Of the married and de facto men surveyed, some 60 per cent believed that they did their fair share and 8 per cent said they did more than their fair share. But when specific contributions were measured a different story emerged: 12 per cent of men had primary responsibility for doing the laundry; vacuuming (20 per cent); cooking (13 per cent); shopping (11 per cent); cleaning the bathroom (12 per cent); and ironing (9 per cent). In fact, the only household chore they excelled at was taking out the rubbish (65 per cent)!

The findings would be humorous if they didn’t have such an influence on the structure of work outside the home. The lack of workplace and government policies enabling women and men to more easily combine work and home responsibilities is directly linked to a situation where most men have no need for such policies. It is easier to stay at work until the chores are done and it is more advantageous to men to have a single focus. A single focus means more time devoted to career (and less involvement at home) which in turn reinforces the expectation that a good worker is the worker with few commitments outside work.

Men are supposed to consider work as their primary time priority, whereas women are expected to make the family their first priority. Men who do not focus on work first, or women who do, are making personal choices that run counter to the norms and face disapproval from their peers in and out of the workplace (Epstein cited in Epstein & Kalleberg, 2001). Thus combining work and home is seen as a conflict for women rather than another form of time allocation that is normative (hence many women at work remain silent about their home and family commitments), although studies show that many who do combine these roles find them gratifying and energising (Epstein & Kalleberg, 2001).
Finding support

Another story contrasted strongly with the stories of the women who followed the traditional path of supportive wife and primary carer. W3, one of the younger women in the sample, explained that she was able to juggle a higher level management position and a child of five because she had a very supportive husband who basically put her career before his own. He took an interest in her job and an active role in the care of their daughter. Interestingly, in her second marriage, her husband, whom she had met through work, was also very supportive. W3 highlighted the significance of a supportive relationship (both physically and emotionally) in managing a job so all-consuming in terms of time and energy:

Well I got a divorce at the end of that period, but I put a lot of my success during that period down to my first husband. He was very supportive, he still is, I get on very well with him and I could not have done it without him, particularly with a young daughter. He was just absolutely wonderful. That marriage fell apart for a whole pile of reasons … you know a lot of people say to me, “Oh those times must have ruined your marriage”. The answer is that it didn’t. That was not what ruined the marriage, there were other personal factors involved in that and I’m still very grateful for the support that he gave me during that period … Yes, he basically subordinated his career to mine, there’s no doubt about that, and I couldn’t have done without that because those bureaucracies are just vicious in their requirements of time. You just have to be in the office ten hours a day, six days a week and you just have to be there, and there’s just no two ways about it.

That’s another one of the reasons why I got out … I wanted to have a highflying career and I wanted to spend time with my daughter (who was five at the time) and that was one of the things that helped me make the decision.

Then in my second marriage I sort of got the same situation, where I have someone who is one hundred per cent supportive of what I do. And once again I couldn’t do without it – I think [that’s] probably part of the package of the sort of people who appeal to me. [The support] can be everything from childcare to just to being really prepared to talk for hours on end about all the things … my work, and help me with it, which both my first and second husbands have been prepared to do.

Actively seeking support, having partners with the flexibility or the circumstances to spend time at home, tapping into domestic services, outsourcing housework and leaving time for self care were recurring points of discussion under the theme of life balance. A number of women in senior management positions talked about and the importance of doing the ‘smart things’ in terms of physical well-being and support in their personal lives:

… certainly the time that you can spend with family and friends is eroded significantly and so you’ve got to work through that and the friends that you have and keep are those who understand. Yes you do … all the smart things, like you find the dry-cleaner that dry-cleans on Saturdays and you find the shop you can ring up
and pick something up at 5 o’clock – the things that we all do now, but I had to learn all of those things [early in my career]. W2

You’ve got to do smart things like have cleaning ladies and all those kinds of things … that’s what I’ve said in women’s groups – don’t let the women down by using your domestic arenas as excuses for not being able to do the job as well as the guys who’ve got all the support. So basically you’ve just got to think ahead … have all those things well managed. For me, I know, in terms of having somebody who would understand what I’m doing, what I’m trying to achieve is important. And I’d done the executive development program so we tried to have an exercise program, but when you start very early and don’t finish till late at night, I think that’s probably when I purchased an exercise bike. But what I do now in fact is put my track suit in the car at least four days a week and make sure, even if it’s raining, I’ll get changed into that track suit so that as I’m driving home either past [the lake or the park] I can do a good walk. I try to do that thirty-minute walk a day if I can.

W14

Time for reflection and debriefing was seen as vital to functioning as a good manager and expressed eloquently by W4:

I believe, in managing teams of people, it is important to be ‘clean’; not to carry ‘your stuff’ into the work situation. You need to debrief. I didn’t realise there was such a thing as that kind of support and I pay for that support now. W4

Interestingly, W15 looked at the capacity for self-reflection through the lens of gender:

I’m not sure if self-reflection is a masculine trait at all. I mean there are men who are capable of it and who do it, but they seem to be the exception rather than the rule … and I do know some women who haven’t got any [self reflective ability]. Needing to have some insight into your own self. But … it’s almost as if we now have to wait until men evolve. I mean the notion … all of the talk about men being in trouble and boys being in trouble and what Bob Connell is saying … or indeed any of that discussion about gender – it’s that construction of masculinity which men find very difficult to examine, because that really gets to the core of how they see themselves. It’s very confronting. [In addition] women have changed a lot in the last twenty, twenty-five years and taken up many more places in society, broadened their roles in society. Men haven’t changed much and you almost have to wait for them. My God … I mean that’s a hundred years; two thousand years!

She linked the retarded rate of personal growth and change that she saw in many males to the comfort that comes with positions of power and privilege:

If they’ve had a tail wind all their lives why would they bother … It’s only if you’ve got to run into a head wind for a bit you might start asking yourself, “Why am I always battering my head against a brick wall?” … Traditional men … privileged all their lives … they are not questioning at all. And they’ve lived traditional lives. Their wives haven’t been in the paid workforce, so they’ve always had somebody to look after them. And that’s what Amanda Sinclair [1994] found when she interviewed men at the top in private industry. They all, almost without exception, had wives who were the traditional housewives at home looking after them and so they had absolutely no conception of what it was like … [similarly] Helen Saunders
did *Acts of Courage* [1996a] and looked at the Western Australian scene and found somewhat the same – that the CEOs were pretty much the same.

**Family friendly equity areas**

The women managing equity related areas less affected by the dominant culture could set up more family friendly environments, more conducive to a life outside work. There was less pressure to conform to the ‘long hours at work’ imperative. The attitude of one senior manager carried over into her efficient and effective management style:

I tried *not* to take work home. Of course that’s not [always] possible, but I’d rather get in there early or stay late and finish it there. You always take work home, whether you’re actually physically doing work [or not], it’s always in your mind. But I always worked out ways of overcoming that. Renovating houses was what kept me fairly well balanced because it just took my mind on to something completely different … But I’m not a bad time manager. I’m pretty efficient and if I need to prioritise and scale down I know how to do that fairly well. W5

However she did recall the stress of a previous restructure:

1988 … that year that would have been the most stressful year I’d ever experienced. I had more headaches than I like to think about; that was a very, very stressful time and certainly there was no sense, no question of life being balanced. It was a day-to-day survival in trying to keep things going and to reorganise when the structure had been completely demolished. So that was really tough. W5

Another incident demonstrated how a change in leadership can have devastating consequences when poor management leads to a breakdown of trust. An interviewee who had many years experience in equity related positions and working in a collaborative team environment met with a new director in a restructure which lead to the disbanding of the EEO branch. The new director’s management style eventually caused W15 to reassess her dedication to the job. The experience had a huge impact on her working life:

In the last three or four years there I had a new director – a bully. A typical male style – one thing completely missing from her makeup was empathy. She made sure she looked after her own career. Both the director and the manager she mentored were bullies. She claimed in her job description that she was a mentor but she mentored only one person, a person who developed the same bullying style.

When the new director took up her position she called us into the office, one by one, and gained our confidence – just to get us to open up about our jobs, what we wanted, how we worked – and afterwards she used it against us. On one occasion I was just so upset when I was driving home afterwards – something she did in that meeting struck a raw nerve and something just snapped. It was then I made the decision to pull back; I started to think of retirement; age comes into account. In fact that director inadvertently did us a favour – we started to plan, to organise our superannuation, whereas before we just went along.

When I asked how she felt after that eventful meeting she replied:
Devastated. Absolutely devastated. And I felt ...I remember explaining to somebody at the time I felt as if ... everything that I held dear was just mocked ... I suppose that is the word. It was quite an extreme reaction, but one of the other staff had exactly the same reaction too and was distraught, as I was distraught, and when we tried to analyse it later we couldn’t really understand why we’d had such an extreme reaction, but we did.

Through the experience of being subjected to a bullying management style she lost confidence and withdrew her trust. It took a long time to heal the wounds.

My capacity to make decisions, contribute ideas – there was no opportunity under that director so I lost confidence in my ability to do those things. It took me months to get back some of myself and it was only in the new job that I realised how much I had closed down. Even in the new job I won’t work those hours again, give up all of myself. W15

Reflection

In a patriarchal society the institution of marriage and the act of having children are accepted as the norm. Women diverging from that norm inevitably invoke resistance: from men who are advantaged in an arrangement where women take both emotional and physical responsibility for ‘wifework’ (childcare, homecare, husband care) (Maushart, 2001) and from other women supporting the ‘natural’ role of women. Making the choice to remain single, childless or divorced is to go against societal pressure to be coupled and to procreate. A conscious choice not to marry, not to have children, or to be a single mother is a choice that disrupts the normalised path to ‘true womanhood’ and requires the courage to be different. The pressure on women to conform comes from multiple sources, such as the media, popular magazines and popular fiction, family, school and community. Yet, as the following statistics indicate, there has been a marked shift in marriage and birth rate patterns in Australia, as in other western countries, since women began entering the workforce in large numbers (Andrews and Curtis cited in Brabazon, 2002):

A 1992 parliamentary report surmised that 20-30 percent of Australian women will never have children. Similarly the marriage rate in 1996 was the lowest since 1900, with a predicted 22 percent of women remaining unmarried at the age of thirty-five … [indicating that] the number of men and women who will never marry has doubled over the past twenty-five years. (p.88)

As observed by Barbara Pocock (quoted in Bachelard, 2001), “Women are not fools, the poor circumstances for the combination of caring and paid work in Australia … are directly contributing to women’s choices to have smaller numbers of children, to have them later in life, or to have no children at all” (p. 8).
The rapid decline in the Australian birth rate has lead to “a growing hysteria about the consequences for the population and the future of the country … How to get women to have more babies has become a subject of almost daily press and political discussion” (Summers, 2003, p. 226). The declining birth rate is an international trend repeated wherever women have access to contraception, education and employment opportunities. The politically driven panic reaction to women controlling fertility raises the question: Is the hidden agenda one that wants to return women to the kitchen where they belong?

Gender reforms tend to centre on childcare issues as women (and some men) try to balance home and work demands. But the structural addition of childcare (albeit with its prohibitive cost and scarcity of places) has meant that the full-time workplace has only minimally altered its organisation to the (feminine) rhythms of domestic responsibilities (Brabazon, 2002). The expectation that women will take responsibility for childcare and childcare arrangements is rarely questioned as traditional (masculine) expectations continue to define working life.

The presence of a wife and the portability of family is taken for granted in the early career development of many males, allowing experience in country and remote locations, a training ground for up and coming executives. And “men’s managerial careers are often constructed with the help of the invisible support of women as secretaries and wives” (Collinson & Hearn, 1996, p. 13 citing both Finch and Grey). But women are rarely supported by partners who are prepared to subjugate their own career aspirations (Sinclair, 1994). Many women tend to have multiple work loads – work, children, partner and extended family – yet even if they manage these capably, they must often face the implied criticism that they put work second or, alternatively, that they are poor mothers (Kirner & Rayner, 1999).

While we continue to focus on the ways women can balance work and family, we neglect the heart of the debate which centres on shared parenting and shared domestic responsibilities. Men are parents too; men partner, marry, live in dwellings; yet their ability to balance work and family is rarely questioned. The reason for this is the underlying assumption, based on a now outdated/minority model, that men have wives who stay at home to care for their needs and for their children. This is an assumption that shapes expectations. Thus a critical problem in the work cultures in many organisations today is that the ideal worker is conceived as someone who has no responsibilities outside
of work (Fletcher, 2002). This is a view that not only advantages most men and
disadvantages most women, but a view that denies the full development of the whole
person, the person as an individual with multiple-faceted interests and responsibilities.
Also rarely questioned is the assumption that longer time at work equals increased
efficiency and effectiveness. Perhaps employees supported to be better able to integrate
their work and personal lives can be more effective (Fletcher, 2002) and more creative in
both their time management and their work outcomes.

As Marilyn Lake (1999) points out, women’s excessive burden of domestic work not only
relieves men of the necessity of pulling their weight, but lets them earn higher incomes,
which in turn consolidates their power. Adding to the complexity of women’s roles, the
caring agenda spills over into working life. Many of the interviewees commented that
managing in a people centred way took time, leading to an unequal division of labour for
women who felt that they were working harder than many of the men (see also Acker &
Feuerverger, 1996). In making time at work for relational work, the boundaries of public
and private become blurred and (mostly) women take the responsibility for work which is
of high importance yet still undervalued in most work places where discourses of
rationality are privileged as an ideal for effective organisational life (Putnam & Mumby,
1993).

Interestingly, the decisions of the women in this research study to leave their employment
with the Education Department were not based on family and childcare responsibilities.
As this chapter has shown, most of the interviewees with children were able take on more
demanding leadership roles because their children were past the early and middle
childhood years. The few women with younger children felt the conflicting demands of
home and work more acutely yet managed their lives so that they could meet the demands
of the job, even if that meant cutting back on sleep and time for self and relationships.
Although the women were critical of an environment that ignored the impact of hours and
conditions of work on personal lives (the job could be all consuming in terms of
emotional and physical energy), it cannot be concluded that family commitments were
holding back their career development at the time of this study.

For some women a desire for more life balance and time for family was cited as a
contributing factor in the decision to leave but that alone would not have prompted the
decision. It was the desire to work in a more supportive environment, in a workplace
more closely aligned with their values that was at the forefront of the decision-making
process. Of course working long hours for the organisation (the greedy institution/the addictive organisation, see Chapter 4) raises questions of collusion with a culture of overwork and why women seeking organisational success feel compelled to do so. Perhaps the lone woman feels powerless to resist, or having resisted, becomes exhausted, especially in the face of neo-liberal reforms in the public services which have supported a ‘do more with less’ agenda. Balancing family, community, social and work commitments was not easy. And despite working extended hours easily matching, or exceeding, those of their male counterparts, all but the two highest ranking women reached a point where their careers were stalled.
Being treated differently

She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other.

— De Beauvoir (1949)

The micropolitics of advantage

Organisations are not gender neutral as the processes of ‘normalisation’ (Acker, 1990; Cockburn, 1991) of the male experience would have us believe. Explaining how organisational cultures are gendered, Acker (1990) says that “advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine” (p. 146). The construction of binaries, or oppositional categories, advantages men who are inevitably seen as in control, rational and superior. If difference is equated to soft, ‘lesser than’ or in terms of the female accommodating the male, the image of male as central, normal and dominant remains intact. “Images of men’s bodies and masculinity pervade organisational processes, marginalising women and contributing to the maintenance of gender segregation in organisations” (Acker, 1990, p. 139). The positing of male participation in work as normal “constructs men as the standard against which women as workers are to be judged” (Currie et al., 2002) and creates an imperative for women to choose between being treated as the same as men or different from men, leaving unchallenged and unquestioned what men are like and how they live their lives (Bacchi, 1990). Those women who succeed in work are likely to be those who are most like men, at least in their material circumstances (Currie et al., 2002).

As further pointed out by Eveline (1994), the male norm operates to advantage men. Not only does the male norm imply that women fall short of the standard (as defined by men), it conceals the advantage for males within a rhetoric of disadvantage for women. While the discourse of female disadvantage remains unchallenged in the literature (and in Australian workplaces) “the everyday spectrum of privileges that accrue to men are taken as unremarkable” (p. 130). Instead of equal opportunity policies singling men out for
remedial treatment, women are viewed as the problem and are deemed in need of more training, more self-esteem, more assertiveness, more skills. Thus programs generally focus on ‘fixing the women’ rather than addressing the behaviour of men.

The workplace is a major site of gender politics, operating to preserve and maintain the male advantage, but over time, with raised awareness of discrimination through equal opportunity legislation, the political games become more subtle. Direct gender discrimination is now less common in educational institutions immersed in educational change agendas and embracing the mantle of ‘diversity’. Yet gendered attitudes surface in more subtle ways, in ways that are difficult to pin down, in ways that assume men will be in charge. These attitudes are difficult to challenge because the issues are submerged and silenced. To raise them is to go against the mob. Morley (1999) uses the term *micropolitics* to describe the gendered subtext of organisational life and the power imbalances which influence everyday transactions in institutions. In an international study of feminist academics and students, Morley explains the micropolitics of coercive power relations and gender regulation in the academy. The women in her study exposed “how power is relayed through seemingly trivial incidents and transactions”, highlighting how “patriarchal power is exercised, rather than simply possessed” (Morley, 1999, p. 5).

According to Morley:

> Micropolitics is about influence, networks, coalitions, political and personal strategies to effect and resist change. It involves rumour, gossip, sarcasm, humour, denial, ‘throwaway remarks’, alliance building. (pp. 4-5)

She suggests that although feminists working within academic institutions are constrained by the hierarchy, which ultimately disempowers, they can push the boundaries by developing an understanding of micropolitics. “[M]icropolitical awareness renders competition and domination more visible; revealing processes of stalling, sabotage, manipulation, power, bargaining, bullying, harassment and spite” (Morley, 1999, pp. 73-74).

In my research I use the concept of micropolitics to delve into the details of the stories of women in the educational bureaucracy who were sensitive to a gendered working environment. These women knew that something was wrong, and their words and feelings revealed their frustrations, disillusionment and sense of transgressed values. Despite outstanding management performance records they were treated differently, had to prove themselves over and over again, and still encountered resistance. Interviewee
W15, who had an indepth understanding of EEO policy and changes over time, explained why confronting discrimination against women is such a complex issue. It is the everyday ‘amorphous’ processes of normalising the male advantage that make it unlikely that men themselves will interrogate their positions of power and privilege. She talks of the difficulties for women in challenging ‘the natural order of things’ and the difficulties for profeminist men who want to support change for women. If they speak out they are automatically identified with the powerless group:

You can’t openly and overtly discriminate [anymore] … although I’m sure there are individuals … who would be overtly sexist. But nonetheless it’s just a given that men will be in charge. That it is a natural thing for men ... I mean our society says that and so the Education Department reflects that. So it’s very difficult for women to challenge that. It’s more amorphous ... what can you point to?

And it’s much harder to have the men raise the men’s awareness to the fact that they are privileged, because ... well that’s just the way it is. I think it’s difficult for men to speak out (if there are men who do want to change things for women); they can’t speak out because they are then identified with the powerless group. They’re identified with women and it takes a lot of courage for men to do that on any level, whether it’s speaking out against rape or sexual harassment, or sexist language, or anything. It takes a lot of courage for a man to step across that line and line up alongside women.

Of course, there are men who are genuine in their questioning of the gendered status quo; conversely there are men who want to be seen as supporting women. Over a decade ago Cockburn (1991) interviewed union women who questioned the rhetoric of the men at the top in their apparent project of transforming the union to meet women’s needs. Some women, particularly those active on women’s issues, were skeptical, “They felt that for some men “a thing isn’t necessarily done because it is right. It’s done to be seen to be doing it” (p. 123).

Even men genuinely aware of gender issues do not face the same battles as women who are discriminated against simply because they are women. More importantly, if they are women who question, who rock the boat, the consequences are dire:

The bottom line is women will not get on. My young colleague – bright, reflective – does not want to compromise her values; she doesn’t want to play the game. She won’t get on … The ‘troublemakers’ … they go off and do their own consultancy work because they know they are not going to get anywhere in the hierarchy … [Women] have more chances of staying, of moving up, if they don’t rock the boat … it goes back to what we were saying before … maybe hiding your real self to some extent in order to survive and to move up. Whether both men and women do that [is an interesting question]. W15
In total, two thirds of the women in the study said that being treated differently as a woman\textsuperscript{28} was a contributing factor in their decision to leave the organisation. They were very aware of gender and equity issues and articulate in their responses, picking up on the micropolitical processes which subtly and subversively work against women and advantage men. Many commented that it was amazing that some men seemed to think that their little power plays and boys’ club games went unnoticed. Undermining can be subtle: scrupulously polite male colleagues can “treat you like a queen, then undermine you behind your back” (Cockburn, 1991, p. 122) or they can “praise your achievements in private but refrain from acknowledging those achievements in public” (W13). Often gender discrimination is submerged, simmering just below the surface, and therefore difficult to challenge. Assertive behaviour in pointing out the games is greeted with, “Don’t take it personally”; “I think you’re reading too much into it”; or “We thought you knew!” (Focus Group comments) and other words of denial, often inferring paranoia.

A powerful woman automatically comes under closer scrutiny. Seven of the 21 women were in senior and executive management positions, either substantively or acting, at director level or above. The other women were managers, education and policy officers, consultants or project leaders. Many felt that there was a general feeling among the men that equity was not an issue, that women had equal opportunities and that their access to jobs was unrestricted; except for women with children who obviously didn’t want the jobs anyway! In addition, they all knew men who felt that equal opportunity had gone too far and that the women were taking all the jobs.

There were men who actually did think quite genuinely of the difficulties women faced in their career development. And then [there were] those who thought that women were privileged, “We poor men, we’re down-trodden – there’s some grand coup”. W2

The predominantly female workforce in primary schools often evokes concern that there will be few male role models for boys in school. W15 challenged the hysteria that surrounds the ‘feminisation’ of teaching and despaired for change in an environment where the male principal is seen as the ‘head of the house’ and the female primary school teacher is accepting of her subservient status:

\textsuperscript{28} In this chapter, ‘being treated differently’ is used to describe gender discrimination against women, sometimes quite blatant treatment, at other times more subtle and hidden. As described by my research participants, the inequitable treatment of women was manifested in various ways, at different times and in different contexts in the Education Department.
Being treated differently

… I’ve always likened it to the traditional family: mum, dad and the kids – in primary – because the principals are nearly always men, and that’s dad. And the women … often the women teachers in primary are very, very subservient.

I don’t know. I’m probably not a good one to talk to at the moment, because I feel despair that it will never … in the end women are just going to bump their heads against a glass ceiling or have their feet stuck on the sticky floor or whatever. You can’t change it. I don’t know; I really do not know. Women running their own companies; women running their own education systems; yet you’ve only got to look at the alarm that is raised at the feminisation of the teaching profession. Shock, horror that they should have only women teaching them. It’s an insult to the women – to see that there’s a real fear – there’s a fear that just sort of goes boom when they realise, for example, that there might only be women and no men at all in a primary school. And their students would only be getting taught by women! I must say, “Well what’s wrong with that?”

Thus the attitude that men will be in charge can be influenced by the degree of acceptance of the status quo – by men and by women. And it varies across the system, between primary and secondary schools and within central office. This thesis is about women in leadership who were not satisfied with inequitable treatment and who wanted their talents, abilities and ideas as leaders recognised and rewarded.

The lone female

Their arithmetic never really computed. Basically they’d think one woman in the job was the woman in education kind of takeover. They would think that’s equal. W14

The isolation of being the only female, or one of a few, was expressed through a variety of responses, particularly by women at senior management levels. Being the ‘lone female’ placed senior managers in the spotlight and could result in their being targeted, attacked and bullied. This discriminatory treatment takes its emotional toll, and displays of emotion by female managers are judged harshly in a regulated masculine ‘rational’ environment (Sachs & Blackmore, 1998). A notable characteristic of these talented and articulate women was their ability to respond assertively and with dignity. They held their ground, resisted unfair treatment and did not accept being treated inequitably. This response by W6 may be threatening to some men who are accustomed to subservience in women; women ‘being nice’ in the face of adversity.

I do remember one question I was asked in the interview, by [a male panel member] who said to me, “Well how on earth do you hope to be able to do this job given that you’re young, you’re female and you’re not a teacher?” I just said, “Well thank you for pointing out three of my best attributes!” and then went on to elaborate why they were going to be valuable in this job. I think he was quite pleased in spite of the fact that I was able to give him a retort. W6
W6 often found her male colleagues “behaving like naughty boys” and behaving differently depending on whether a male or female was in charge. On one memorable occasion she found that she was singled out as the lone woman at a corporate executive meeting: an ‘easy target’ for budget cuts to her area. The behaviour of the men had degenerated while the female CEO was on leave and further degenerated each time the acting CEO (a male) left the room in the course of a long and difficult meeting:

There’s a story I often tell, so it’s pretty clear in my mind and it sounds extreme, but it’s very true. We were in a corporate executive meeting and this was at the time when [a male CEO] was there acting, so it was all men with the exception of myself. We were looking at the budget and having to argue about who gets what in the budget and we were going through cost reductions … Anyway, to cut a long story short, [the CEO] got called out of the meeting and had to go and address this group [of union demonstrators] and deal with the Minister so somebody else took over chairing the meeting. Now the minute [the CEO] left they all turned on me because we’d all been arguing about why we had to keep our positions, why … you know. They all turned on me and said, “Well, Equal Opportunity can go … we’ve done that now … [we can] save x thousand dollars, three FTE’s, so get rid of it … that’s the good way of doing it.” They never mentioned a word of that whilst [the CEO] was there.

… while they would want to be passing it off as a joke, I knew they were serious … It was really a ganging up. The meeting moved from just working logically and rationally through each area [to be] aimed at me. When [the CEO] came back into the room the behaviour reverted, and it was so obvious. They were going on like this and he had to go in and out of the room a few times. This meeting I remember went until 9.00 at night. It was basically like we have to stay here until we’ve made this decision. It was that sort of singling someone out, picking on them, thinking she’s the weakest, most vulnerable; we’ll get to her, in the very competitive situation that we were in.

She described herself as “fairly emotionally overwrought” at the end of the meeting, (especially as she was also worried about her children at home alone) but made it known to a male colleague who colluded by ‘sitting on the fence’ that she was equally disappointed in his behaviour:

… I was fairly emotionally overwrought at the end of the meeting and as I was going out of the meeting X came up, as only X can, put his arm on my shoulder and said, “Gee they treated you a bit rough in there, didn’t they?” I just turned and said, “X, yes they did and I’m very disappointed in you.” And he said to me, “I didn’t do anything!” I said, “No, and you didn’t speak up when the others [attacked me].” And there was this [reaction of] shock, horror, oh really?

X wouldn’t have spoken up because if he did then the other guys would have turned on him. He … would be speaking out against their behaviour. So he was thinking if he could straddle both sides … stay in good with me because he wouldn’t have been part of it and stay in OK with them by not criticising them; but I was determined to make him know it was not going to work.

Her final response was to turn her anger into action in a very assertive way:
… by the next morning, instead of being upset I was angry and I went to see each one of them individually and told them that I thought their behaviour was despicable. “I’ll not countenance that sort of immature, sexist behaviour in future.” They [responded with] shock, horror, who me? Oh, well, you’ve taken it the wrong way … that sort of stuff. Under normal circumstances I would just say, “Yes, OK, sorry” but I was quite angry and I said, “Well I don’t care how you meant it, or how you think you meant it, this is how it came across”.

In the end I scared them so much with my individual discussions where I was obviously pretty determined, and no they didn’t succeed … Oh they would see us as all fair game and yet they wouldn’t treat their own gender in the same way.

W6 realised that although she thought she had the support of the executive team, she was in fact being treated differently because of her gender:

So, on the one hand, I guess I sort of skated along thinking well OK, the rest of the culture is like that and I don’t like it, but my colleagues at least treat me with respect. But they were part of the situation as well.

It was like the teacher’s away and we’ve got one of our mates in now … and people who had previously been normal colleagues of mine – there are always some sort of underlying issues about gender – suddenly turned into people who were commenting on my gender and just treating me slightly differently. When [the female CEO] came back, that behaviour stopped again. [That change in behaviour] made me very much aware of how superficial it was and I felt very uncomfortable from thereon with those people … Whilst their behaviour went back to the way it had been, I realised that they were just barely keeping it controlled.

W12 reflected on her value to the organisation as a good manager of projects and as “a woman who got things done”. This theme emerged in the interviews repeatedly and was linked to the undervaluing of women who demonstrated the ability to produce results and to the power of men to sit on influential committees doing the status work. Similarly, in a rhetorical questioning of what work is valued in education, and who claims the rewards, Freedman (cited in Grant, 1989) asks, “Who are the busy little bees that do all the dirty work … ? Women. Who’s on the negotiating committee? Men.” (p. 42). As a result of reflecting on her experience in the education bureaucracy W12 was able to ask a lot more questions in her subsequent short-term consulting job, especially if she suspected that she was being treated inequitably. She questioned the use of language and the way performance is interpreted in gendered ways:

I was always encouraged and asked to be on things because they knew I would produce a result … Someone said to me the other day, “You’re very task oriented”, which I took as a bit of an affront because I actually think I’m a very strategic person, I’m a very big thinker … [with] longer term vision. But the male interpretation of that is that I’m very task orientated, which is just fascinating.

So I’m going to go back and try and re-dialogue that and try to redefine his perception of what that means. Because again I think [it’s the perception] of,
“You’re a good little worker bee, we need you here because it would be a shame to lose you”.

… it’s about making a difference. You can’t make a difference if you’re not getting things done. You know, it’s managing an area; it’s got to operate effectively so if it means you’ve got to do piddly things about policies and procedures, you do it. If you’ve got to change something that’s going to make something more effective, you do it. As well as looking to the big picture …

I’m just wondering, I’m wondering whether if it were a male [being assessed] if the comment would have been, “You’ve achieved really good things”? … So the language thing, it will be interesting to go back … I guess I’ve got nothing to lose, being here five months, I’ve got nothing to lose so I can be a bit naughtier than I would perhaps otherwise be. So [now] I’m far more confronting and questioning about how people get acting positions in this organisation, how people get access to information, how people get asked to be on committees and whatever. So I’ll be very naughty in asking those questions because I think – what does it matter?

W5 was the lone female at a meeting in which she was the target of bullying behaviour.
She describes the incident as the worst day of her working life:

I had one really bad meeting experience … They were all men, I was the only woman and they were expecting my director to attend. Instead I came along to the meeting, to defend the policy … there was just a whole lot of issues [raised]. But it was the manner in which they did it. It was a real full onslaught attack on the policy and everything else … it was just a very unpleasant experience. I’m sure if it had been women in the meeting they wouldn’t have behaved in that way towards me. I thought it was particularly unfair in that they really had much more power over me than they would have over my director. [They] probably got a real buzz out of it [resigned irony].

She was appalled at the bullying behaviour but handled the situation with dignity:

Yes, totally unexpected. In fact one of the guys at the morning tea break said to me that he was embarrassed at their behaviour. I broke down then, as you do when someone gives you a bit of sympathy. I went to the toilet and got some toilet paper to dry my eyes and then went back in and faced the meeting again. They were all very subdued. It was the worst day of my working life … [they] all attacked, all men – it was open slather.

Isolation, particularly for women who challenged the status quo, was a recurring theme and in this account the pressure is palpable:

I was worn down. The demands of the job were high but it was not so much that as the isolation. I was fairly much a pariah for the whole time [two years in executive leadership] really, but after the government changed I was even more a pariah, more isolated, as I could see the insane approach that was being taken, that was going to lead sooner or later to absolute catastrophe, and of course it did! W21
W3 talked about her career ambitions and what she would have liked to do had she not been sidelined. The stereotypical perception of executive management as a male domain is highlighted in this conversation:

I’d have probably liked to have done some work in another government department and I guess I would have seen myself as a head of some department at some stage … I’m very fond of telling this story, because I remember, when I first joined the Department, some of my colleagues were sitting around a table and asking each other what they would do if they were Director General. When they came to me, they skipped me because it was obvious I wouldn’t want to be Director General or would never get to be Director General. That’s right … because they were all blokes! Why would you ask a sheila what she would do as Director General?

… that’s just a little incident where it crystallised in my mind that if I wanted to [reach that goal] I would really have to be clear about it, because it wasn’t going to happen accidentally. That would have been when I was in my mid 20s or late 20s and from that time [I thought] well, there’s nothing stopping me from being Director General or head of a department.

As noted in Chapter 4, one research participant (W20) in a senior executive position in the late ’90s, with a history of senior appointments, had a different story to tell. A notable exception in the interview sample, she claimed that gender had no influence on perceptions of management ability and that women have to stop thinking about being treated differently. Her story emerges quite strongly in its rejection of the gender argument and is interesting in that her ability to survive in the corporate culture, increasingly driven by the ‘bottom line’, may have been linked to her disassociation with ‘women’s issues’:

I don’t think people care what gender their manager is, provided that person is competent, so male or female, it doesn’t matter. When you get to a very senior position and you have had a lot of experience and you’ve had a series of achievements, people respect that, and it doesn’t matter if you are male or female. I think women have to stop thinking about being treated differently. If you’re competent you’re treated with respect.

She eschewed the ‘victim’ mentality and denied the lone female experience, linking in to a network of women across Australia:

I have never felt isolated as a woman at the top … You build up groups of friends and contacts wherever you work … I’ve got my own personal network of friends … women in leadership … we help each other, we coach and mentor each other. In the early days you might have more senior people finding opportunities for you and suggesting things to you but as you hit senior management and chief executive positions you have your peers, you work together as a like minded group of peers, to look at opportunities and be each others’ referees.
When asked if she felt treated differently as a woman, W20 rejected gender as an issue, explaining that insecurity in others (who were behaving badly) can lead to resistance to the leader, male or female. She used the power of her position to resolve any difficulties:

No, I think that everybody in a senior position is going to encounter people who are anxious about that person being in the position – male or female – and people display their anxiety in a whole range of ways including inappropriate behaviour. There was one famous underminer there whose name I won’t mention, whom I moved on very smartly. He’d been around for a long time. You deal with it. You cannot go into these jobs and not have courage, as the main ingredient of what you want to do. And have the big picture in mind, [not] be overwhelmed with thoughts of, “Gee I’m a woman, I wonder what they will think of me?”

Like W2, who worked at an equally senior level some years earlier, W20 denied that gender politics had influenced her decision to leave. However, as the above quote indicates, she was dealing with gender politics on an everyday level. Comments from other women in the sample both support her claim and contradict it. Many saw that, despite her more forthright style and her courage in confronting sexist behaviour, W20 was still subject to gender politics. For example, W21, in executive management at that time and very aware of her own position as a lone female, commented on W20’s style:

… she [W20] didn’t suffer fools lightly. So any man who played any patronising tricks on her I think she saw it within five seconds of them opening their mouths and she absolutely put them down and I reckon they were never to be favoured again [humour].

Interestingly, W15, a woman with an in-depth understanding of equity issues, described W20 as a feminist who ‘had difficulty’:

It was difficult being a feminist I think; she had difficulty. But she was brought in to make some radical changes by the government and she did; and then she had to go when they wanted somebody conservative again.

W21 also recognised that with a return to a more conservative education agenda at the end of the ‘90s, W20’s style was rapidly going out of favour. There was a return to nurturing the old boys’ network in a policy that she described as ‘bringing them home’. She very soon realised that anyone who had been associated with W20 was on the outer:

… I think it was … that he [new leader] had seen me, quite rightly, as being absolutely allied with [W20]. And he had therefore also seen me as a person who had been very supportive of [a male executive director] who had been acting DG for a year, just before [W20] came. She fundamentally took no prisoners and took no crap from anyone and he [new leader] was one of those that she made it absolutely clear that she had no time for … So I was the traitor, I had been loyal to [the acting DG] instead of being part of the group to undermine the female leader. So in the
sense of tribalism and boys’ networks, [if I’d wanted to belong], I should have stayed loyal to him even when [W20] came.

Kanter (1977) identified the token female in her landmark text *Men and Women of the Corporation*. The token female is often viewed as representative of all women. Any mistake will be judged harshly and extended to the inadequacy of females as a group. Any perceived failure, and there will probably be many if she does things differently, will confirm the underlying dominant belief that the job would be better left to a man. “Tokens are simultaneously representatives and exceptions. They serve as symbols of their category, especially when they fumble, yet they also are seen as unusual examples of their kind, especially when they succeed” (Kanter, 1977, p. 239).

These examples raise questions for me, the researcher. Have some women at the top of organisations joined the culture, assimilated to the organisational cultural norms? Have they been able to influence the culture? Are they in a state of denial, representatives of a ‘colluded self’ (Casey, 1995) or in a state of ‘false consciousness’ (Halford & Leonard, 2001) as described by Judith Pringle (2003) in her examination of issues of gender and sexuality for senior women managers. Or are they very strategically distancing themselves from gender politics, feminist issues and disadvantage discourses that position them as ‘other’, rather than the highly competent, talented and strong leaders they know themselves to be?

**Male reactions to the female manager**

W2, a woman with a very successful career in executive management, said she could understand the difficulties for men relating to a female manager for the first time:

> The reality was that most of the men that were in management positions in head office had never had to relate to a woman in the superordinate position. I mean that really was the reality. I’d been the first regional superintendent to work for who was a woman, the first regional director that had been a woman, the first chief executive in Australia that had been a woman. I mean there was not a lot of experience of how to relate to a position when it also happens to be a woman who’s holding it. So I think that some men, not all, needed to work that through. Then how do you do it? They hadn’t had to do it before. I mean do you do it like you do to the mates around a game of cards?

Like W20, who talked about inappropriate behaviour in people who are anxious, W2 emphasised that it was not just a gender issue, as interpersonal skills were the key:
But it wasn’t differentiated totally on gender lines. There were certain men who related extremely easily on person-to-person lines – gender didn’t seem to be an issue there. You saw what you would judge as gauche or inappropriate personal relations but that wasn’t [linked] to my [executive] position. I mean I saw those [behaviours] in every other career position that I had, without exception, whether it was the deputy position and it was the male deputy … I mean some people just have better interpersonal skills than others and that was characterised all the way through. W2

Her understanding of the difficulties was highlighted with a humorous comment regarding the stereotypical role of women in educational management in the not too distant past:

I mean I go back as far as the Ark. So you came in at Deputy Principal/Principal Mistress. So the Principal Mistress without any doubt in people’s minds made the tea and did the flowers. W2

The perceptions and expectations of the woman’s role varied according to context, depending on the management environment:

… the first year that I held that position … the principal in fact was quite enlightened and said things like, ‘I’d like you to do the accounts, we work as a trio here and I thought, ‘Yeah, I’ll wait ’til I see that’’. But it worked, and so here I was in my first [management] position where I wasn’t expected to make the tea and I wasn’t expected to do the flowers; I was doing the school books! I’d never done it in my life before but I was prepared to learn because it seemed like a real responsibility. I never had a sense that there was a gender issue so it was quite a shock when I went to the next position where gender was alive and well and so we ploughed [back] into tea making. W2

W2 also acknowledged that as she moved into senior executive positions the power that accompanied those positions meant that sexist behaviour became less evident:

[In a position of power] the relationship changes a bit, doesn’t it? [I mean] the overt relationship … what they said down at the pub afterwards I was probably never party to.

In contrast to W2 (above), who found less overt discrimination as she rose to positions of authority, W21 explained that her presence on the executive was seen as a leadership threat to the man at the top. The marginalisation and undermining started on the very first day and came in the form of open attack:

I was in that period substantially marginalised and isolated and the things that I put in place were undermined, like the [educational program] he gave no support to … because fundamentally the dinosaurs felt that they didn’t need to change because sooner or later he [leader] would ensure that it all went away … So the whole time really – the first day that I was there I was attacked by [him] in corporate executive as being a person who was posturing to become Director General. It was shown very
clearly that I was one of the people on the bad people list, not one of the people on the good people list.

W3 commented on the differential treatment she received as a relatively young woman working at director level. The allocation of smaller cars to female managers was humorous but confirmation of the discrimination directed towards women.

There are lots of things that used to annoy me and annoy me still. For instance, when I would go out to the schools, people would always defer to a male [who was with me] even if that person was my junior … because I was reasonably young so there was lots of just straight ordinary discriminatory stuff that on one hand was funny but on another hand was not. But I got through those days … I still get that.

Age and gender, yes, I think that’s a very potent mix. W6 would have similar [experiences] because she and I were roughly the same age and we were in similar sorts of positions. There was a lot of talk about how these young sheilas were running the Department and a lot of resentment. She and I were given smaller cars than the other directors … it was true, we got these ‘tinny’ little things and all the other directors got … [laughter] absolutely outright [discrimination]! I asked, “Why is that?” and the guy in charge of the [car] pool said, “You don’t need as big a car, you’re not so big”. So there are lots of things like that I just tried to ignore.

W6 was, for a time, the only woman at executive director level and also a lot younger than most of the executive team. She commented on treatment similar to that referred to by W3:

… for a time [I was] the only woman at executive director level … and being at the time a lot younger than most of them too. I was in my early thirties when I was first appointed there and I think that was fairly noticeable. W3 and I were of [a younger] age group and the others were late forties, fifties.

… the play that was going on behind the scenes … I always knew it was there, the rumours, the gossip and the stuff that was said about me, all of which I was very aware of, even though people sort of pretended I wouldn’t know these things. W6

In summary, W3 was scathing in her assessment of the culture and the lack of support for women:

They [the men] would have perceived someone like me as being promoted ridiculously fast, so from that point of view they’d say there’s no lack of opportunity for women. But there was certainly no systematic mentoring or development of women, and no one would have thought it was necessary or desirable. There might have been some lip service to it but no real action.

Reactions of other women

Resistance to the female leader can come from both men and women accustomed to men in positions of power. W6 described the reaction of some women who had adopted the
ways of the dominant culture. Although most women were supportive (of her work as an executive director), these women surprised her:

I guess the biggest surprise for me was the way some of the women related [to me] … I had two women reporting to me as subordinates, both a fair bit older than me, both very strong personalities and both I would judge to be fairly put out by the fact that I was the one who got the position. They tried all sorts of power plays on me, all sorts of power plays … I never use power in my situations with staff, it’s always been a teamwork thing and so I found it fairly difficult to deal with people who didn’t operate in that way … they were women who had clearly fought hard to get to where they were, had had to prove themselves to be tougher than the guys and were unable to shake that behaviour when they had a chance to. I worked really hard to try to get the teamwork happening but it was never going to happen … eventually I found that the only way to deal with it was to start treating them in that power type relationship and basically assert that I was the boss. I hated to do that but it was effective and that got them working. And I found that really sad because they’d both obviously become so ingrained into their patterns of behaviour … men were scared of these women [laughter].

… I suspect I wouldn’t have been treated in the same way if I’d been a man. I think it was a bit of an insult to them that a younger female had been appointed. I hadn’t been through all those hard knocks in the same way and furthermore, I wasn’t behaving in the [traditional] way … I was trying to be collaborative …

The above account links to the theme of women being judged more harshly than men; of not fitting the normalised image of leader. Age also comes into account. Often, a younger woman will be considered not up to the job; paradoxically, an older woman can be dismissed as ‘past it’. An added complexity is that while a woman in her thirties can be considered too young, and a woman in her fifties can be considered too old, men of similar ages will be accepted as the norm in senior and executive management positions.

Itzin & Phillipson (1995) talk about the combined effects of ageism and sexism. Because “the organisation of work is structured to accommodate a male chronology of continuous employment, and not the female chronology … and the discontinuity which follows from moving in and out of paid employment” (p. 88), women can be pursuing career advancement at a later age than many men. W17, an experienced middle manager who had continued to work at district level after her departure from central office, is an example. Her words indicate that the age barrier, or the glass ceiling of age, can be internalised by women working within male norms. This is hardly surprising, as attitudes to older women, at work and in the wider society, are deeply entrenched. Constantly being evaluated by male norms, yet more harshly, means that women can find themselves considered old earlier than men. In fact, if they have had career breaks for childrearing and family commitments, they are ready for their ‘golden years’ later than men.
I’m 60, I’m not going to continue up the ladder … I would have loved to have been a principal … [It would be] a great way to finish your career but I think I’ve left it a bit late. I don’t see another step up into central office for me and the next step from here would be district director and I certainly don’t feel that I could take on that role, because I have not had enough leadership experience. I think it’s wrong to go into district director job without having been a school principal, or at least a deputy principal … Who am I to tell principals how to run their schools if I haven’t had the same experience. I believe in that, although we’ve got some very successful district directors who haven’t been principals. W17

When I asked if, in lieu of school based line management experience, W17 could transfer her experience in managing project teams and district curriculum advisory teams to the job of district director, she replied, “That wouldn’t be a problem at all!” I then asked if she was being a bit hard on herself and she readily acknowledged that she needed the support and encouragement of a mentor (see chapter 9) to give her that vital confidence to apply for a senior management position:

Yes, I probably am [being a bit hard on myself]. That’s where you need a mentor, to say, “Now come on W17, don’t be silly!”

**Having to be ‘better than a man’**

At least half of the sample talked about the pressure of having to continually prove that they were capable, having to be better than their male peers, and not gaining the automatic respect accorded to a male manager. The benefits of *who* you know as opposed to *what* you know and the potentiality for promoting incompetence are examined in the following quotes:

Women seem to have to continually prove themselves … it’s like starting from the ground up, starting from square one every time. Whereas I have seen men with less experience in leadership, and less competence, given a lot of respect in a new situation (by both men and women) – not having to keep proving themselves time and time again. W13

I couldn’t afford to [make a mistake]. When you’re on the outer … you have to be absolutely certain that the things that you are doing don’t go wrong and you also have to make sure that you stay a long, long way from things that are falling apart. And that’s hard to keep doing over a very, very long period of time. X [executive director] knows that just before the change of government how worn out I was, how stressed and aged and beaten down. You had to walk on water; you knew that absolutely no excuses would be made and that you would be seen as [weak/failure]. There would be a major conversation that said something like, “A lot of early promise shown but not much delivered”. I didn’t ever get it, but that is what would have been said. W21

I think women have had to work harder at being [credited as] good at the job. Because they were under scrutiny … and once they got it [the job] they had to prove
themselves some more too. I don’t think there would have been as much grace and forgiveness to women managers for not managing well … I mean when I look at some people [men] who I had experienced, who are now in senior positions in the organisation, I just shake my head. They were the people who just walked around all day, did nothing. Swanned around … They were the days when people just tapped you on the shoulder anyway: “There’s something going – would you like to have a go?” … There was no sense of competing for the job, you just … you needed to be in the know. W4

When W12 was asked why she couldn’t seem to progress past the level of project leader, despite a record of outstanding performance, she referred to being treated differently (inequitably) as a woman, to the ‘promotion of incompetence’ and the preservation of mediocrity:

Because I was a woman! Now that’s simplistic but why would you promote someone that you can keep there to make you look good, why would you allow them into your team? And it was interesting at the time, you could see that the team, or the cabal of suits – the locker room cabal – they were promoting incompetence. So that there was no competition for them. I mean, it just became such a repetitive theme that I thought, “No, I’m just not going to get anywhere here”.

W2 explained how being the first meant establishing herself in each new role:

When I moved into a superintendent role, again the first women in the role, so you had to almost start over again establishing how you wanted to be, how you would relate to others, how you would be seen to relate to others. And when you went through the same [thing again] some men related very readily, for others it was a learning experience. So we went through that. A combination of initiative and efficiency increases productivity. But despite a huge workload and a proven ability to get things done, W21 faced opposition to her request for additional administrative support. When asked if there were any differences in the workload she was managing and that of male senior executives, she was emphatic:

Oh, good heavens, yes! There was no doubt, if you ask the people who worked with me [executive assistants], my workload [was] twice or three times as much as the other executive directors [male]. Fundamentally those two women thought that my workload was as large as the rest of them [executive directors] combined. At one stage Y went to work as the executive assistant to the Deputy Director General [male] after being my executive assistant and she said, “It’s like a holiday!” She had about half the work that one person in my office had but there was a lot of opposition to my getting a second executive assistant [even though] the volume of files that we moved was much greater than the others. The [aforementioned] Deputy Director General’s job didn’t involve doing any more than his executive director role but [it was honoured] with a grand title.

Many of the women commented that there seemed to be a need to convince others that a different management style (one that varied from a traditional masculinist approach) was
effective (see Chapter 7 for an elaboration of management styles). W1 commented on being prejudged as not a strong manager because she was a woman with a more inclusive style:

Being perceived as somehow unable to make the tough decisions … it was with great surprise that people observed me doing a downsizing process or doing performance management and giving difficult feedback or working with hard to manage, poor performing staff, all those sorts of things. I think the perception was that I would avoid confrontation or I would not tackle those situations. The fact that I did it differently, I think was a bit of enlightenment.

Working in an equity area

Women who worked in central office equity and social justice areas found it difficult to determine whether reactions from male colleagues were linked to them as women or to the area of equity in general. Although anti-feminist sentiments were not usually explicit, there seemed to be an underlying disapproval (and undervaluing, even fear) of ‘equal opportunity’ women (see Middleton, 1989). W8 said she found it difficult to disassociate herself personally from the position but felt the pressure of marginalisation from the men and from the mainstream. Being identified as ‘a hairy-legged feminist’ was not good for career advancement. The issue of having to prove one’s worth came up again and, like the EO coordinators in Blackmore’s study (1999), W8 felt like a moral policewoman:

I think once you were in the gender equity area there’s always that little bit of a barrier that comes up, particularly with the guys, and so you always felt you had to prove [yourself] or you were always being tested. Was she OK or was she one of those feminists?

There was always this worry that you were going to find something wrong. I used to laugh … that everyone else was there to solve problems but I was there to create problems. I guess that’s the nature of the position … Often there were those comments which I hated, but it was, “Thank goodness she’s not one of the hairy-legged feminists” … we were seen as almost ‘Thought Police’ … curriculum documents would be produced which had glaring equity glitches in them and you’d be resented because you’d raise those issues … causing problems again …

W5 also felt that it was hard to separate attitudes towards her as a woman from attitudes to her position in an equity area:

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29 The EEO Branch was disbanded in 1998 and the functions of the branch were incorporated into the policy section. Responsibility for EEO was devolved to line managers, including executive directors, directors (central and district), school principals and curriculum managers. From 1998 line managers’ accountability in relation to EEO/diversity has been defined through their performance agreements with their superordinates (according to a letter to line managers from the Director General, 3 July 1997).
Well, it’s a bit hard to separate me as a woman and what I represented – in the social justice/equity area – which is a thorn in the side of a lot of people; life would be a lot easier if they didn’t have to worry about that. Life would be a lot easier if they didn’t have ‘those kids’ [children with special needs]. So you always represent that area and it’s hard to separate the two.

You get to the point where you avoid saying where you work or what you do because it’s just easier. Now whether I would have found things different, a different set of circumstances, if I’d been manager of Maths Education or Curriculum Branch or something … there was always that element of the area that I was working in.

W8 was amazed at one appointment where the job of manager went to a man although he had far less experience in the social justice area than the highly competent woman who missed out. As an additional insult, the women reporting to him were asked to support him in his new role:

[The branch manager] had been a very good manager – I mean everybody was very loyal to her and we had the situation where we had people from other branches coming to ask her for support and to get information and so on because they weren’t getting it from their own management … The manager who was appointed – very nice guy, but known as an incompetent manager, and didn’t prove otherwise. In fact that was born out because he didn’t last very long in the position. On the whole it just didn’t seem justified that he should have been there in preference to people like Y who had been pushed aside … and was treated subsequently in a very poor way.

… I was told by both the director and the executive director that we all had to help X become a manager. They had just appointed him as a manager but we all had to help him become a real manager! Why appoint him? Why not appoint Y? She had proved herself. So even in that scenario, with women making the appointments, the boy got the job. There were things like that that happened that had no rationale, no real rationale behind them at all, that was obvious.

The equity and social justice areas tended to attract people, both men and women, who favoured a more inclusive, cooperative management style. W10 commented on the undervaluing by senior management of what was seen as ‘women’s work’ in the Equal Opportunity area:

[A job] in Human Resources and in a public service position wasn’t as highly valued, particularly Equal Employment Opportunity … was a necessary evil – well that’s how it was regarded by many of the management … The challenges I had were with other people in the Department … they might have been directors in some educational area [whom] I would have to work with on an issue. And that’s where I would find some difficulty in terms of their respecting the work I was doing … very dismissive, just dismissive, “You’re just a girl, you’re just an EEO, you’re just … go away!”

Similarly W15 talked about the labelling of people who had worked in equity and human resource related areas, particularly those with a more collaborative management style.
She wondered if her own reputation as a feminist had negatively influenced her new line manager, this time a female, appointed in the late nineties, who was even more masculine in her approach than most of the men:

Well yes [she did see my collaborative style as weak] … She made things clear, “That’s … not the way to do things”, “That’s not the way we’re going to do things”. And certainly there was that inference … you’re a bleeding heart or … certainly they’re not the exact words that she used, but others have used them, about people in EEO or HR as being bleeding hearts.

I wondered too whether she had talked to other people about my [style] … people who knew me outside of work. And whether all of that coloured her views. I’ve no idea. Yes [she probably saw me as] too feminist and too … maybe too soft and yes, probably all of those things.

Human Resources and Equal Opportunity were often targetted in restructures.

X had no qualms about saying that he saw himself as ‘a dry’ in economic terms and that he was there to chop. And my area was seen, because it did a few things that were a bit more innovative, it was seen as ripe for plucking … especially Equal Opportunity where a lot of people were quite keen to see Equal Opportunity actually disappear … W7

There was a feeling of a general lack of executive support for equity issues. W10 voiced frustration that the Department found it preferable to take cases to the tribunal rather than confront the issues internally:

… whilst the little issues did get the nods and the waves and go aheads, the big issues that we tried to tackle we were never successful. We had to have them go through the Tribunal. In fact it was said that they would prefer to go through the Tribunal and have the decision made for them because they wouldn’t be popular if they made the decision themselves. It’s extremely expensive, about $250,000 a case.

Facing harassment and patronising attitudes

Some of the women were subject to harassment, obviously meant to intimidate them. In most instances the behaviour seemed to be driven by a fear that the women were gaining power and needed to be constrained in some way. Cockburn (1991) describes sexual harassment as a male intervention for the assertion of power, a warning to a woman stepping out of her ‘proper place’. “It is a controlling gesture to diminish any sense of power she may be acquiring and to remind her ‘you’re only a woman, that’s the way I see you. And at that level you’re vulnerable to me and to any man’” (p. 142). Comparatively young women in positions of leadership were particularly at risk:

I had most direct difficulty handling my peers who tended to be men ten to twenty years older than I was. I mean, I just found that they were breathtakingly horrible to
me, many of them, including one guy who I was really in fear of because he sort of physically threatened me ... there were lots of threats around at that time [Task Force for Better Schools] but this was one of the few I took seriously. I can’t remember the exact words but I do remember something to do with ‘strangle’. It wasn’t in the heat of the moment, that’s what was so scary – it was a special meeting called by X [director] to warn me off. It was cold, considered, cool.

[The male directors] perceived that I had the ear of people in high places, [however] he [my executive director] was scrupulously fair, there was no favouritism … I don’t by and large think of myself as being a very threatening character but they obviously felt that I needed severe restraint in some way, shape or form and I found that really horrible. W3

W6 told of the reception she received from ‘the old guard’ when she was appointed as a director:

The old guard, [on] the day I was appointed – I was at a cocktail party – that’s going back to [the late 80s]. There was a cocktail party to greet the new directors and all the heavies from around the Department were invited; the district supers and all the other senior staff. One particular person, who is still in the Education Department in a very senior position, came up to me and took me aside and said to me, “There is no way in the world that you are ever going to succeed in this position. This position, the position you’re in, has broken the backs of many a fine man and there is no way you will succeed, so I don’t know why you’re even bothering”. I think it would have been quite deliberate – “Watch your step because we’re after you”. It was that sort of thing. You think [to yourself], “Great, I can hardly wait!” [irony] … as I got to know him, I realised that around him were a whole bunch of men of similar persuasions who, over the period of time that I was there, exerted increasing influence as they progressed through the system. And he is now one of the executive directors.

W13 described her experience of harassment whilst leading a project and reporting to a male manager, who in turn reported to a male executive director. The incidents were linked to her objection to the ‘buddy system’ that was operating in the job selection process.

Because I made it known to him that I intended to apply for the job of consultant, for which he obviously had someone in mind, he did everything in his power to stop me getting the job. First I had to appeal against two structural barriers which effectively prevented me from applying for the position. Then I had to appeal against the biased selection criteria which he had skewed to suit the desired applicant. I questioned the relevance of the criteria and also commented on the absurdity of the structural barriers. My dissent was too much for him. He was accustomed to acquiescence: “Yes sir, no sir, three bags full”. After nearly a year of campaigning on my part, intervention from Equal Opportunity and a final appeal to the Director General (a male who was actually aware of gender issues), the job was eventually re-advertised. By then the preferred male candidate had acted in the role for nearly twelve months. My chances of getting the job were nil.

He used the bullying tactics for which he was renowned, including, “You don’t know how it works around here!” when I asked for some feedback on my performance and shouting at me over the telephone in regard to the project budget
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for which I was responsible and was managing capably. I began to see very clearly how it worked around there.

When I reported his behaviour, which was definitely harassment, to the executive director, he told me to leave all communications with X to him. There was no further action taken. X eventually moved to another position and a new manager was appointed, yet another ‘buddy’ of the executive director. They stuck together like glue.

One interviewee, with the hindsight of experience in gender equity, talked of behaviours that she described as constant low-level sexual harassment and a ‘primary school’ [naughty boys’] culture amongst the managers. She felt that she was expected to be a “good girl” in this boys’ club atmosphere:

… when I moved to HR, I experienced what I would describe as sort of low level sexual harassment. I didn’t name it as that but now I work in the area [linked to EEO], I understand what was going on … there was a lot of behaviour towards me, actually physical and verbal that made me feel very uncomfortable. I mention that now because I think that those sorts of behaviours and teasing … there’s very much a boys’ club amongst the managers and amongst people who are aspiring to be managers. There was very much a primary school culture amongst the managers … there were a number of people like that.

I thought that I always had to be good, you know, a good girl. And things happened to me, perhaps during drinks, at morning teas in the branch, [that] I felt were quite embarrassing. In fact one female senior consultant said to the management at the time, “I’m just sick and tired of sitting around at morning tea and hearing sexist and homophobic jokes”. So I think there was something about it, I had a sense that it was the old guard, it was conservative and I didn’t really have anything else to go on because I had not worked outside.

… any power that I might have had because of my position was taken away from me by this sort of sexist and physical and familiar behaviour … pushing me to the extent of having to be jolly and friendly to get along. I felt that, definitely … I think I was treated much better when I moved to the other unit because the manager was a woman, not that that means everything [but] I got away from that sort of school-boy approach to things. W11

W11 also felt that the work that she was doing on a special project in gender equity might have posed a ‘threat’ to certain people who were wary of ‘women’s issues’:

… but I did feel that some of the [sexist] behaviour I mentioned was probably because I was seen as a bit of a threat. I think some people saw me as a bit of a threat … some people thought, “What’s this, what’s W11 doing? It’s marginal, it’s something outside, what’s the gender stuff got to do with anything?” … very little support and very much the ‘old-boys’ sort of culture.

A number of women commented on the memorable cases of two managers who had been found guilty of sexual harassment and subsequently got promoted:
… we had a couple of very strong sexual harassment cases and what was seen as a result of those was that the men who were found responsible for sexual harassment in fact were promoted … so there was nothing to say that the [EEO] position or the issues had any clout. We used to laugh and say, “Well you know if you’re found guilty of sexual harassment you’ll be promoted”. There were two significant cases.

I just see bullying tactics happening over and over again. It happens both ways – it happens upwards and downwards. I think, I wouldn’t be surprised, if at the moment it wasn’t happening upwards towards the current Director General [female] … I could say [a successful manager has to be male, a sexual harasser and a bully, but that’s a bit unkind. I honestly don’t think I could answer that question [on the typical successful manager in central office] without having to bring in my biases about things like that. W10

“It is undoubtedly true that some men in management positions find it difficult to deal with women as colleagues or equals. Some find it easier to support and patronise up-and-coming young women, but are genuinely put off when they move into positions of relative equality” (Kirner & Rayner, 1999, p. 167). The following accounts from the interviewees confirm that some men treated them patronisingly, an attitude which they found infuriating. But there are many differences among men and W2 noticed that some men received the same patronising treatment from dominant males:

What they’ll do, and this is what I found very common amongst males, is they’ll patronisingly say, “But we’ll look after you because we know you do good work, we’ll find you something else” and I think that’s why I made the decision to get out because I was getting the same treatment again. But I’d just had enough of that … I thought I don’t care any more, I don’t want to be ‘looked after’ and treated in … that very male patronising sort of way. W9

I didn’t strike open opposition [but] I would have had a couple of senior male principals whose egos were huge in any circumstance, who really could only relate in a patronising way. It wasn’t opposition at all, quite the contrary; everything on the surface was charming but just so patronising. But they were in the minority by a long way and that wasn’t the only circumstance in which their patronisation and egotism impacted. I mean I watched it happen with men to men as well, so it was more than a gender thing. W2

Cultural difference

Two of the women in this study reflected on their experiences of being treated differently in terms of cultural difference and gender. These experiences were linked to their Aboriginality, yet the differences between those experiences were marked. Being women also impacted on their lives, in terms of their interaction with Aboriginal men and women and non-Aboriginal men and women. One of the women (W19) explained that, in her various management positions throughout her career, she has often found herself in situations where she is the only woman. Yet her lifelong experience of difference, and
positive childhood influences, had given her the strength to feel comfortable with that
difference. In one regional meeting in the late ’80s, where the topic of Affirmative Action
was raised for discussion (in relation to her ability to function effectively as a leader in an
all male forum), she said:

In case you haven’t noticed, I’m Black. That means I’ve actually been different and
been in a minority my whole life; I’m a bit used to it in a way that other women
won’t necessarily be.

This attitude fits with bel hooks’ (in hooks & West, 1991) description of the life-
enhancing process of understanding and confronting harsh realities. Such ‘intellectual
work’ “may remind us that domination and oppression continue to shape the lives of
everyone, especially Black people and people of colour” (p. 164). She says that moving
through this pain to work with ideas that may serve as a catalyst for transformation of the
self and others can be a rewarding process, and fundamentally life-enhancing.

W19’s understanding and experience of discriminatory treatment led to her leaving the
Education Department and subsequently moving into senior management roles. She
explained that, following a secondment to a union position, physical health reasons
(including major surgery) prevented her from returning to the classroom. She found that
her medically endorsed request for a return to a central office appointment was denied. In
fact, she was charged with abandonment of contract for refusing to take up an alternative
appointment without a Departmental medical assurance that the job was safe in regard to
her medical condition. She felt that this treatment was selective and due to a combination
of politically motivated reasons: her links with the union and her gender30, especially
being a woman who was prepared to speak out.

I think they treated me quite shabbily, especially after the years of service, because
even my time at the Teachers’ Union was under secondment, so in service terms I
guess I had more than 20 years service. I knew that I could have pursued unfair
dismissal options (I had a background in industrial relations and it could have got
really nasty) but, quite honestly, I couldn’t be bothered arguing with them. If that
was how they were going to treat me, I wasn’t convinced I wanted to work for them
any more.

But when the Department said no … I must say that some of that was by political
interference … You wonder how much of that is gender related too, because we still
had conservative ministers … So, political, but I still wouldn’t rule out the gender
bias. It can easily be interpreted, and I don’t think it’s a long bow at all – it’s OK for
men to take a stand on issues, but if women do that’s a different matter – and [a

30 W19 did not cite her Aboriginality as a reason for this discriminatory treatment yet it could well
have been a contributing factor.
particular Education Minister], I’ve got to say, was very much like that. As a bloke, as a Minister, [he conveyed the message], “I’m going to take it personally if she says something but it’s OK if he does”.

Every job that I have had since has accommodated my medical condition. If the Department is not going to accommodate health needs specific to women … yet I know of a teacher (male) … with bowel cancer, they found both him and his wife a position in central office. So they do accommodate illness, but not in a consistent way.

W18 cited negative experiences in central office, linked to her difference (both gender and Aboriginality), to her resistance to control, and to her willingness to speak out:

I consider myself a very strong leader, yet working in central office was the most debilitating experience because of the male domination and the politics that are played by both men and women … It was because I was seen to be powerful beyond my means and beyond the comprehension of how they could control me. I’m a woman who can’t be controlled … people know that I can’t be bought, I am my own person, and if you play politics with me then get ready to take the consequences. I make lots of mistakes and I take the consequences … but I will not be made the martyr or the victim of other people’s politics.

She explained that she had been raised within a matriarchal family environment where women were given equal status with men and accepted as leaders:

For me it was a progression. I was raised in a family where men and women had equal status, in fact in my family the women were probably the bosses, because it was a matriarchal environment. So I had belief systems instilled in me when I was very young that women were quite powerful and strong and had a lot of status. I think that in essence that was why I got so much politics played on me in the education system as a woman and a culturally different woman. I didn’t fit the stereotypical image of a woman and I didn’t fit the stereotypic image of an Aboriginal woman, because I wasn’t compliant and I didn’t give ground to the men. They were not seen by me to be superior and more competent than I was. So in fact I was seen to be ‘huge competition’ to the men and the women. I didn’t realise until I left that my whole life in the education system was about politics.

What I found in central office was that [Aboriginal employees] had learnt to be compliant to what non-Aboriginal people wanted them to do. Or they got by operating in a stereotypic fashion as to what was expected by the system of Aboriginal people. Despite [the expectations and limitations], I was able to make lots of changes, but to some extent I will never know – it’s like the bee spreading pollen, you never know which one will flower. In Aboriginal Education I got a lot more support in the long term when I stood up and was counted, and people knew they couldn’t stab me in the back, kick me in the guts, because they knew I would call their behaviour and be very assertive.

bel hooks (1982; 1984) talks about the double marginality of black women in America (prejudice manifested across gender and race lines) that is really about the maintenance of power by those who hold it, that is, heterosexual white wealthy men. When she talks about resisting stereotypes of race and gender she refers to the double standard for
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women, especially black women, who seem ‘too smart’: "Learning early on that good grades were rewarded while independent thinking was regarded with suspicion, I knew that it was important to be 'smart' but not 'too smart'. Being too smart was synonymous with intellectuality and that was cause for concern, especially if one was female” (hooks in hooks & West, 1991, p. 149).

Reflection

The quest for equal representation in positions of leadership and management is complicated by the unequal treatment of women in almost all areas of human endeavour. Patriarchal oppression justifies itself by connecting women much more closely than men to the body, “by containing them in bodies that are represented, even constructed, as frail, imperfect, unruly, and unreliable, subject to various intrusions which are not under conscious control” (Grosz, 1994, p. 14). Grosz explains that the male/female opposition has been closely allied with the mind/body opposition, emphasising an identity for women closely tied to their reproductive capacity. Women’s bodies are perceived as vulnerable, unreliable, in need of protection or special treatment, confined to the biological, leaving men “free to inhabit what they (falsely) believe is a purely conceptual order” (p.14). Perhaps this attitude helps to explain, not only the general devaluation of ‘women’s work’, but the devaluation of women employed in ‘people centred’ or ‘child centred’ areas.

Blackmore (1999) explains that the under representation of women in positions of power and authority is recognised as inequitable and unprofitable, yet is seen as troublesome in that it undermines male claims to leadership and authority. Moreover, women who get into leadership positions disrupt existing modes of management, are different and often seek to promote equity and change. And women working in positions linked to equity and social justice may be even more troublesome, as explained by the interviewees in my thesis. Perhaps women with an explicit understanding of equity issues (and collaborative rather than bureaucratic modes of organisation) are particularly threatening to the male status quo. They are working in clearly defined areas of ‘women’s work’ (Cockburn, 1991), yet at the same time they are working for equity and change and demonstrating resistance to dominant power structures. The more troublesome the woman, the more she is marginalised. If she is overtly feminist or linked to a feminist agenda, she won’t get on.
Due to cultural/stereotypical perceptions, women are often perceived as not capable because they are not powerful. Their lack of positional power in organisations, directly related to men’s advantaged status, can be confused as a measure of ability and potential. Often women working on projects found the doors closed when it came to promotional opportunities. Their management capabilities and their achievements went unrecognised. And the women already in senior management positions felt the isolation of being the only female in ‘a sea of grey suits’. The words of one interviewee, who had worked both inside and outside education, sum up the general feeling of being treated differently as a woman:

In my other jobs previous to the Department I had never ever had any trouble working with men. Now I dare say they were as male chauvinist as you’d find anywhere but I generally don’t think I had any trouble working with men. I never felt that I was put upon as a woman. The irony was coming into the Education Department, which was a Department staffed largely by women … I felt for the first time in some ways that there was a gender bias in the place.

As female leaders in a male dominated management environment, many of these women were treated differently. The cultural environment was often not supportive of their work or their talents. They experienced bullying and harassment as well as patronising attitudes. Age and cultural differences combined with gender to intensify stereotypical perceptions. The reactions of men, and some women, when reporting to a female manager reflected a culture that was accustomed to a traditional command and control management style. Having to be better than a man to prove one’s worth, especially if working in an area linked with equity, social justice or human resources, was frustrating, particularly when less competent men were rewarded and promoted. The isolation so often experienced by the lone female demanded resilience, courage and dignity, especially in the face of resistance from the almost exclusively male executive culture. It is perhaps not surprising that one female manager adopted a more masculinist style to survive, or perhaps to thrive. In hearing her story we can question essentialist notions of female/feminist behaviour and interrogate our own expectations of women in management through an expanded understanding of leadership styles. Others resisted the culture and ultimately left.
Doing leadership differently

There is an overwhelming need to reconstruct the concept of organisational leadership, to look for leadership in new places ... Yet there is little evidence that our notions of corporate leadership are changing to reflect or align with the shifting imperatives of a global marketplace ... our conceptions of leadership are locked in a time-warp, constrained by lingering archetypes of heroic warriors and wise but distant fathers.

— Amanda Sinclair (1998)

The ideal worker is seen as having a masculine ideal, and this masculine image still exists. But you don’t need to be a hero to be a leader; you don’t need to be a ‘John Wayne’ necessarily anymore. In a true leader, analytic skills and relational skills are not separate ... The trick is integrating them.”

— Joyce Fletcher (1999)

By valuing a diversity of leadership styles, organisations will find the strength and flexibility to survive in a highly competitive increasingly diverse economic environment.


Discourses of difference

Through the interview, transcription and analysis process, difference emerged as a recurring theme: different values, different management and communication styles, and being subjected to different treatment. However, as this thesis illustrates, there are exceptions, variations, similarities, and differences within differences. In any discussion of gender and difference it is important to recognise the influence of postmodern thought in a growing understanding of the complexity of difference. A complex matrix of circumstances influences the research and “differences among women as well as similarities between men and women are acknowledged” (Olesen, 2000, p. 228 citing Brabeck & Lykes)

For the purposes of this thesis I use leadership and management interchangeably as I do not think that it is possible to separate the two. A good leader needs sound management skills and all managers need the skills of leadership. There are many variations of opinion on what makes a good leader and a good manager, and in this chapter I draw on the ideas

31 Doing Leadership Differently, the title of this chapter, is taken from Amanda Sinclair’s (1998) book of the same name.
of the interviewees to investigate these variations and differences. All of the interviewees were questioned about their preferred leadership or management styles. A strong pattern emerged which indicated a rejection of the typical masculinist style of the dominant culture. These female leaders challenged the traditional masculine image of heroic, ‘rational’ leadership. They were critical of command and control styles, bullying, poor people skills, excessive self-interest, insincerity, and ‘bandwagon’ support for change. Although individual management styles varied, most interviewees emerged as more inclusive, interactive and supportive. A relational (Fletcher, 1999) or connective pattern (Lipman-Blumen, 1996) of managing emerged. Like Fletcher (1999), most described the “emotionally supportive, sometimes selfless behaviours that create the social glue that gets tasks done and holds teams, even whole organisations together” (Martin cited in Fletcher, 1999, back cover). Ironically, this same style of management is often ‘disappeared’ (Fletcher, 1999), devalued and unacknowledged when rewards and promotions are handed out. Many of the interviewees emphasised management as facilitative: inclusive; valuing people and ideas; recognising and developing the talents of the team. Some emphasised flexibility and the ability to combine masculine and feminine styles. In general they disliked the hierarchical, competitive and directive style of the dominant culture and found that they got results using a more cooperative style. This did not mean that they were incapable of making the hard decisions when required. One woman pointed out that certain skills were necessary to survive in a large bureaucracy and she had them ‘in spades’ (W3). Another, at CEO level, emphasised the need to make decisions and move things along – her style was more directive yet she also valued talking things through.

Discourses surrounding difference are a ‘hotspot’ for women aspiring to management equality. They can give credence to the ‘individual-deficit’ or ‘woman-centred’ explanation of why there are so few women in management, an explanation which leaves the problem residing with individuals, usually women (Sinclair, 1998). “The obvious attraction, and shortcoming, of the individual-deficit argument is that blame is firmly attributed to ‘the victim’, who is also expected to fix things” (Sinclair, 1998, p. 132). “[I]t removes responsibility from organisations and allows the status quo and power structure to continue unchallenged” (Gutek cited in Sinclair, 1998, p. 132).

Thus arguments relating to women’s difference from men (for example Gilligan, 1982; Rosener, 1990) and their different (and effective) management skills and abilities may
work against them rather than strengthening the call for female leadership. Their ‘deficits’ may be linked to character, training, commitment or experience; or to a feminine leadership approach. As noted in the literature review for this thesis, poststructuralist approaches point out that an over simplified focus on gender creates binary or oppositional categories which only serve to create hierarchies of power, usually favouring males. The concept of difference is complex and complicated and it is through a recognition of this complexity, and a recognition of the similarities and differences between women and between men, that we can "resist making definitive or categorical statements about men and women managers" (Halford & Leonard, 2001, p. 137). In describing a variety of masculine and feminine management styles, Halford and Leonard (2001) illustrate this poststructuralist understanding of difference:

To claim that all men manage in one masculine style, and that all women manage in an alternative, feminine style is … to oversimplify all of the concepts of gender, power and management. Individual men may manage in very different ways: some will be macho-male, wielding power in traditional ways; others will be more feminine, and may themselves be subject to more dominant colleagues, either male or female. (p. 137)

The masculinist perception that ‘softer’ management skills are a sign of weakness was something that the women in my thesis had to confront. Many were aware of the need to challenge the dualisms embedded in organisational discourses which connect masculinity to leadership and femininity to emotions and irrationality (Blackmore, 1999). Blackmore warns of the dangers of the discourses of ‘soft’ skills for women and ‘hard’ skills for men and the resultant positioning of women as better able to manage the practical curriculum and school based work and men as better at policy and planning. This only serves to consolidate men in positions of power and authority.

Yet my thesis is about listening to the management experiences of women in leadership and this chapter gives you their stories of managing differently, according to their values and sense of what makes good management. Yes, there are distinct variations between the women, one or two quite distinct, but a sense of a relational, connected and people centred style of management for the good of education emerges as a common theme. For many of the women, outstanding management performance, which often ‘rocked the boat’ in its effectiveness and difference went unrecognised, leading to a frustration that things would never change.
Women on top

Much research has questioned whether women can compete in organisations where the dominant culture of the managerial elite is white, middle class, able bodied and male and whether, when women do make it into positions in senior management, they can survive without becoming honorary males (Greer, 1973) or without realigning their values. Are things different for the few women who break through the glass ceiling? Can ‘women on top’ fulfill the multiple expectations of them as women in ‘an alien culture’ struggling for survival and needing to be careful that that they don’t turn into aliens themselves (Peters, 2003)? The following discussion draws on the experiences of the women in my sample and illustrates the differences in those experiences, linked to time and context.

Although most of the women favoured a relational management style, there was pressure, especially in upper management, to conform to the dominant masculinist pattern set in place by a long history of men in senior positions. The tensions surrounding ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ management styles surfaced in the stories of, and about, women at the top. Women lower in the hierarchy sometimes expressed disappointment that women in executive management positions didn’t make a difference to the culture. But women at the top work in relative isolation and are often judged as women rather than leaders: criticised for being too soft, or too hard, or as not supportive enough. These criticisms are rarely directed at a man. The normalisation of men in leadership positions and their greater numbers in those positions leads to higher expectations (from both men and women) of the few women at and near the top of organisations. The expectations for tokens (Kanter, 1977) are always high, they stand out, they are held as representative of all women and expected to perform, to nurture and to care, often without equivalent support for themselves. A female manager in my sample expressed her concern for women at the top. She saw, and felt, the exhaustion brought on by the constant erosion of female authority:

[The female senior executives were] being undermined continually. Because [the men] see themselves as heirs to the throne … they don’t even conscientiously think it, but it’s so male to be in this leadership role. They just think it is unnatural, they’re not comfortable … for a woman to be in this [executive] position; it’s almost, “How dare she!” This undermining, it was happening with [another female executive] as well. And you get very tired; it’s very, very tiring. You’ve got to do your job and have this continual white-anting underneath. I think it’s debilitating and I think we’re still working on it; it’s exhausting. And I don’t think enough women rallied to her [naming a particular female leader]; I think she was very much out on a limb. W17
Another interviewee was not alone when she expressed disappointment that a woman in a senior position had not supported other women as promised:

… and that was a real disappointment because one of the executive directors was somebody who came highly recommended and we thought was going to make great changes and was going to be very supportive. But I felt it was very hollow, [although] the rhetoric was there. At the first [leadership talk] she just about got a standing ovation when she spoke about supporting women and what was happening and so on … it was just disappointing to see that that wasn’t being born out with actions. W8

However, viewed from the perspective of a female senior executive, the pressure to care for others may have been overwhelming when just surviving as the lone female was difficult enough. W21 explained that although the huge workload was not a problem for her, the personal and political undermining was certainly a problem. Her ethical commitment to the job was clear:

I felt that I could handle it – [the workload] wasn’t a problem for me. What I did feel was absolutely isolated because it was perfectly clear that X [male leader] and I didn’t get on and he was working hard all the time to undermine me … so that is where I felt immensely dissatisfied … Especially when the government changed and I could see that he was working very hard to undermine the new Labour government which I thought was absolutely improper. I was more and more unhappy and made my unhappiness very clear until he was more and more dissatisfied with me as I told him quite frankly that the way that he was behaving was wrong, against the Westminster tradition – I told him straight out – “We are here to serve the Minister, not to criticise”. Fundamentally that is where my political orientation lies, but I am a very loyal public servant to whatever government is in power, regardless of which one I support. He and I had some very bitter exchanges that led to his saying all round the traps that [a male executive] and I were in cahoots to bring him down.

W21 explained that the agenda was very anti women: “It wasn’t so much that there was a definite discrimination against [me] but that there was an overwhelming gender discrimination that was going on”. Thus, in a climate of personal conflict, combined with a lack of support for women in general, she felt almost powerless in her efforts to make a difference for other women:

I am very keen on mentoring, so I kept things going for the women. I mentored as much as I possibly could, but within that environment, I felt the weight of expectation of other women as a sense of guilt, that things were going backwards, and going backwards in a very big way, and here I was, the senior woman in the organisation, the head of the EEO committee and unable to do a single thing about it. And so it was a real feeling of guilt and powerlessness … and the only thing that I felt able to do was warn people if I heard they were in the firing line, support others in ways that would not hurt them, because it became clear to me that my support of a woman would not help her. So I wanted to help them in ways that would not harm them within the ruling orthodoxy. And so I felt a very, very, big burden there. W21
The pressure on the lone chief executive woman, especially if she inherits an all male team preselected by the previous corporate executive, is revealed in the following comment by another interviewee in my sample:

... I think that if you had perhaps been able to appoint ... your 2IC [second-in-command], I think that would be a way that you could do it. I mean if you inherit an executive team, I don’t think it’s quite the same as if you appoint some of your own executive team. You [would] probably consciously and subconsciously be appointing someone who [could] be some sort of support. I inherited the team that had been put in place by a very different person than me ... I’m sure the chemistry would have been brilliant with my predecessor but ... it wouldn’t necessarily have been the chemistry that I would have chosen. W2

One interviewee, working at an equally senior level some years later, in a time of neo-liberal reform with its emphasis on economy, performance indicators and accountability, reported a different experience (as discussed in previous chapters). She appeared more masculinist, even tough/hard-line in her management style, in a job with chief executive responsibilities. When I explained that another women in a similar senior executive position had inherited a ready-made team which posed its own set of problems, she responded, “She didn’t have to, you have the choice”. She distanced herself from ‘women’s issues’ and described her own management style as collaborative, yet decisive and direct:

Fairly direct, people know what they have to do. Also collaborative, I like to talk things through. I have a good presence; you develop a certain leadership style over the years. You can’t be a good leader unless you are a good manager as well. I make decisions and move things on.

... I had a big agenda for the government — that’s what CEOs are for — and when you have got that you can’t delve down into ‘who’s behaving nicely today or not’, you’ve got to trust your managers and expect high standards of behaviour, keep people busy. W20

As pointed out by Kanter in 1977, women can be inducted into the iron maiden role when they resist the stereotypic mother, seductress or pet roles reserved for token women in organisations. Iron maidens are stereotyped as tougher than they are simply because they demand treatment as an equal in a setting in which no woman has previously been seen as an equal. Creating distance, minimising sexuality and submerging femaleness (because it conveys the opposite of leadership) while at the same time avoiding the label feminist (due to its connotations within patriarchal discourse) are strategies women use in attempts to be taken seriously as leaders (Sinclair, 1998). Denying the influence of gender
(sometimes labelled the Queen Bee Syndrome\textsuperscript{32}) may be an effective strategy for some women, particularly women who have ‘made it’ to positions of power and influence. Others feel its impact palpably. The following quote expresses the difficulty for women trying to survive at the top of organisations when the management culture does not sit comfortably with personal beliefs:

I felt almost as though I had to work from my shadow, rather from where I was more comfortable. And that’s what I mean by corrupting. I felt that I was corrupted by the culture, that yes, you do have to change. I could see myself becoming more directive, I could see myself starting to think that my ideas were necessarily right because I thought them, I could see that I gave up on some of my colleagues. I thought, “Well they’re unmitigated dickheads, therefore I’m …” so maybe there was a sort of joining of the predominant culture that says that you don’t try to work together. As it worked its way out under [the new male leader] where the style that was the absolute antithesis of what I believed in was more and more in control, so I felt more as though I was existing within an alien environment and needing to be very careful that I didn’t turn into an alien myself … Yes it absolutely wore me down. And there was a sense often of not being in control of the job but the job being in control of me. W21

The sense that they were working within a culture at odds with their personal and ethical understanding of leadership was revealed by many of the interviewees. Like Amanda Sinclair (2002), they reflected critically on their own leadership practices and were alert to the possibility that organisations can “turn you into someone you don’t recognise and someone you don’t like” (p. 4). Thus the dilemmas faced by the lone female, at or near the top of the organisation are revealed in both conflicting and converging discourses on how to manage, and how to survive in a predominantly male executive environment.

Although female leadership made a difference, the dominant culture was hard to change:

It did make a difference [who was at the top] but mainly with the interpersonal relations … it didn’t actually make a difference to the culture … the culture seemed to be the same. I decided, “Enough of trying to change myself to fit in with this culture; I don’t actually want to do that. I’ll look for a culture or another opportunity where I can be what I want to be.” So, ultimately, the position at [another organisation/institution] came up and I took it. W6

These different accounts of leadership experiences at and near the top of the organisation remind me, the researcher, of the limitations of my own leadership experience and of the difficulties for women who have actually moved beyond the metaphorical glass ceiling. Listening to multiple stories reveals patterns and themes, yet raises dilemmas and

\textsuperscript{32} The Queen Bee label is sometimes used to describe senior women who ‘protect their territory’ by not supporting or mentoring more junior women. However, as pointed out by Kanter (cited in Sinclair, 1998), token women are judged against an idealised standard of womanliness and are seen as representative of all women. We set for women a higher standard of caring and nurturance, and we expect solidarity among women that we would not expect from men (Sinclair, 1998).
questions for the researcher. Are women changing the culture, or is the culture changing women? Creating more oppositional categories is unlikely to be the answer. By being open to different interpretations of leadership, organisations can tap into the wider talents of the workforce and move beyond the limitations of traditional masculinist models.

**Talent and diversity**

Among the women interviewed there was a strong feeling of frustration that the central office management hierarchy was not harnessing the full potential of the workforce. Often highly talented people were not managed positively and there was a lack of cohesion that meant their potential for effective leadership was under utilised. W7 spoke about the failure to identify and support talented people; about an organisation where “the whole was less than the sum of the parts”. She referred to two enlightened male managers who recognised the loss to the organisation when talent is not valued:

[There was] an acting Director General of the Education Department, a few years back … we got to talking about the Department and here’s the comment that sticks: he felt there was a number of extraordinarily talented people in that place and yet the senior management kept trying to put them in a box. His view of management was that when you have those sorts of people what you do is give them lots of room to move so they can actually produce for you. You give them support, you give them assistance and encouragement and so on.

I guess what I have to say about the Education Department in the period I was in it (1989 through to the end of 1993) is that it was not very good at recognising talent. I’m not even talking about rewarding it, but recognising it and nurturing it! I mean sometimes there are lots of talented people who, for whatever reason, can’t be rewarded in that kind of traditional way of promotions and so on. But a lot of people aren’t even necessarily looking for that, they are looking for an environment in which they can use their skills and their energy to make a difference. And I think it’s really hard to make a difference in that place.

There’s a wonderful comment that I believe X made at a farewell function … I’m sure you’re aware of the meaning of the word ‘synergy’ where the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. He said that the Education Department was the only place he knew where the whole was less than the sum of the parts. To me that’s a wonderful metaphor because I think it’s actually true.

W7 elaborated on the inability to harness talent and to reward initiative, particularly in those who didn’t ‘fit the mould’. Her feelings of frustration were expressed eloquently:

… at the Education Department [central office] I met some of the most talented, committed, interesting people, mainly women, but lots of men too, that I’ve had the privilege to work with – some fantastic people. It is an enormous tragedy I think that, for whatever reasons, and it’s very complex, those talents can’t be harnessed in a more positive way for the people who actually work in the place and for [the people in] schools out there who are looking to them for some form of leadership.
It’s not like there’s a lack of talent, but there’s certainly a lack of ability to harness that talent profitably and now hopefully your work will go someway to try to understand that moment of where ‘the whole is less than the sum of the parts’.

W13 expressed frustration with a hierarchical management structure that suppressed ideas and failed to give credit where it was due:

I had to give my new manager every file, every paper, every record and every strategic plan I had ever generated for the project, knowing full well that my work would never be acknowledged within the hierarchy. My success would be his. I had already proposed to executive management that we take the project resource to a commercial publisher – I had all the contacts and the networks to make it a successful venture. The demand for it was high. I was told that that was not my responsibility and Joe Bloggs would have to look at the idea – publishing for profit was not a Department practice. Ideas that could benefit the organisation were lost in the system – you couldn’t step out of line.

Men who were different and didn’t fit the dominant culture were also marginalised. Talented individuals, male or female, would not get on if they were classified as outsiders. W14 explained how some men were marginalised either through their different interpretations of what it meant to be a male manager or through their collaborative association with women. As a female manager, W14 had to deal with innuendo and inappropriate comments regarding her male professional assistant:

I can only say that it was very selective as an organisation about the talent that it would support … The development tower is pretty selective and certainly not commensurate with the amount of talent that’s there. And I think that’s probably true of certain men as well as a whole heap of women.

You look at the fairly modern men, fairly reconstructed in terms of their ‘androgyny’ and they got marginalised as well. It was as though they were women. My professional assistant was marginalised because he got on with me … they asked him if he was ‘getting it from me’ and all these kinds of absolutely, disgusting [inferences]. I said to him, “If you wish to lodge a complaint I will take that up as harassment on your behalf.” But that is where they cop it sweet … So I think we’re missing out on a lot of wonderful young men who would make wonderful administrators and certainly hundreds of young women who would make wonderful administrators.

W21 warned that it was not good to be too talented. Paradoxically, a woman’s performance was always under scrutiny:

People are comfortable if you are talented in one area, but if you are talented in more than one, well that’s a problem. I think that is what many of our really gifted kids get, especially if they combine say a musical gift with a sporting gift, that’s seen as having one too many [advantages] … It doesn’t help you to do something really well, but on the other hand, if you do something less than well there will be extravagant blame – so you can’t win!
The value of diversity was discussed by W10, an interviewee with extensive experience in equity issues. She used a quaint old story as a metaphor for resistance to change:

No one at that time actually saw the value of diversity as a value in itself in terms of the delivery of education. Because we’ve been teachers, we accept that’s the way it’s always been … but these people [working in EEO] would ask why. You know the old story about the roast in the oven? Have you heard that one? A woman went to the butcher and asked for the roast to be cut in half and her daughter said to her mum, “Why do you always get the roast cut in half?” She said, “Because your grandmother always did.” So they went to grandma and said, “Why do you always cut your roast in the middle before you put it in the oven?” She said, “Because great-grandma always did.” So they went to great-grandma and said, “Why did you cut the roast in half before you cooked it?” She said, “Because my oven was only this big.”

You know so sometimes we keep doing things because that’s the way they’ve always been done, we’ve never stopped and asked why. And bringing fresh people in … this is the value of diversity. You bring these people in and they look at things in a different way. Even breaking down the group of men sitting around the table – the white Anglo Saxon males aged 45-55 and throwing just one little diversity factor in there – maybe gender – and see what happens. It is working out there. I see it daily [in my consulting] where the groups are generating far better problem solving strategies, brainstorming … ideas and management.

**Effective people management**

An understanding of the value of good people management and the way such relational management can be disappeared in organisations (Fletcher, 1999) emerges strongly in this thesis. The women I interviewed were confident in their ability to manage and had developed skills that were very effective in achieving results. Many emphasised that their skills were facilitative: valuing the talents of the team and working collaboratively towards better educational practices. Similarly, Astin and Leland’s (1991) cross-generational study (cited in Vinnicombe & Cames, 1998) of seventy-seven women leaders showed that the women demonstrated a leadership style based on empowerment and collective action to initiate and sustain change. Most defined leadership as a process of “working with people and through people” (Vinnicombe & Cames, 1998, p. 25).

Despite demonstrating strong relational management skills, which they saw as a strength, many of the women in my thesis were wary of being classified as managers with a limited range of ‘women’s skills’, or soft skills. They were concerned that good people management was undervalued in a masculinist environment dominated by masculine values.

The tendency for large bureaucratic structures to rely on power and control mechanisms despite the recommendation of contemporary management texts (Covey, 1989; Senge,
Doing leadership differently

1990; Semler, 1993; Steinberg, 1996; Goleman, 1996) for more flexible, team oriented and supportive management styles has been well documented. Thirty years ago Bem (1974) talked about androgynous management and a resistance to classifying management styles according to gender. She emphasised that not all males are socialised to have more masculine attributes, nor all females feminine ones, but many people are ‘androgynous’, possessing both masculine and feminine traits. Bem noted, however, that textbook descriptions of androgynous management do not readily translate into bureaucratic practice. Although androgynous managers are said to be able to respond to a wide variety of situations — both men and women can exhibit a cooperative, empowering style aimed at recognising and developing the potential of both the individual and the team — research does support the contention that bureaucratic, hierarchical management structures, dominated by male leadership, tend to rely on power and control mechanisms to achieve outcomes (Bem, 1974). Moreover, if the masculine attributes of androgyny are valued over the so-called feminine attributes, traditional power relations in organisations are likely to be reinforced rather than challenged (Halford & Leonard, 2001, p.124)

Despite these reservations, Vinnicombe and Cames (1998, p. 25) point out that the concept of androgyny is a way of reconciling the female and male aspects of leadership. They refer to a gender identity theory by Spence (cited in Vinnicombe & Cames, 1998) which proposes that masculine traits are related to instrumentality and agency, whilst feminine characteristics are those of the interpersonal and expressive domain. Traditionally sex-typed individuals are socialised to have more features from one dimension than the other, whereas androgynous people show high levels of both masculine and feminine traits.

The gradual shift in management theory towards greater collaboration, more emphasis on relational management, and a focus on emotional intelligence, represents a move away from the singular, masculine image of the heroic leader. Yet old habits are hard to break and can re-emerge in times of crisis. Educational restructuring in tight economic times has meant a re-emphasis on ‘hard’ management practices and a move away from feminist leadership practices (Blackmore, 1999). Social justice issues have become diversity issues, and ‘the bottom line’ is about dollars, not people:

Educational restructuring, with its emphasis on efficiency, accountability and outcomes, privileges ‘hard’ management and entrepreneurial discourses of leadership over less instrumental, more holistic and ‘softer’, ‘feminised’ leadership discourses. (Blackmore, 1999, p. 3)
Blackmore (1999) also warns against the tendency to judge female managers as a homogeneous group. She points out that there is a difference between being female and being feminist and alludes to the diminished influence of feminists over new managerialist and economic rationalist discourses:

> Populist versions promoted in the media of feminist discourses about women’s styles of leadership being more caring and sharing have conflated ‘being female’ to ‘being feminist’ in highly essentialist ways. It is a conflation that ignores both the differences amongst women and the difficult political context in which leading women now work. (p. 3-4).

The possibilities for cultural change do not lie with women who act like men in order to be accepted by the dominant culture. Feminist leadership is about challenging dominant and repressive practices and being willing to do it differently. Foucault’s notion of resistance (1978, 1979) demonstrates that power is fluid and shifting, and that subversion itself can be powerful. However hegemonic masculinities are remarkably resilient (Cockburn, 1991; Connell, 1987) and can re-emerge in a conservative economic climate as a “reassertion of old style patriarchy” (Blackmore, 1999, p. 129).

In *The Women’s Power Handbook*, Kirner and Rayner (1999) talk about “doing it without becoming a bloke” (p. 100). They point out that it isn’t necessary to play the negative corporate games associated with traditional, male-oriented management practices and go on to quote Sue Vardon, Australian Businesswoman of the Year in 1996, who cautions against following bad behaviour which she identifies as ‘boys’ rules’:

> … such unconstructive behaviours as short-term planning and [short-term] strategic thinking, hoarding of information and power by senior managers; inflexible, rigid and complacent attitudes; poor people skills and lack of teamwork. (pp. 100-101)

Instead, the values she espouses include “teamwork, cross-functional integration, relationships, the resolution of conflict and the management of diversity” (p. 101). She reminds us that these skills do not belong exclusively to women and that they can be used to a company’s advantage.

Judy Rosener (1990) characterises women’s preferred leadership style as *interactive* or *transformational* whilst men’s preferred leadership style is traditionally *transactional*, relying on power, position and formal authority (command and control).

“Transformational leaders attempt to make their interactions with their subordinates positive for everyone involved by encouraging participation, sharing power and
information, enhancing other people’s self-worth and getting them excited about their work by energising them” (Rosener quoted in Vinnicombe & Cames, 1998, p. 24). In an earlier national study (USA, 1989) of men and women leaders in a diverse range of professions, Rosener found that women generally exhibited and preferred the interactive leadership style and men the command and control leadership style. Furthermore the interactive style is particularly effective in flexible, nonhierarchical and nontraditional organisations. This highlights the frustrations felt by interactive managers in bureaucratic and hierarchical organisations. Rosener (1995) points out that it is ironic that “in some organisations men are now being trained to be interactive leaders while women are still hitting the glass ceiling because they are interactive leaders” (pp. 11-13). She argues, as does the Karpin Report (1995) on the future of management in Australia, that in times of rapid change and with an increased emphasis on the ‘bottom line’ we should recognise the untapped economic resource of women as managers and value their different management styles to gain a competitive advantage.

Many of the women in my thesis expressed a sense of themselves as different, and as operating outside of the predominantly male-defined hierarchical structure. They also cautioned that there are women who act in a more masculine style just as there are men who embrace more interactive and inclusive management practices. But the following quote is typical:

Because of the line management structure, which is so rigid, you feel a tiny cog in a wheel I think. And I believe that is not how women operate. I think men and women operate very differently as managers … I think men are very selfish in the way they work, looking after themselves. And maybe that’s because they see themselves as the breadwinner, got to go up the ladder, whereas women, certainly women of my generation, see it as something worthwhile to do and make a difference. I don’t think women are as selfish in their outlook.

This difference may be due, not only to having a different management style and being a woman in a masculinist hierarchical culture, but also to holding different values. Seeing things differently can lead to a profound questioning of the status quo. In turn, the desire for change is often met with resistance by the dominant culture. Women speaking out are frequently constructed, either consciously or unconsciously, as the ‘nagging female’, ‘that silly bitch’, or ‘that feminist’ (Blackmore, 1999, p. 118).
Individual management styles

The best of both worlds

W14 expressed her preference for a more androgynous and holistic management style that capitalises on individual strengths:

… I’m a bit of a fan of all of that androgynous management type thinking, that there are some things in the male characteristics that are very good and there are things in the women’s genre. And really what you need to do is pull those together to get a more reconstructed and … more modern leadership role. So leadership wasn’t something you’d put on like a dressing gown or an academic robe. It came from your inner strengths … So I got a very good response because I think they understood that I wanted to enable them and that I did believe the quest has to involve people, to inform them, to support them and so on … you might have a whole lot of gold braid that you might have to use on occasions but you don’t overplay that. So I think I tried to develop a holistic natural way [of management].

W3 talked about her love of ideas and action. She also referred to the type of management skills, often described as masculine, but necessary to survive in a bureaucracy:

I like change, action, risk, fun, teamwork, a sense of moving forward, all of those sorts of things, which I had in the Education Department for twelve years. But then it ended. I work best with people who are excited by ideas and achievement and objectives and so forth and I know I wear people out. So I’ve learned that over the years. I probably wasn’t aware of it as much when I was in the Department but I am now. I like to get the job done and I like to have it done with some sort of coherent integrity. I like ideas.

… being able to operate in a bureaucratic context, I think you could get swallowed up, and so you have to have those sorts of, some people call them masculine skills, to survive in the bureaucracy. I think I probably have them in spades. I think you have to have them to develop and I think W2 has them and I think anyone who gets to those levels has them. It’s a question of what you do with them and how much capacity you’ve got to do anything else.

Other women, also working with passion and commitment, found that their management styles could be classified as either ‘soft’ or feminist. W4 saw her role as a consultant as one of helping to create change and commented that the ‘soft’ skills, so necessary in developing relationships, were not valued:

… a difficult role, helping to create change. Working with teachers and change is very difficult. There is a perception – ‘soft’ skills are not valued, but the world is based on relationships. The human side is of great importance.

She also realised that the attributes of commitment and idealism could be ‘used’ within a bureaucracy:
Commitment to your work, your idealism is your greatest asset; and it’s also your greatest weakness because you could be used. People can manipulate you.

W4 felt that because she was ‘different’ and did not conform to the image of the dominant culture her career was limited. Different ideas and different management styles were marginalised:

I think I’ve always been different and I’ve always felt, rightly or wrongly, that because I was different, I didn’t get on. Yes, my ideas were different, and my way of going about things was different too. I think it hinders [your career] – you can’t be different.

W10, like W4, realised that her strong commitment to equity and passion for the job could be ‘used’:

I think it was quite convenient to leave me there to maintain that level of visual impact, actually having something of a high quality coming out of Human Resources. So no career path, no development, no management, nothing … and part of it is that when you’re doing a job like EEO they know you’re doing it because you have a passion about it. You can’t do a job like that without a very firm belief. So they’ve got you, they’ve got you well and truly, because you’re 100 percent committed and they can do whatever they like to you knowing that you’re committed. They don’t actually have to encourage you. W10

Regretfully, she saw the traditional style manager as a bully and someone who progressed through the ranks. She also saw the good managers leave:

The traditional manager – it was typical education, it was ‘bully’ … When I say ‘typical education’ that’s a huge stereotype I know, but in my experience successful people in education probably were the bullies in the school yard, because a lot of them behaved that way to achieve what they needed to achieve, or felt they needed to achieve by bullying other people. In fact, recently I went in to see an executive director and I was told – as an external person – I was given a lecture in natural justice followed by an implied threat about whether I would be employed by that organisation again. Now if that’s the sort of bullying tactics that they’re using on external people … it must still be continuing internally.

I mean there were some excellent people in there, really good people, but a lot of them also left. A lot of the really good people left. I’d say it had something to do with who you knew, there were certainly connections that were required, you needed to be well known, you needed to be well respected in educational terms. In those days an outside person didn’t get a look … so yes, educational background – coming up through the ranks – was quite important. If you had experience from teacher to perhaps principal, deputy principal to perhaps acting district superintendent, those sorts of things really stood people in good stead to get maybe a directorship. And the culture was of course that you progressed through the ranks and you time-served, the whole educational promotional system was based on that, so there had to be some lingering effects from that I think. W10
Building a self-managing team and providing feedback

W1 spoke about the invisibility of relational management skills and the difficulties of achieving recognition for what was seen as a different management style. The ability to build a good team was attributed to luck and good people management skills were not recognised:

I didn’t get any sense that there was any particular problem with what I was doing or my management style. But on the other hand when it came to actually trying to put a case about what it was I had achieved, it was kind of assumed that all things just happened. [But] what I do is very systematically build a team, support the people in the team, provide them with guidance, have regular meetings. All that kind of stuff is pretty invisible and you’re seen as just lucky to have a good team and to have got the work done. Whereas in fact I didn’t have a particularly good team, I built a team, but that’s not what they recognised…. I think it’s just outside their experience. They just couldn’t understand how you could be nice (laughter) but strong.

… I think that good personal relationships in the work place are not soft; people management is one of the toughest things to do and do well. But it’s not perceived in that way by people who have a fairly disciplinarian kind of style and who rely on positional power, who don’t rely on other kinds of power (shared power), are threatened and frightened by subordinates having [responsibility], who think in terms of subordinates and so on and use that kind of a language. I think it’s a male style. It’s not always men but it’s a very male style.

She clarified her management style which was based on her philosophy of good teaching and learning and compared that to the traditional masculinist style:

I had a very strong philosophy about teaching and learning and managing a classroom and the role of the students in that kind of self-managed classroom and that really carried over into my management style. I carried the same philosophy [to my management positions]. I believe that a good teacher makes for a good manager and I managed my teams in exactly the same way. I give as much responsibility as I think people are able to [manage], and where I see that people aren’t good with that I try to build responsibility and I delegate tasks … I have very high expectations of my staff, but I provide support and feed-back as well.

I think the skills I had … the kind of qualities and skills I value were not recognised or valued by the organisation. [There seemed to be a belief that] if you’re tough and distant then that must be stronger and more effective [whereas] a lot of the things that I did were exactly the same as you do in a classroom: you’re building a relationship, you’re building trust, you create opportunities to build a team. So you have functions and do things together, they’re mad nutty things, and everyone has a good laugh, but for me there’s a real purpose behind all that. W1

W1 elaborated on her facilitative and inclusive management style. She acknowledged the work of the team and gave informed feedback. Although this was her preferred style she encountered managers and supervisors who were only too ready to claim the credit for the work that she had done:
Doing leadership differently

… to me it’s about building an honest relationship, providing honest feedback and building a mutual respect. Being honest and direct and expecting that of other people too. Not skirting around pretending something was OK when really it’s not. It’s really tough, but at the end of the day, [informed feedback] gives much more satisfaction than just sweeping it under the carpet and letting it fester and build.

That’s one of the criticisms [of the management culture] … one of the things that I tried to do was to provide opportunities and systematic feedback to staff but it’s something I never was able to get for myself. I was always keen to give the kudos to my staff for the work they’d done, but I also had the sort of managers and supervisors who were keen to claim credit for work that I did.

Similarly, W2 spoke of the importance of receiving, as well as giving, honest feedback on performance. She felt that this honest feedback was vital to self-improvement and growth, yet was particularly difficult to get, especially for lone women in senior executive positions:

In those sorts of positions [senior executive], I found you got very little feedback – very little balanced or considered feedback. I mean you got the brick bats, you got a bit of praise, but the balanced feedback by which we all adjust our behaviour and gauge our progress, you got very little of that.

If you could choose your executive team you’d expect them to give you those cues and then you can, I think, continue to fine-tune your behaviour, and that’s where satisfaction comes … It’s really hard to do that.

Like W1, W5 felt that her people management and team building (relational) skills weren’t valued when it came to job reshuffles in the restructuring process:

I think my position did require a certain level of management skills, I mean all positions do, but because the areas [I was responsible for] were so diverse I always felt there was real possibility for those areas not working together … competing for scarce resources. My challenge all the time was bringing the group together and getting them to see the common aspects of their work. I put a lot of time into all of that and I guess I was hurt that they didn’t recognise my management skills. I think I have good people management skills.

I put a lot of effort in to having regular meetings of the consultants and regular planning days for the whole branch, where I made it known that I expected everyone to be there – not plan to be out in the school or plan to do anything else on those days. It became a bit of a joke almost, but I put a lot of effort into those sorts of things and I certainly got lots of positive feedback from the branch. So I think in terms of subordinates … I still have very close friends and meet regularly with some of them, but not quite so regularly with others. I still use those consultants, I keep referring to them, I still use them in my private consulting work wherever possible. So we’ve established a fairly firm friendship, not just a working relationship in those years.

She reflected that many women, herself included, want different things from the work environment. She talked about different values and a desire to change the dominant culture but finding the reality of doing that very, very difficult:
I think women, whether it’s because they have a different view of what they want to do at the top, and when they get there it’s a harsher environment than they imagined. I think a lot of women don’t necessarily want to be CEOs. I think they value other things like a balance, diversity, challenge, interest in their work, good people to work with. Certainly those things were far more important to me than the actual position that I had.

It does become a bit enticing, when you’re in there and you’re doing OK, so you think, “Well maybe I should apply for something and maybe I can be influential at another level too.” So you get enticed into this, but I think for a lot of women it has been very hard at the top, very hard. Not at the top necessarily, but in positions of power and decision-making and I think what you often hear is true that a lot of women do have a different attitude to how decisions are made, towards how meetings are run, and would probably influence the organisation to work in different ways if that dominant male way of working weren’t so dominant, so strong.

W12 also talked about the lack of value placed on relational management (see Fletcher, 1999). Her definition of leadership emphasised recognising individual strengths and the leader as facilitator in the development of talent. A metaphor for growth helped express her philosophy:

My definition of leadership is about being a good facilitator. It’s about assuming that everyone has good qualities and you build on those strengths and good qualities. So in other words you’re like the gardener, you prepare the soil, you have the right climate, you try to get everything absolutely wonderful to give those plants the best opportunity to survive and grow. So I don’t see myself as a manager, I see myself as a facilitator and perhaps a coordinator.

This contrasted strongly with what she saw as the management style of the corporate culture. The theme of working for the good of education and finding that ideal undervalued in a culture that rewarded individualism surfaced again:

Being a good person and being a good people manager accounts for nothing … and being genuine about good quality education, instead of genuine about your own career.

W7 gave her version of successful management and the way she liked to work:

…it’s very much a personal definition of success. In a work context it’s primarily one of achievement – to feel that I have helped do some things that have made a better work environment, a place that’s more likely to achieve the outcomes it wants. I guess I come from a kind of traditional puritan background where you’re expected to leave the world a better place than you found it. That’s all I want to do, leave the world a better place than I found it and if I can do that then I will feel I’ve had a measure of success.

It’s not money. Quite naturally I’d like to be paid reasonably well but I certainly am not openly looking for big dollars. It doesn’t interest me. Making a difference is something that seems to be increasingly difficult to do in today’s public service.
because making a difference actually means improving things and I sense that governments are so anti public service that it’s just the opposite.

W8 described the lack of recognition and undervaluing of different management styles. She felt that seeking ‘more of the same’ (cloning) and rejecting those who don’t fit the mould contradicted the rhetoric for change. W8 also noted that some men have a more ‘feminine’ management style and some women get to positions of power by rejecting that style in order to fit the mould:

I think it’s embedded in what we see as successful management styles and recognising something and appreciating something in a lot of women’s styles that is overlooked … because you don’t fit into the mould. It’s like rewarding the same old performance again and again. So unless there is a real change in the thinking, what we value and what is rewarded, then that won’t change. Again the rhetoric’s there, I mean, I think it’s not that the knowledge isn’t there, but it’s actually changing the practices, and so I guess it’s a vigilance … And again it’s not just the Human Resources or the selection panels, I think it’s an up front demonstration by management that they value and reward a more feminine style.

I can think of some guys who fit well into a feminist style or a feminine style. And I can see some of the women who are in there now who don’t fit that at all and I think that has been one of the biggest disappointments. I can find all the excuses under the sun, however I’m still disappointed by it … Y [executive management position] doesn’t have what I would call a feminine management style and she’s got to where she is probably because she hasn’t had a feminine management style.

She concluded by explaining her preferred management style:

Therefore that’s why I think it needs that whole change in what we value. I think it’s a more cooperative style, more sharing rather than authoritarian or out front individual leadership. I mean it’s more of appreciating a collective voice and consultative … I’m finding it hard to say this because I keep on seeing in my mind’s eye the people who are in there, women who are in there [now] who are in the positions of power, and they are certainly not those people … with that style … they are much more ruthless, ambitious.

Similarly, W9 talked about having a more collaborative management style and recognising individual contributions to the team. She also expressed her disappointment that some managers (including some women) espoused consultation and inclusion yet worked in autocratic and exclusionary ways. This seemed to be acceptable in the managerialist and rationalist climate of the late ’90s and beyond:

I believe my management style is inclusive. While I have worked with managers who have had a similar style, in particular women, I have also worked with managers who espouse consultation and inclusion in their rhetoric but are actually autocratic and excluding in their approach. Unfortunately I can think of current women managers who fit this description.
I always tried to allow people to do the same things as I liked being done with me. Giving people respect and trust, allowing them to be seen and to get recognition; working together. So working together to achieve the outcome that we were after. Obviously there are times when you have to take the lead and make some hard decisions but I think if you work in a collaborative way [I was responsible for] with people prior to that then they will accept and understand.

... sometimes there will be people in your team with whom you can’t work in that way but I never let the one or two times that happened change my mode of operation. It just wasn’t in me to go from collaborative and respecting others, and involving others, to bullying or authoritarian ... because one or two people let you down.

She saw some exceptions to the rule – men with a more inclusive style and women who were clones, sometimes more authoritarian than the men they emulated. But she saw the good managers, with a ‘humanistic’ style, leave the organisation:

Only a certain sort of person is promoted and developed. I think you’re now getting more clones than you would have even in the past ... I’ve watched all the people who I thought worked in a style that I admired, and could work with, both male and female, leave. And I think what’s left now are the males who work in that very authoritarian style and the women who work in that same mode. Sometimes they can be worse than the males.

If I go right back to when I first went in there ... there were all males at the top and they were very patronising and while there were some authoritarian males, there were also men who exhibited what you’d call a more female way of operating and I think I dealt with one of those ... X was just visionary. The way he developed people and worked with people - brilliantly, brilliantly. So he exhibited that sort of trait that you’d expect in most women. It’s a humanistic way of believing in people. What I’ve observed is that more women than men have it, but what I see now is the rise of women who are very comfortable with the autocratic, authoritarian style of managing. Maybe humanistic people are too subject to power plays; maybe they care too much about people and what happens. The cost to yourself was too great.

Valuing expertise
There was a sense that expertise, apart from the male dominated area of technical expertise, was not valued. Many of the women had developed high levels of expertise which were lost to the organisation when they left. Women who operated in a relational management style and had expertise in equity related areas often found themselves sidelined in restructures and management reshuffles.

A number of high profile companies are beginning to recognise the economic value of knowledge, with cost estimates of between $70,000 and $100,000 to replace one female middle manager (Stevens, 2000, p. 22). The knowledge of experts is valuable in facilitating problem solving through rapid access to information, the ability to make connections, manage complexity and to see a range of possibilities. But to value expertise
organisations must first recognise the notion of ‘fluid expertise’ (Fletcher, 1999) where the leader is willing to step back, learn from, and give credit to team members.

W13 expressed her views on success, expertise and the recognition of talent. She talked about what is valued:

Success for me is about being challenged, being passionate about what I do, wanting to reach high levels, making a difference. If you’re passionate about your work you will naturally want to reach a standard of excellence, you will be self-motivated. But managers need to be able to recognise that talent and encourage its development. I guess that’s why so many capable women tend to get into projects. If their talent isn’t recognised and the promotional pathway is blocked, they gravitate towards the things that they care about, where they have expertise.

Expertise is necessary for deep understanding and to get the job done to a high level. I don’t think expertise and higher-level knowledge is valued in central office. I think the experts are confined to the lower ranks. And those in the senior management hierarchy (usually male) are happy to take the credit when the ‘worker bees’ (usually female) make things happen. But without that expertise – people with the knowledge and the ideas for getting the job done – the place would grind to a halt.

W5 had similar views on expertise and its value to the organisation. When expertise is not valued the wheel gets reinvented many times. Without the building of new knowledge on to existing knowledge progress is limited:

Someone who knows their particular area, knowledge and understanding of their area, I think that’s an important component [yet] that’s not the way the public sector has gone. It’s now very much generic management – less content … I think that’s actually one of the problems in there [central office] that there isn’t any continuity and that people move about and the wheel gets reinvented so many times … a lot of enthusiastic people who are new to it finding out all the things that have been known for years … it’s a bit sad that it doesn’t move on.

Linking a collaborative management style to respect for expertise and the valuing of talents in other people, W17 echoed themes that continually resurface throughout this thesis.

I’m very much about a collaborative model, that’s how I manage, and [I’m] very successful in that I think. Empowering others and not keeping power; valuing other people and knowing that they also have expertise and that they have huge amounts to offer.

In a way that recognised the idea of mutual empowerment (Fletcher, 1999) and the interdependence of leaders and their teams, W15 used the analogy of an orchestra to talk about the attraction of ‘servant leadership’ Servant leadership recognises that to get to the peak of achievement in any field we need support from other people (W15).
Somebody was talking the other night about the notion of ‘servant leadership’ coming back and that’s a kind of leadership that I’ve always found attractive. The word ‘servant’ has got those unfortunate pejorative overtones or undertones. I think Eva Cox [1996] called it more ‘collaborative leadership’ … in other words you don’t have to stand out the front and be pulling everybody behind you … you stand back and you allow your team members to show their talents] … it’s like a conductor of an orchestra … who has the whole range of talents and allows the instrumentalists to display their talents … so long as ‘in the air’ you’ve got harmony and you’ve got this beautiful piece of music that you’re playing.

W8 found it incredible that expertise and experience were neither valued nor rewarded. The resultant loss to the organisation was considerable:

I think about the knowledge and experience that went out the door, and OK fresh blood is great, but there’s something about experience too, or just knowing an area well. I can’t think of another profession where you can come out of working at the coal face in a school, are taken into a district office or central office, develop your skills, whether it’s your liaison, writing Ministers’ briefing notes, developing, really getting to know your area extremely well, workshop groups – a whole range of experiences you don’t get in a classroom – and then suddenly your position’s gone and back you go to where you were four, five, six, eight years ago … and having no recognition of that at all. And that’s incredible.

A focus on education

Working for the good of education is a theme that emerged and re-emerged throughout the thesis. In her executive management capacity, W2 tried to redefine the role to maintain more genuine contact with schools. Although she tried extremely hard, the reality was, that within the bureaucratic and political confines of the job, it was impossible. This realisation contributed to her decision to leave. She wanted to work in a context where she would have a more direct influence at the school level.

I guess when I came back as [executive position] I knew that it was going to be really hard to keep contact with schools. I worked at that knowing that I was probably riding a loser, but trying to see if the role could be developed, so that you actually were keeping direct contact with schools, so you were getting accurate, undistorted information rather than all the layers with everyone putting their distortions in between. But I found it virtually impossible and my colleagues in other states said you’re mad even trying to do it. I still reckon it was worth persevering but I don’t think it can be done.

Trying to be out in schools, trying to be out visiting country centres, trying to see some of the remote community schools. The risk is that you’re like a Mary Poppins; I mean you’re in at 9 o’clock and out at 9.30 and I didn’t want that to be the image. So I went through that trying to see if the role could be re-modelled but decided in the end it couldn’t be. That probably made me feel more strongly that the time was right when this job was advertised to apply for it because I could see that I wasn’t going to be able to change that role to keep some direct contact with schools.
Other women talked about the desire to do their best for education, to make a difference and to get the job done. This was contrasted with a self-interested approach to career, which was more commonly, yet not exclusively, a male attitude. W11 had worked on a career path review which found that women were more likely to describe their career ambitions in terms of students and outcomes whereas men were focused on salary package and promotion. She talked about women not wanting to be part of a management culture they didn’t admire:

… what gets measured, what competence is valued in the organisation? Actually I think it is linked to your earlier question about who gets on, who’s successful, what is valued, what competences are valued. But the thing I found that staggered me was that women were far more outcome-focused than the men. [In my review] I asked each group identical questions [about their careers] but women announced in terms of student outcomes and men would often want to talk about their superannuation or the blockages in the career promotion system.

Women unfortunately looked upwards and said I don’t want to apply for promotions, I don’t like the way the job is done, I don’t like the way the Department values it, I don’t want to be a boring administrator. I think [perhaps] a lot of these things are changing now, that was five years ago.

W18 explained differences in male and female behaviours, yet was quick to point out contradictions and exceptions:

Women themselves, if they want to be leaders, strong leaders, have to know how to negotiate with other women and make agreements and follow those agreements through and not jump ship when it gets too tough. If women stick together, and work in partnership and don’t malign each other and keep the women who play the games with the men out, it will make a difference.

I was never a woman leader who wanted to control the men. When I was a [senior manager] my catch phrase was, “You are site manager in education and leader of your school and that is how you are expected to perform”. My role was to monitor the performance of that school, but my purpose and intention was to work in partnerships with the men, not to control them or let them dominate me. The men who were prepared to do it, and were not little boys, have moved onto bigger and better things. There are men with a better balance of masculine and feminine energy but they are seen to be inferior males to the males who are … control freaks or bully boys. They [the latter] are the ones who run to all the important meetings, who get on all the important committees so it will look good on their CVs; they are the ones that pick the important things to do.

… The women do all the hard tasks and the menial tasks, while the men swan around looking good … women go to the things that they think are important to a make a difference, women take on the tasks that they think will have an impact on the system … because they understand that the core group of customers for the system are the children, and have a better understanding of that because they have been the primary parent of their children in the early childhood years (or care givers to others), and they understand the needs of children much better than the males.
Intrinsic satisfaction vs. self-promotion

A characteristic of the dominant culture was promoting career prospects through the technique of impression management. W5, working on the margins in an equity area, commented on her dislike of excessive self-promotion and managing upwards:

… I actually didn’t have a lot to do with my peers [in other sections] in a sense of regular meetings; they were a bit spasmodic. People would have preferred to have forgotten us; not all of them but some of them. I certainly didn’t have as close a working relationship with them … [A female director] made a comment once, “You always come into this office, into these meetings, bright, breezy and cheery with stories from the branch and you always go out feeling [deflated].” So I certainly, I didn’t enjoy my working upwards, managing upwards in the sense of promoting myself. Maybe I could have promoted the work of the branch more, I don’t know. Certainly the satisfaction in my work was at the branch level and, you know, working with districts and schools.

W12 had similar views on the different way women and men viewed their roles in education:

I see women wanting to make a difference for quality of education; men are wanting to make a difference for their own careers. So those motivations lead up very different paths and to very different work. Men – it’s about getting the scores on the board in terms of what is meritorious. Women – it’s getting scores on the board in terms of making a difference for kids and teachers in schools.

She explained her view on why these different styles emerge, linking it to the lingering effects of the traditional home/work gender divide:

I just think it’s as old as time. It comes right back to the theory of male breadwinner; woman home carer-nurturer. It’s that basic, and through the generations the men’s careers have been so critical. It’s a critical part of their ego, it’s a critical part of who they are and their sense of self, so the stakes are higher for them. Whereas women have a multi-dimensional world. You know you and I have both made a decision that our quality of life, our relationships with our friends and family – we can fulfill those needs in so many other ways that I actually feel a bit sorry for men that they’ve only got this single, singular way to live life.

Women managing projects found it difficult to obtain constructive feedback and guidance from male line managers. W13 highlighted the dangers of questioning existing practices in a culture that encouraged sycophantic behaviour:

I asked my manager if he was happy with the way the project was progressing. The feedback from teachers and administrators involved in the project was very positive and I was managing to gain support from classroom teachers and specialist groups. He responded aggressively, “You don’t understand how things work around here, take a look at the way X operates”. In my estimation X was close to incompetent and certainly had no understanding of the area, but I did notice that he spent a lot of time pleasing the boss. I found it quite sickening, but apparently I was expected to
be like that. I even had the temerity on some occasions to disagree, question existing practices and suggest more commonsense approaches [facetious]. I was not subservient.

Like many of the women in the study, W12 was scathing in her disdain for the boys’ club habit of ‘pissing in pockets’. She saw men marketing themselves while the women got the ‘real work’ done:

And we’d be working our butts off, getting the real work done. That’s part of it too, women are so busy doing the real work they don’t see it [promoting themselves] as legitimate, they do in their own time – the selling of the stuff, the talking up, or they do it in terms of their work. Whereas men are constantly pissing in each other’s pockets about, “I did …, I have …, I …, I …, I …”. Women are, “We …, We …, We …; the team”.

Personal responsibility vs. dependency and political games

W6 talked about her philosophy of personal responsibility compared with the victim mentality of some managers (mostly male), particularly at the school level:

The ‘ay oughta’ syndrome – they [the system] oughta do this, they oughta do that ... for God’s sake! I really found that very difficult because I have a philosophy of personal responsibility and if there’s something in your life that you don’t like, you take action to change it. Yet I would go out and see people everywhere, all around, reinforcing each other with that “Oh poor me, I’m in the nasty system, in a job I don’t like … and who’s going to rescue me?” And I just thought I would be embarrassed to be publicly expressing myself in that way.

W11 also noticed this dependent behaviour in central office:

… it was very much like being in a large school and people were very, very critical of executive. There was a lot of gossip and I saw a culture of people absolving themselves of responsibility to change things. So the constant gossip and the rumours in the head office were unbelievable … that sort of club atmosphere.

… very negative rumours about restructures and who was going to get this job and who was on the outer and who was on the inner. You know there’s also a naivety about that sort of thing. I ring up now and a very senior person will sling off about someone else, be critical of someone else in the Department. You don’t get that happening in any other public sector department.

W6 spoke about the management style of a person likely to succeed in the central office bureaucracy. The use of power, politics and games, including ‘toadying’ to the boss, was described:

It’s really awful to say this but I think this particular person is probably a good example, I mean highly political in both capital P and small p. He was playing the game with the ALP at the time, probably messing around with the Liberals at the moment, but very political within the organisation. Full of innuendo, full of … like
implying he had information and knowledge that other people didn’t. I never quite knew whether he did or not, I don’t think he did, I think it was all an act; you know, wheels within wheels, that sort of bullshit … the ‘knowledge is power’ type of approach to things. The naked use of power in putting people down or making it apparent that he could affect their promotion prospects. Those sorts of things encouraging the sniffing types to toady to you …they did that … got their little entourage of people who basically hitched themselves to their staff.

When asked if men and women related to her leadership differently, W17 pointed out the complexity of perceived gender differences, that it was more about management styles than a strict male-female division:

I had a huge team in ’94 – mainly women. I also managed men out in districts, it was a huge team … I value a team approach … I always have a very good team feeling, I guess it’s my management style … I think that is definitely the way we need to go, but because telling people what to do is so ingrained, I think we still look to that as the best model, it predominates. [That leadership style is] very much an ‘I am’, ‘I know it all’, ‘I’m managing you’, ‘I don’t really recognise your talents’ – so people feel undervalued and many then go into a box – so there’s no empowerment.

However there are men in there too who have what I call the feminine management style, and I think it’s far healthier, far more empowering. And I think the people who don’t manage in an empowering way are really out for themselves and building their own empire and wanting to step up the ladder. Whereas I think most women are not so concerned with that – I think that’s the difference … maybe we need someone at the top who says this is the way it’s done … I don’t know [despairing].

W6 spoke of the energy that can be expended in ‘playing the politics’ in competitive work environments. Her version of success and a work environment that supports that success were inextricably linked to being true to one’s values:

You know success is now being able to align my values and my abilities and my motivation with what I do, so that everything is in alignment, and I am successful to the extent that I achieve that. When they’re in alignment, the things that flow and the things I’ve been able to do, have been tremendous and they’ve been done with minimal effort.

I think it’s so easy [in my current position] to achieve things because I don’t have to fight the political games. I haven’t fought a political game the whole time I’ve been here [new job]. It takes a huge amount of energy … that’s where your talent and enthusiasm goes into playing the other person and not getting the job done.

W11 also talked about politics getting in the way of genuine reform despite constant changes in direction. The rationale behind “beautifully articulated” change agendas was not accompanied by genuine support at the implementation level, thus encouraging feelings of dependence on the organisation. Evoking images of the addictive organisation (Schaef & Fassel, 1988), W11 described the insecurity that arises from dependence, leading to a fear of expressing criticism of the way the place was managed.
When I go to a meeting at the Education Department it’s like lots of articulate words but there are always barriers, there’s this negative attitude, there’s always a reason why we can’t do things … there isn’t that ability to make things happen practically. I think the whole devolution thing and the ‘squiggle’ booklets was an example of that. The rationale of why devolve was beautiful, beautifully articulated, it was rational but there was nothing on the how. That’s the hardest thing to do strategically – to make things happen – and there was none of that. I felt it was like grabbing a bag of empty air.

No, I think there are very poor managers of people there. A lot of waste of human resources … and it’s a political place, there’s such a constant change in direction that there’s a feeling of dependence on the organisation. Who am I? I’m just a small cog in the wheel. Things just went up the line and back down the line and there wasn’t a lot of initiative taken in management.

I think there’s a fear, a fear of the truth coming out, a fear of it being politically dangerous to the government, a fear you know that it might cause some problems, there’s not a lot of openness to inquiry. I was very disappointed at the level/standard of management …

In contrast, she described a female director in my sample whose management style she admired and whose advice she sought in making her decision to leave:

But when I was doing the review, that committee was chaired by a woman … who was about the same age [as me], younger … early 30s, and she was Level 8. So I was impressed with her. It was a glimpse into the outside world for me because she was very efficient and whipped a lot of the senior Education Department men into line in terms of her organisational skills, efficiency, getting them to make decisions and to stop the endless intellectual debate that used to go on about issues. She’d just say “Look we’ve got an hour to make twelve decisions, so, how about it?” I was very impressed with that and she was a key figure for me, [when I was] wanting to know what strategies to use. I got on the phone to her and tossed the ideas around and realised I couldn’t go back. She had been intuitive that there was very little management of me and I was just left to flounder and not assisted at all. W11

Reflection

This chapter has looked at different ways of leading and managing, not in an attempt to essentialise women, but in an attempt to open up debate, look at alternatives, and to broaden the definition of ‘successful’ leadership. Amanda Sinclair (1998) is not alone when she points out that “there is a close but obscured connection between constructs of leadership, traditional assumptions of masculinity and a particular expression of male heterosexual identity” (p. 1). Eveline (in Eveline & Hayden, 2000) warns against measuring women leaders against men, as the process further cements the idea that the leader is normally male. It also assumes that all men are the same and that women are a homogeneous group who will necessarily hold different values and visions to men. The women in this study did not wish to be measured against men. They were confident in their management styles yet were frustrated at the failure of so many men in positions of
power to recognise and to value management styles outside their own experience. Often there was a clash of ethical values.

The stories from the interviewees revealed a common thread. Although there were individual differences in management styles (and in one case, at CEO level, quite obvious differences – possibly linked to a new managerialist culture\(^{33}\)) the underlying philosophy was one of good people management. These women in leadership and management generally described their style as inclusive, collaborative, interactive and supportive; focused on developing the talents of the team – indicating elements of a transformational model of leadership (Rosener, 1990). This was in direct opposition to the command and control (transactional) style of the dominant culture. The respect, recognition and empowerment that the women managers were keen to give to others was something they were often unable to get for themselves, particularly from male line managers. And they realised that relational and inclusive leadership styles (sometimes labelled ‘soft’) were undervalued and frequently unrecognised in a masculinist environment. Like Fletcher (1999), they realised that good people management could be made invisible, a strategy that advantaged many men who did not have those skills.

Far from adopting a victim or angel stance, the interviewees were clear in their understanding of themselves as leaders. Overwhelmingly they saw themselves as leaders who encouraged their team members and were concerned with the recognition and development of talent and ideas, demonstrating their ability to step aside from the role of expert and to learn from others (‘fluid expertise’ as described by Fletcher, 1999). They wanted to achieve and to make things happen, taking the lead where necessary, but including others in that achievement. They recognised the need for a flexible, responsive style but generally held ‘toadying to the boss’ and excessive self-promotion in disdain and felt that masculinist styles of management rarely had an educational focus.

These women respected the handful of men who had an inclusive management style and realised that there were women who acted like ‘honorary males’ (Greer, 1973; Kirner and Rayner, 1999). W15 particularly experienced the difficulties working for a female manager (outside my sample) with a strong masculinist style. Her career satisfaction

\(^{33}\) Morley (1999) explains that under new managerialism the emphasis is on the three Es: economy, efficiency and effectiveness with a noticeable absence of the fourth E – for equity. Equity is off the agenda (Ball, 1994) and values relating to social justice “are perceived as irrelevant to management theories based on marketisation” (Ranson & Stewart cited in Morley, 1999, p. 28).
declined dramatically under the influence of this bullying manager. Becoming the same as men seems to alienate men and women alike. As explained by Franzway (2001, p. 87), “Women cannot escape the complex meanings and effects of patriarchal gender relations by simply adopting male practices”. It was significant that the pockets of harmonious, interdependent and collaborative management were usually found in the more female dominated areas of the central bureaucracy, often linked to equity and social justice functions. They were also the least valued and the first to go in any restructure.

Yet there is a dilemma for women, particularly the few who actually break through the glass ceiling as senior executives, even CEOs. Maintaining resistance, particularly for the lone female, is exhausting; changing the culture is difficult, if not impossible. A ‘successful’ leader might want to work collaboratively, yet collaboration in an alien climate is often untenable. Toughening up, ‘giving as good as you get’ may be a wise choice when a label of ‘weak’ or ‘soft’ is the alternative. Either way, a woman is likely to be condemned:

You have only got to look at what’s happening to … those women who are at director level … particular aspects of their style are picked up as unacceptable. So, for instance, if Y1 talks over everything with her staff, it’s seen as “She talks over everything with her staff”; if Y2 is seen as committed to disabled children, it’s “Oh God she’s so emotional”; if Y3 is seen as railroading over other people, it’s “Oh God, she never consults anybody”. There is almost no way that you can do it right!

Indeed, Belinda Probert (1999) says that there is a curious paradox at the heart of the new work order of the ’90s and beyond. On the one hand, fast capitalism has promoted corporate loyalty with an emphasis on ‘empowered’ team playing employees, investing fully their hearts, minds and bodies in their work [evoking images of the greedy institution, see Chapter 4], performing to the maximum in ‘participatory’ organisational cultures. On the other hand, “staff are encouraged to think of themselves as a ‘portfolio of skills’, willing and able to move from one organisation to another as enterprises expand and contract in this hyper-competitive global market” (p. 23). Like many of the women in
my thesis, Probert questions the efficacy of this individualist notion of work, yet does acknowledge its appeal for professionals with skills that are in short supply. What she leaves unsaid is that the scarcity of women in executive positions could lead to a high demand for their services, placing them in a more lucrative job market than most women experience. Some may find frequent relocation “an exhilarating and financially rewarding experience provided they are capable of remarkable ‘flexibility’. Others, however, may find it stressful and strangely unsatisfying in the long run” (Probert, 1999, p. 23).
Being bypassed for promotion

*It is obvious that the values of women differ very often from the values which have been made by the other sex. Yet, it is the masculine values that prevail.*

— Virginia Woolf

*The successful manager? A mediocre person wearing trousers of the male variety.*

— W12

*... you virtually had to be just warm, upright, living and male to be guaranteed of promotion.*

— W11

The preservation of mediocrity

Being bypassed for promotion (again!) was a defining (or culminating) factor in the decision to leave for more than 75 percent of the women in this thesis. Repeatedly missing out on promotion, often after ‘acting’ in the position for a number of years, was difficult to bear, particularly if the successful candidate lacked experience, expertise, or, worst of all, was renowned for his incompetence. The preservation of the status quo by promoting mediocre males (and, in some cases, compliant/complicit women) who would not be a threat to existing management was a recurring theme. Managers want to work with people they feel they can trust (Kanter, 1977) but they may also feel that their own job security will be threatened if they appoint people who are too different, too talented and outside their control. Talented women (and men who were different) could be bypassed in selection processes where boys’ club sponsorship and pre-selection favoured men. W12 questioned the ethical dimension of obviously biased selections:

I just think that it’s a subconscious thing; you promote people to be around you who are not going to be a threat to you. And again and again and again. In that short nine months I was there, those final nine months, I saw a good half a dozen men promoted to acting positions by invitation, not by expressions of interest. And I just could not for the life of me …! These were lazy people, people who were doing their footy tipping or organising their cricket team, [while] working at a Level 6 or 7 – obscene stuff, and they would be promoted. Getting their secretaries to do [their job applications], whereas I wouldn’t dream in a million years of doing that. Absolutely, the different ways of what is right and wrong.

She wryly summed up her opinion of the type of person most likely to be appointed to a management position in education:
A mediocre person wearing trousers of the male variety.

Some women also explained the mediocrity of the male managers by referring to their lack of management experience outside the school culture. Many of these men had come up through the system (with no career divergence) and never experienced anything outside of education. Some had also entered education as a last resort. Teaching required its quota of men and for many it was not their first choice. In contrast, due to the limited options traditionally available to women, many top female students entered the teaching profession. In turn, on encountering discrimination in the workplace, only a handful of those women rose to senior management positions. Many more men, less outstanding, rose to positions of power and influence despite their disproportionate (lower) numbers in a female dominated profession.

It certainly wasn’t the top job for a male – an ‘A’ male student could be a doctor, lawyer, perhaps an engineer; but for an outstanding female student, teaching was top of the tree when their choices were limited to teacher, nurse, secretary or hairdresser. Girls didn’t really need a career when they were going to ‘waste’ it all by getting married. The same men who scraped through into teaching became the leaders in our schools and education offices. W13

Positive discrimination encourages men to enter teaching (there are now ‘men only’ scholarships available to entice applicants), particularly into primary teaching – a point usually forgotten in the debate about gender equity. Ironically these same men, often with lesser qualifications and commitment than high achieving women, can end up in management positions.

I think [managing up] was stronger with men … the women less so because I think there is probably more intrinsic motivation to do the job for the women than for the men … the history of the Education Department being that the men who went in there were probably the men who didn’t have all that many other choices. W6

W7 was perceptive in her understanding of the threat that capable women could pose to rather mediocre men:

So you ended up with a rather mediocre bunch of men in senior positions in that organisation, feeling threatened by large numbers of talented women all around them, some of them [the women] who had been promoted, some of them who were in more subordinate positions but still able to question. And what people often do when they’re under threat is they become much more rigid and authoritarian.

W8 gave examples of men getting promotions and linked their advantage to numbers, masculine values (the theme of self-promotion and careerism being valued over actual job performance arose again) and opportunities for ‘the boys’:
My general impressions of the culture there is there were an awful lot of good women doing good things and getting on with the job, putting their effort into servicing schools, servicing teachers, doing the job. There were some good guys doing that too, but … a majority of women … and the men generally seemed to be the ones that were singled out, given promotions or received the offers. I mean I can think of a guy … he was fairly laid back but he did his job reasonably well. He had a meteoric rise because he was asked to get involved in the technology area and suddenly he’s gone from a level 6 to a level 8 overnight almost.

And there were others who would create a fuss and a position would be created. I’m thinking of … the guy … he had a level 9 position created for him … and these things happen to the men, I never heard these stories about the women. So there was that sort of difference in the culture. It was easier to get a promotion … there were fewer of them … also they would ask for it, demand it in a way that none of the women would. Have you seen who they’ve appointed in X position in Human Resources? A terrible reputation for working with people and now he’s managing [that position] in the Department!

I think that there was an underlying thing with women working hard and being patted on the head and being told how good they were and what a good job they were doing … but not necessarily being rewarded for it … it was still a man’s world in that regard. It comes down to what is valued I suppose.

W14 also felt that the male network ensured that the boys usually got whom they wanted in management positions:

… basically he could have won it on merit but [there was] a definite sense that he was sponsored by [the executive director] who was on that panel … In the Education Department there have been situations like this where that male network and that male culture can win out. If it doesn’t win in the first round it will find another way, it’s very determined.

Similarly W16 described the subtle and repeated advantages in job selection processes for those who were members of the boys’ club:

They were people who were looked after … the boys’ group, I suppose that’s what we used to call them. There would be quite a few of them who would apply for a job, not get it, but then would be given an acting job at the same level. Whereas when I went for a particular job and didn’t get it, it was just sort of, “Oh well, do better next time” … So that was very frustrating, because you could see that people … were given opportunities and though they didn’t make them [work], they’d still be given another chance, whereas you never were.

There were also a couple of instances … where a man was asked to do a particular job. He didn’t want to do it, so basically he went in and ranted and raved and said, “I won’t do this!” and so was given something else. Whereas the rest of us sort of did what we were told: “Oh just go away”.

W4 could see a stark difference between the traditional and conservative managers she worked with, mostly male principals, who had grown up in a dependent system (thus
finding it difficult to make the transition to self-managing schools) and good teachers who can be inspiring:

… it’s this whole culture of obedience, there’s still a lot of dependent behaviour and maybe that’s because we’ve got some people who have grown up in the dependent system; who think that’s how it will always be, and have never developed themselves in any other way, never worked in another system … mainly male. They need to grow up. They’re critical, they’re uninformed, they whinge a lot, they complain an enormous amount; they have no idea about basic stuff like saying, “Well, what is your purpose here today?”

… It’s like a little bit of sludge, you know, you really have to struggle to keep out of the cultural morass, [yet] to see a good teacher I think is the best thing in the world. I think it’s stunning … to see them holding themselves with breadth and passion and self-respect, and they give it to the kids.

Baggage from the past

Traditionally career patterns have been shaped by men who, as the breadwinners for their families, followed typically linear career paths with promotional opportunities dependent on length of service and geographic mobility. Many of the research participants talked about the historical influence of career progression through a seniority system based on length of service and country postings. Although promotion by merit eventually replaced the old system, subtle barriers were still in place and certain experiences were valued over others. Coming up through the ranks was still seen by many men as the only legitimate path to promotion. In addition, the opportunity for men to have had prior line management experience was a reality, particularly in the primary system where men, although comprising less than 10% of the workforce, held most of the promotional positions. The advantage for men was expressed humorously in this account:

… with a seniority transfer system, no matter how good you were as a woman you were never going to be equal on transfers. If you [subtract] the time out to have children, you were never going to get those years … What was not really ever highlighted by the men [is that] you’ve now got an increasingly feminised workforce in primary with the Level 1 and 2 teachers now being 92% female and 8% male. If you tag 50% of your deputy principal positions in primary for men35 you virtually have to be just warm, upright, living and male to be guaranteed of promotion. You’re tagging 50% of the positions for 8% of the teaching workforce … W11

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35 The requirement that deputy principal positions be divided equally between men and women has recently been lifted (1997-1998). While appearing progressive, this decision can work to further advantage the smaller pool of men who now have access to the full range of management positions in schools. It can also serve to reduce the total number of available management positions as some smaller schools in the primary sector will no longer require two deputies (Barrera et al., 1999).
The opportunity for management experience in schools was greater for men than for women, with a history of women having to resign on marriage and being barred from the top management position of principal. The traditional division of labour on gender lines was a common experience, creating subtle barriers for women:

… there were subtle barriers in the schools. Deputy principal females in primaries got a very different allocation of work tasks than the men, when, in fact, they were supposed to do identical jobs. So it’s the old story of saying, of course the men do better in the system, they deserve to because they get more opportunities to accrue merit. We do girls’ hygiene and pastoral care and morning tea and they do budgeting and stock control, sport, finance, IT, and those are the things that get measured in the merit promotion system … That’s all very well if women are happy to have that division in labour and also if those things get tested [equally] in the promotional system. W11

A number of women in the study benefited from the EEO legislation in the 1980s, in that their leadership potential was recognised and rewarded with career progression. Governments and organisations were accountable for demonstrating equal employment opportunities for women and Affirmative Action resulted in a rise in the number of women in leadership positions. One woman (W3), promoted to director level during that period, but subsequently sidelined, highlighted this brief period of progress with the words, “I had a short and glorious career”. The 1990s saw a return to conservative practices, where ‘the frills’ were slashed. The frills in traditional management terms applied to equity and social justice issues. In any budget decision, equity was the first to go. Blackmore (1999) states the situation clearly:

Ironically, these well-prepared and motivated women now work in schools where the legitimacy of EEO is being actively undermined. In the context of the radical conservatism of the 1990s, equity discourses are being marginalised and equity structures dismantled … (p. 80)

The advantages of Equal Opportunity Act reforms and Affirmative Action were short lived:

… there were some examples of women getting fast promotions … I think there were jobs for the girls [in the late ’80s] and there were jobs for the boys and I think it’s unfair to the men to have it represented as just being jobs for the boys. I think that era created that culture [but after that they] just paid lip service to it really. W11

W3 explained that Equal Opportunity meant that she had access to promotion, which had not been available to women in the past. However, once she rose to a level where she was seen as competition for senior management positions, she was treated differently:
In the mid ’80s … when the Labor Government came in, when there was Equal Opportunity legislation … plans had to be written and the Department was in court for discriminatory practice. There was lots of commonwealth money coming in and so there were lots of things happening … They were very heady times, it was absolutely terrific, but by the end of the ’80s and the early ’90s the pendulum was starting to swing back the other way and if any Director General wanted to keep their head or their hat they’d have to swing with it.

This is pretty complex because I reckon if I had not been female, I wouldn’t have got those opportunities for a start – because I was in the Department and got promoted and noticed through the Equal Opportunity area so I mean that was a plus. Then I think you get to do things because you’re a woman, because the blokes don’t see you as a threat; they don’t compete with you directly, or they don’t think they have to compete with you directly, until suddenly they find they do and that shocks and surprises them.

Job selection processes and perceptions of merit

With most of the structural barriers of the past removed, job selection, by definition, is based on merit. However, perceptions of what constitutes merit vary according to context and are largely controlled by those in power. Viewed through the ‘lens of privilege’, merit cannot be seen as a neutral or fair measure for all:

Viewing educational administration through the lens of privilege means deconstructing concepts such as merit, seeing it as a social construct which favours those already in power, largely white middle class males … (Burton, 1993 cited in Blackmore, 1995). Exclusive notions of merit and leadership deny access to those whose experience and skills do not conform to a dominant view. (Blackmore, 1995, p. 54)

Lack of experience is often cited as the main reason that women do not win administrative positions. Ironically, males with less experience are frequently hired to fill those roles (Hill & Ragland, 1995). Women, operating outside the norm, often have to work harder and be better qualified to be seen as competent. The theme of having to be better than a man, linked to historic notions of leadership, wove its way through the stories of many women in the sample:

They [women] are more conscientious, they get the job done; they do it to the best of their ability (not half done). If they want promotion I think they have got to be seen as highly successful. I think it’s also an inbuilt thing, that to believe in yourself you need to do the job 110% … I believe that women have to continually prove themselves. Why? … I think that there is still a perception that leaders are men, I think that is still ingrained. I think it is changing gradually, I think we’ve moved a long way, but … I noticed in meetings, [the male director] is very charismatic, but I noticed that the eye contact, even when [the female director] was there, people would still defer to the male, even though there was a woman of equal status, highly regarded, but we defer to the male. I think many of us are guilty of that. Even though it may have been the portfolio of the female, even then you would see them defer to the male director … and that’s undermining and somewhat soul destroying
Being bypassed for promotion

and again leads to lack of confidence, lack of self esteem of that particular woman, and it’s very subtle but it’s there. And of course, the women of my generation, their upbringing was that the male was dominant, that they were in leadership roles. I did my whole schooling with a male principal; it’s hard to undo. W17

Job selection processes are positioned as gender neutral36, yet images of the ideal candidate for leadership are invariably male. Many research studies have confirmed that managers have a tendency to promote people who most resemble themselves and through a process of homosocial reproduction (Kanter, 1977) sponsor other men “by providing information, supplying references, recommending them for wider professional rewards and experiences, and introducing them to significant others in the organisation” (Randell, cited in Smith & Huchinson, 1995a, p.75).

In the last ten years or more there have been efforts, influenced by Equal Employment Opportunity policies, to promote non-discriminatory selection practices. There is a standardised written selection criteria and interview format for all advertised Public Service and Education Act positions. Apart from the contacting of referees, the job appointment hinges on the quality of the written application to secure an interview and, finally, on the success of the all-important interview. The flaws in this process are much harder to define than the direct discrimination issues of the past. The selection criteria and the interview questions can focus on skills and abilities that favour masculine, rationalist models of leadership. In addition, non-interactive interview formats favour an oration over an interaction. Revealing personal style can be difficult in an unnatural, clinical situation where the set questions, and only the set questions, can be asked. Often, if the respondent misses an important aspect of the response, no prompting is allowed as this may disadvantage other applicants. However, it may also fail to reveal the full potential of an applicant who shines in a supportive, encouraging and interactive environment.

Despite in-depth experience, high qualifications for the position and proven ability to lead teams to successful outcomes, many of the women in this study missed out on ‘the job’. An unsuccessful interview was often the defining factor. W5 told of her experience in the

36 In 1997 selection panels were no longer required to undertake specific training courses in EEO/diversity issues; however it is stated in a letter to line managers from the Director General (3 July, 1997) that “an explicit [EEO] component for the training of selection panel members will be developed and implemented”. In addition, “when opportunities arise or when vacancies occur, line managers will be required to achieve at least 25% females on all promotional positions”. This requirement needs to be viewed in the light of the fact that women represent approximately 70% of the total education workforce.
selection process and the problems that can arise when the interviewee has more expertise in the area than the members of the selection panel:

I think any selection process, any interview process is fraught with all sorts of difficulties, everybody knows that. I think that, often, when you’ve been in the position for a long time and you know the area well, you actually know it far better than the people who are interviewing you, and so I think in their terms the answers you give, the responses you give may not be the ones they imagine are the right ones. But you get pretty committed in your views about how things are and what the issues are ...

In the restructure she didn’t win the management position she had been working in for three years (a man with no experience in the area got the job). Despite a record of outstanding achievement, relevant experience and expertise, and excellent postgraduate qualifications, W5 was not the favoured applicant:

[Before that particular restructure] I was actually interviewed for an executive director position. Now I didn’t think I would get it, I didn’t expect to get it, but I was chuffed that I was short listed for it. So not getting a manager’s position when I’d been working in it for three years was a bit of a slap in the face. So there was a real message in there for me. You know – seriously rethink where you’re at and what you’re doing here … I guess I hoped I would [eventually] get a director’s position and that probably would have been it … the expectation was built up that that’s what I would slot into in time. I was led to believe that others saw me in that light too … and that all just went in a day.

W13 also thought there were inherent problems in the interview process and in the selection of panel members:

The requirement is that there will be an expert on the panel. The ‘expert’ in this case was the manager who had been in the job for a matter of weeks and had never worked in the area before. That meant that there was no one on the panel who could understand the complexity of the issues and therefore little value was placed on expertise. The panel members were hand picked by the executive director who was also on the panel. Of course he chose people who thought like he did and he certainly didn’t want to appoint a consultant with high-level expertise in the area. He had said previously that he didn’t want anyone who was likely to object if the program was cut back or eliminated. The guy who got the job certainly didn’t rock the boat … he was verging on incompetent.

Competent women with more experience, more expertise and stronger qualifications were passed over for males who had been pre-selected for the job. The job application process was in place, to meet equity criteria, but those in power often had the preferred candidate in mind. As an already initiated member of the boys’ club, he had the full support of his mentors who were also the ones with whom the final decision rested. Selection processes can stifle diversity when hiring and promoting ‘more of the same’ is an unspoken, yet accepted, guiding principal. One woman talked about not being wanted by the new boss
who was actively seeking candidates with whom he felt comfortable, a strategy that she 
feared may have been linked to his own lack of confidence. Rather than welcome the ideas 
of experienced employees he seemed to feel threatened:

So we had a director come in who basically decided he didn’t really like people who 
were already there and that wasn’t just me of course. There were a few of us and he 
made it known to a few people that he would like to get rid of us, not thinking that 
these things would be reported back to us, which of course they were. There were 
three of us in the same situation. The other two were men … he didn’t want us there. 
He didn’t like people who challenged him. I think that was the word he actually 
used. We challenged him too much … I’m not quite sure how you can do that. I 
know there were acting positions available and he went out and examined the people 
he wanted. I just think he simply … he basically wanted people who would do what 
he said without question … Maybe it’s a lack of confidence … It just wasn’t a very 
pleasant working environment. You felt that you weren’t … your opinion wasn’t 
valued. W16

W7 discussed the subtle bias in job selection processes; indirect discrimination which is 
difficult to detect, such as selection criteria which advantaged the male candidates:

So it’s very, very subtle. It’s nothing really obvious … I think there would be those 
who would argue from a feminist perspective that even though we have selection 
criteria, and that puts us way ahead of the private sector, that those selection criteria 
are subtly geared to supporting the sorts of things that men are more likely to have 
done. It’s what you value … selection criteria that value certain kinds of technical 
skills ahead of other kinds of technical skills … So it’s that kind of questioning of 
what actually has value and whether or not there is indirect discrimination …

She pointed out that most men probably do not recognise subtle biases in selection 
processes:

I’m sure that most men don’t see themselves as biased in any way, it’s just they 
have different life experiences, they ask different questions of themselves … I think 
it’s a lack of self-knowledge more than anything else … They think they’re going 
by the books when they are engaged in a selection process, but they don’t recognise 
the subtext.

The selection panel’s stereotype of the ‘ideal’ candidate can be detrimental to women 
applying for jobs in typically male dominated management structures. Management has 
become heavily saturated with idealisations of masculinity (Marshall, 1995a), the male 
norm becoming the measure against which women are assessed. Jocelynne Scutt (1996) 
describes the cloning effect which operates so that ‘like support like’ in a system where 
men in positions of power encourage those ‘below’ them whom they see as a mirror 
image of their younger selves:

Men on selection panels tend to hire candidates who most closely resemble 
themselves. Men with the power to hire tend to employ job seekers who look, act,
think, speak like themselves. After all, if a man has confidence in his own abilities and approves of his own approach to the job, he is likely to see admirable qualities and potential in those who appear to act most like himself. (p. 2-3)

As pointed out by Harris (1998) “decision makers appear to base selection decisions on the fit between the attributes of the job applicant and the decision maker’s perception of the typical job holder” (p. 8). She uses Fiske and Linville’s argument that “organisational decision makers gradually acquire a set of mental models of important, repeatedly encountered, categories of people and objects. These mental models guide the processing of new information and the retrieval of stored information” (Harris, 1998, p. 8).

In his work on the learning organisation, Senge (1990) explains the importance of recognising ‘mental models’ and their influence on our thinking and actions. He says that new insights fail to get put into practice because they conflict with deeply held internal images of how the world works. These images limit us to familiar ways of thinking and acting. He quotes Argyris (1982) who says that, “Although people do not always behave congruently with their espoused theories (what they say), they do behave congruently with their theories-in-use (their mental models)”. Senge emphasises the difference between espoused theory and theory in use and challenges managers to be open to new world views:

Managers must learn to reflect on their current mental models – until prevailing assumptions are brought into the open, there is no reason to expect mental models to change … If managers ‘believe’ their world views are facts rather than sets of assumptions, they will not be open to challenging those world views. If they lack skills in inquiring into their and others’ ways of thinking, they will be limited in experimenting collaboratively with new ways of thinking. (p. 203)

Other researchers have talked about categories of change and first- and second-order change (Bateson, 1973; Watzlawick, Weakland & Fisch, 1974; both references cited in Marshall, 1995a). Second-order change requires a change to basic assumptions and fundamental patterns, and a readiness to change. These arguments help to explain the difficulties for women in facing selection criteria and selection processes that have been designed by the established management with an ideal candidate in mind. The more traditional ‘masculine’ qualities are likely to be valued when mental models remain unchanged. Both men and women who want to ‘get on’ will be pressured to conform to the values of those in charge. W10 talked about what is valued, the use of selection criteria that favour the male candidates and job profiles that emphasise hierarchical and technical experience:
We still have a very biased classification system that doesn’t value what we call the ‘soft skills’ that women tend to have in terms of communication, interpersonal, etc. So I believe the classification system in itself doesn’t value the skills that traditionally women hold. The next thing is the job profiles themselves … they would put more weighting on technical skills or experience in the hierarchy than they would on the ‘on the floor skills’ of a female … which, to my mind, puts in a barrier against predominantly women who might have those broad managerial skills but not the [particular] technical expertise …

In the final analysis they were all the women applicants [who missed out on selection] … some were very strong in contending for management but didn’t have one particular criterion that was put in there. So that’s the other way things are biased.

W13 saw evidence of selection criteria tailored to suit the male image of the person who would fit the job:

It was obvious the jobs were advertised with a preconceived idea of who was likely to apply. They had the favoured applicant lined up and wrote the criteria with that person in mind. If the potential male applicant didn’t have certain skills or practical experience they were downplayed in the process whereas there was always a lot of emphasis placed on line-management experience, which the men were more likely to have.

Working on the periphery of the organisation, in a support function such as human resources or a job with equity links, was seen by at least 50 percent of the research participants as a barrier to their advancement (see Chapter 6). W10 realised that, even with line management experience and a postgraduate qualification in management, she was always going to be seen as inferior due to her links with EEO. The path to promotion was closed:

I knew I wasn’t going anywhere in that organisation or even in the public sector. It was closed … I could certainly meet the selection criteria and get an interview. I had had line management experience. I had my own budget, my own team … the thing is that they saw my human resource management experience as being in Equal Employment Opportunity. When I fell foul of ever winning a level 7 position [the] feedback was consistently, “Well, W10 you really did come very close to winning the position, you met all the selection criteria but person ‘X’ has had broader experience than you”.

So after that I decided I would apply for Level 5 positions in other areas, to get the breadth of experience you see [facetious] … every time I went for a Level 5 position the feedback was, “Oh, W10 you’d be so bored in this position because your skills and talents go well beyond Level 5”. You know this is the paper shuffling position or this is that. So I really was caught. I couldn’t get any further experience at that level and I couldn’t seem to crack a higher level. And I was pretty much stuck in Equal Employment Opportunity even though I’d gone back and done a Postgraduate Diploma in Human Resource Management and Development on top of my Bachelor of Education. So I just thought at that point that there’s nowhere for me to go … when the opportunity came up to leave I couldn’t see any reason not to.
She also found that community management experiences, which women are more likely to have, carried little weight in the selection process:

… having interest in the community and wanting to commit some time to community issues was something that I always did … that was never perceived as being of value in a selection process. The fact that I chaired a board for two years – those sorts of things weren’t considered of value …

W13 found that it was not only voluntary community and professional experiences, but also primary parenting experience that was undervalued or simply not recognised. Moreover, the claim to motherhood could be detrimental to career progress:

When I quoted leadership in professional associations, at both state and national levels, I was told by the [male] panel members, “Oh we’ve all had experiences like that.” The difference was that I was leading the initiatives and they had been members of conference committees or voluntary associations. Just enough to get your name associated with something big without actually having to do anything. The frustrating thing was that blown up claims were never checked out and genuine leadership experience outside of paid employment was ignored.

Similarly, being a parent, the major caregiver to your children was not valued. I mean really parenting – not simply having children then leaving them to your partner to manage – the absent father syndrome. A man is always given a tick for being a father, whereas a woman is terrified to mention mothering because of the negative and stereotypical connotations that image conjures up … It’s a great pity that the skills learned over years of parenting – negotiation, conflict resolution, counselling, child psychology, time management, financial management, encouraging growth and independence, facilitating talent development, organising a multitude of things – don’t even rate a criterion point in the selection process. It’s like those years of parenting just don’t exist … yet they have a giant influence on who you are as a person. Most ‘mothers in management’ don’t need to be sent to expensive courses to learn these skills – they’ve been practising them for years.

And W8 observed that job selection criteria requiring an understanding of equity issues were treated superficially because these were the areas in which both male interviewers and male interviewees were likely to lack understanding:

… just really paying lip service to it … people would quote having taught Aboriginal children for two years as understanding social justice issues without really unpeeling what that meant. Without being able to demonstrate what they learnt from that or what they understood from that … that [type of understanding] was meaningless to a lot of people, I mean a lot of people couldn’t understand it even if they wanted to.

W10, an interviewee who (as an external consultant) has recently conducted a review on the selection system, expressed her disappointment at the standard of the process and the possibilities for bias:
I think the whole selection system has the potential to be grossly flawed. I have little faith in it. Whilst we have public sector standards now that govern things, I’ve just completed a review in which I’ve found applicants weren’t fairly assessed, there was a reasonable apprehension of bias and natural justice wasn’t served … I’m disappointed by the standards that are used, not just by internal people running panels but by outside consultants … I feel quite disappointed in the standard of panels. I really don’t believe that diversity in the public sector will be achieved given the current processes that are being used.

**Project management**

Often project leaders work in low level, low status ‘management’ positions with a pay packet to match. Yet project work often demands complex management skills ranging from writing grant applications to strategic and financial planning, to developing a project team and outsourcing work, to designing professional development training and evaluating pilot programs and trials. Many women fill these lower level pseudo management positions, doing the work of a manager but being classified as an ‘officer’ or perhaps a ‘consultant’ or ‘coordinator’. Thus inequalities operate beneath the surface:

Women may operate with contradictory sets of meanings, on the one hand invited to contribute as equals, on the other having to remember their real place. A consequence of this is that women may take on more than they are actually paid for, as the junior members of a team in which responsibility is supposedly shared equally. (Halford & Leonard, 2001, p. 91)

Newman (1995) says that while a position with elevated responsibilities may be good for the career development of some women, it is exploitative of many. The women leading projects conveyed this feeling of being exploited. They were outstanding in their project management successes but held firmly in their place by a hierarchical system which chose not to recognise or reward their skills and abilities.

W2 talked about the lack of value placed on the management skills of women leading projects, and their consequent exclusion from promotional positions. In her corporate executive role, she argued for the recognition of successful project management experience in the job selection process. But she said that because of the structure and the requirements of the merit principle it was “almost an impossible task”. She explains the difficulties and the ‘huge chasm’ that existed:

It’s one of the characteristics of women’s careers within the public sector that so often you find that women have been appointed as project managers … what I would see as terrific, complex, important projects, and they’ve delivered. And then, come to apply for promotional positions within the public sector, they actually can’t cite that, well they can cite it, but it doesn’t stand up. The project management
experience doesn’t stand up against people who can say, “I actually held a management position substantively”.

When I was with the senior executive service and on interview panels, like every week, that was one of the things that hit me between the eyes. The number of quality women applying [who] had these superb examples of project management and delivery but … because of the strict way you needed to interview and appoint in the public service [they didn’t get the promotions] … And that was part of the culture in the Education Department; but it wasn’t unique to the Education Department, it was right across the public sector.

… I used to argue that [issue] vehemently for my senior executive service positions … I don’t know if it’s better now but it was a huge chasm that seemed so unjust at the time.

The vulnerability of the position was a common dilemma for women working on central office projects:

When we think about how women with responsibility came into head office … a host of them came in on what I’d call a project management base, not a line management base, and so their position and their security by definition was more vulnerable. [Their positions] often relied on funding being continued and it came in on either commonwealth funding or special purposes funding so they had a vulnerability … W2

Job selection criteria can exclude women by focusing on experiences that many women cannot meet, such as line management experience, whilst not valuing other management experiences, such as project management. Ironically, by not giving women opportunities for line management experience, either in acting positions or in promotional positions, the woman can never qualify for advancement.

W12 saw quite clearly that the management skills involved in leading a project were never going to be counted as ‘real’ management experience in terms of career development. She spoke of being held in high regard as a good producer, yet realising that she was always going to be seen as “a good hand maiden for someone else’s career opportunity” rather than a leader in her own right:

I got a position in head office … on a wonderful project and in terms of the project I found that just terrific. But what became alarmingly clear to me was that there was no future for me there because while I think I was held in high regard because I was a good producer and made things happen, I was always going to be seen as a good hand maiden for somebody else’s career opportunity. I thought I was never going to be allowed to be seen in my own right as a leader and a manager.
A common theme emerged: women managing projects and delivering outstanding results to the advantage of a system that wanted more of the same – capable women leading projects. In addition, seeing things differently and speaking out was often seen as a threat to established practices. W12 expressed this quite simply: “If you think differently, you don’t belong.”

So I was very conscious of the culture that existed that enabled me to produce and be outstanding in developing the particular project … being part of developing the Student Outcome Statements because they were all coming to the fore at that time, but when it came to working at a more strategic level … constantly being put back in my box.

She referred to the indirect discrimination, the penalty for women and others who rock the boat or ‘shine too brightly’:

It’s so embedded in the culture that’s it’s not an overt thing. They don’t make these decisions to promote ‘X’ because he’s a bit of a Wally and I’ll be able to keep him in control and I’m not going to promote her because she’s outspoken and whatever, although I’m sure that’s part of it. But it’s so embedded in the culture that it’s so hard to put a finger on it and unpick and question and ask why. So you know, we’ve moved on from the days where the discrimination was so overt and direct we could say “No you can’t do that”. It had become really subversive and when you’d ask questions … of one particular supervisor or manager, I remember him saying, “But you are a star, we do see you as a future leader”. But it was a future leader doing more of the same sorts of projects.

The question of merit and what constitutes merit is critical in a culture where the men in charge decide what is meritorious. Sitting on prestigious committees rated highly whereas actively producing change and making a difference for education was devalued as ‘the work on the ground’.

The culture that says women working on projects are very important … we’ve got to keep them there because we’ve got to have the output from the projects … we can’t release them to do higher duties because the projects are so critical. So you’re damned if you do and damned if you don’t. But in doing those projects and delivering and making a difference at the end of the day that doesn’t count for anything … because you haven’t had these high positions, you haven’t been on the national committee or you haven’t had the management experience.

So it comes back to how you define or redefine merit. Merit is seen as not necessarily producing outcomes and making a difference but how many committees you sit on, how many different strategic things you’re involved in; so actually doing the basic ground work which is going to fundamentally change our education in this state is not seen as a meritorious way to operate. W12

W13 felt that demonstrated performance was not critical to the selection process:
There were no real measures of performance in the job selection process. Apart from brief reports from referees, there were no checks on past performance. So a wonderfully successful project never really counted. And management could turn a blind eye to poor performance if the boys’ club had decided whom they wanted for the job. A nice up and coming young man who was not too much of a threat to the status quo; fairly mediocre in performance. Even complaints about past performance in dealing with schools – they didn’t want to know. Their minds were made up well before the interviews.

W12 pointed out that the skills involved in managing a project were the very skills required to be an effective leader. Projects involve policy implementation and the management of change. Effective change management means effective people management. But these skills can attract little recognition compared to sitting on a high profile management committee. The debate on what work is valued – what is recognised and rewarded – is one explored by many women in this thesis.

… merit in the male world is defined differently. They don’t see that [managing people] as being good managers and leaders actually creating that environment and making that happen. They can’t see that they are in fact the very skills you need, the relationship development, the having the vision, the planning to implement the vision and bringing people along with you. They don’t see that that professional development design and implementation review is exactly the process you need to be an effective manager and leader. They can’t. Their definition of management and leadership is about … your [personal] profile, national committee stuff. They don’t measure the outcomes from that, they don’t talk about impact. So you’re on three national committees? Terrific, but what good is it to the organisation if you’re not doing anything with the information, if you’re not sharing the information, if you’re not using it to enhance what you’re doing?

Thus, the lack of recognition of the complexity of project management and the skills involved was a frustration for many of the women. W11 pointed out that she was contracting and managing staff, a fact that male dominated selection panels seemed incapable of acknowledging:

I wasn’t managing [permanent] employees but I was a project manager in the sense that I could get contract staff in to do computer work, stats analysis … developing telephone surveys for both projects … then meeting with and hiring the consultants. So I was managing, not a team of staff, but managing contract workers.

Like W12 she realised she was being offered one short-term project contract after another with no real prospect of promotion. Although she was gaining valuable management skills, she could not see a future after project work. She found the work environment unsupportive and, in the few jobs that were available, couldn’t compete with the male bias in selection criteria so decided it was time to ‘jump ship’. Even though the move was
unplanned and it was a difficult time for her financially and personally, she needed to
grow:

I found a segregation of work along gender lines and fewer opportunities to accrue
to merit in the type of projects that women were given … Sure, I could see I was
getting very valuable skills and learning new things; I was growing professionally
and I wouldn’t take that away from the Department … it was a great opportunity to
do those two projects. But in a way it was stressful – there’s a feeling of “Look if I
stay around … I’m going to go back, not just back to the school I was in, I’m going
to go back even further”.

I was ranked second for every job I applied for and the reason it didn’t work was
that the selection criteria for the jobs were written very much with a male bias in
terms of the technical competences that were required. But I just think it wasn’t
meant to be – I was meant to leave … It would have been helpful to discuss issues;
instead the decision I made to jump ship was a huge decision and I did it on my own
… that was the feeling. W11

The lack of recognition for the women managing projects is in the best interests of men
who rarely take on project work. They minimalise the importance of the work but are
very willing to co-opt women to get the job done. This positions women “as powerless
one minute and co-opted the next” (Ramsay, 1993, p. 48). When credit for a woman’s
work is assumed by a senior male, positional power creates advantage and credit for
actually getting the work done is minimised. The climate got chillier higher up and
women in senior management positions found themselves sidelined.

Being sidelined and the effects of restructuring

In Chapter 4 I looked at the negative implications of restructuring for the short term:
innovation motivated by politics and careerism rather than a desire for real, sustained
change. In this chapter the interviewees recount their stories of being ‘conveniently’
sideline and marginalised in the frequent restructures. The restructuring motivated by
economic rationalism meant that there were fewer management jobs available. When the
inevitable restructures occurred, women often came off second best. Four of the women
in this study were acting in positions for two or three years before the jobs were
advertised as vacancies to be filled. None of the women won the positions; three were
filled by men from within central office and one by a woman from interstate. Each
woman in the acting position had been receiving feedback from superordinates and
subordinates to confirm that they had been performing at a high level. Their areas of
responsibility had been performing well, demonstrating the effectiveness of their
leadership. Not winning the positions that they had worked so hard to develop was the
catalyst in their decisions to leave. The sequence of events surrounding the appointments
confirmed their decisions. One example was described as ‘unusual circumstances’
surrounding an interview for the job of director:

… basically … I was so disgusted with it I didn’t even go and seek feedback from
the panel, I just made my mind up that I would leave. But you know there was quite
a lot of material there … there had been a previous round of interviews for the same
position that the Director General had actually suspended because one of the
secretaries had come to her to say they hadn’t interviewed me yet but they’d written
this report about the interview. So [the Director General] in her lovely, full of
integrity way suspended that process. So I thought the boys would be very silly …
But you know maybe boys have another way of making sure competition doesn’t
get substantively appointed.

… there were two positions and they both went to men. They’d been Social Studies
teachers together and they’d been Social Studies superintendents together, so of
course, competing with that kind of corporal capital is hard and I never tried (to
appeal). W14

W5, a manager with high qualifications (experience, expertise and a postgraduate
qualification) described her personal ‘horror story’ as a result of a restructure. She
described the poor treatment she received after not winning a management position that
she had held very successfully, in an acting capacity, for three years. After missing out on
that position, she was offered an acting director position. The offer was subsequently
withdrawn and both of the jobs were filled by men.

I guess the major impetus (to leave) was the restructure … Having not got the
manager’s position, I was offered the director’s position in an acting capacity, which
I thought was strange at the time, but the executive director said it was appropriate
because I was actually ready to move on and she had full confidence in my knowing
the whole area well, to be able to bring it together.

So that was the understanding … I was coming back to after the Christmas vacation.
When I arrived back, it was the whole scenario that you hear about, the sort of
horror stories of how people are dealt with. I couldn’t locate my materials, the office
that I thought was going to be mine was completely empty, no telephone, no table,
no chair, nothing. It wasn’t ’til the end of that first day back from leave that I was
informed that things had changed and the offer that had been made to me … that I
was not able to be the director because some of the people in Corporative Executive
objected to that decision having been made.

I was offered managing [another] area. So I guess they were the most critical events.
Then it was further exacerbated by – in the interim period – I had to find an office
for myself and get things together in the [new] area. But at the same time, because I
was the one who knew the [old] area, I was there advising the person who was
brought in to the position that I’d been offered. So the whole thing was very, very
unsavoury as far as I was concerned.

That lasted about a week. I eventually found my things and just decided that the
scene in there wasn’t for me any more, and that really I was being shuffled
sideways, and the best thing to do was to get out. So I made a quick decision to get
out. And, no, I did not consider alternatives because my gut feeling was there wasn’t
an alternative, that the alternative was to get out. And to do it as cleanly and as quickly as possible.

W5 compared her negative experience with a job promotion that was happening simultaneously. A man who was her junior was offered a position two levels above his current role. In contrast to her case it was not seen as a problem that he should advance so rapidly.

I think there’s a little bit of gender bias there. A guy got it: a two level jump to an acting position. But I didn’t.

W4 summed up the effects of restructuring for women in social justice and equity areas and for women on special projects. Being ‘different’ limited career prospects and being a woman meant working harder to prove one’s worth:

Many women’s jobs were discarded in the restructure. As a result of restructuring, the Professional Development unit was disbanded. The ‘frills’ went, the margins. Economic rationalism doesn’t help. I was perceived as ‘different’ and that didn’t help my career prospects. I had different ideas.

Women weren’t seen as part of it. There were very few women there (in management) … I think women have had to work harder at being good at the job because they are under scrutiny.

According to Bellamy and Ramsay (1994, p. 14), the economic downturn seemed to “sharpen the practice of women being treated differently”. Those who miss out in the job selection process are those who don’t fit the dominant culture, for example, women, and some men, who are seen as not playing the game. Blackmore (1999) describes the new opportunities for resistance to gender equity which can arise in times of radical restructuring. Redefining jobs can mean reallocating jobs to men through subtle processes of selection.

Indeed, in times of scarcity and the radical restructuring of the social, economic and political relations due to economic globalisation and cultural uncertainty, new opportunities for resistance to gender equity and social transformation of gender arise … Structural backlash is when the male biases embedded in educational organisations, processes, structures and values are able to be mobilised, consciously and unconsciously, in some, but not all, men’s favour through the actual processes of restructuring e.g. job redefinition and reallocation. Cultural backlash takes the form of populist discourses circulating that are resistant to gender equity. (p. 4)

Some of the women in senior management positions found themselves sidelined as they became more of a threat to the male status quo. W3 talked about her experience which was personal as well as political. It involved factions but also included resentment of her
work on some high level initiatives. Up until that time she had a career rise that she described as “just terrific”. It therefore came as a shock when she was sidelined in what seemed a classic case of the executive female or manager ‘hitting the glass ceiling’.

I left because I felt as though I’d been sidelined. And I was too impatient to wait around to do what we had to do in those days which was do some penance or something like that, so I decided [to leave]. I’d always been ambitious to do all sorts of different things. Actually at the time I had one fantastic scholarship through the Education Department to go to Stanford for a year and do a Masters there and I think this was actually one of the ways they were going to sideline me. That’s how it works when you get to the senior levels, you get these opportunities which actually get you out of the place and it was … it was wonderful, it was exactly what I wanted. But at the very last moment – I was just going through a divorce and my husband at the time wouldn’t let me take my daughter who was three. It was a year’s scholarship and so I couldn’t really go, I couldn’t leave my daughter for a year, so I ended up by not having the scholarship but nonetheless being sidelined at the Education Department … and knowing I’d have to [wait] for three or five, however many long years it took hanging around doing busy work in the Department until I got back into favour.

In the senior management levels in the Department at that time, and I expect that it would be the case now, were factions, and my faction (I say faction very loosely, but the people I worked with and the people [with whom] I had a shared ideology) had been sort of a key faction for some time. With a change of Minister and a change of Director General our faction had got sidelined. So it was personal but it was also political, in the sense that the Department was perceived to be changing direction, and the direction that the people I was closely associated with and the direction of the Department were perceived to be different. Now that’s on the structural level. On a personal level it was always, it was also the case that people in the two factions didn’t get on that well. Two or three or four factions, however many people … probably hundreds, I don’t know.

I think because I was heavily associated in people’s minds with Equal Opportunity, because I was associated with the unit curriculum [for reasons which constantly amaze me], because I was associated with the Better Schools report … and because of all of those reasons I was sort of tarred with all those brushes and I couldn’t readily see myself escaping that … First of all you think “Oh, is this really happening?” And yes, more evidence comes up and you start getting the drift. I think of myself as a reasonably astute bureaucracy watcher, so you can pick the signs.

… it was an amazing time, I wouldn’t have [missed it] for quids, it was really exciting and I really enjoyed it, it was just terrific. When I look back over my time in the Education Department it was really just wonderful because I started off in the research branch which was just wonderful; then I went into Equal Opportunity and was there for three years, at the best possible time; then I was involved in the Better Schools Report; and then on the corporate executive. You couldn’t have written a better script if you tried. And that’s what I mean – when I got sidelined I thought, “Oh hmmmph! This is going to be no good” because I wanted to keep the fast pace and the action and so forth.

In a recent article in *The Australian Magazine* Stevens (2000) confirms that although many senior women choose not to talk about it, too many still crash before they smash through the glass ceiling. Rob Jackson (quoted in Stevens, 2000), a Melbourne lawyer
specialising in gender discrimination in the workplace, confirms that blatant
discrimination is probably a thing of the past, but gender bias can surface suddenly and at
senior levels:

These days, gender discrimination is like a car accident. It happens when you least
expect it. We see senior managers, women who have been happily travelling along,
thinking everything is fine and then, wham, they get run over. (p. 18)

W1 had been acting in a director’s position for three years when the job was advertised.
Despite an excellent performance record, she did not get the job. Most frustrating was the
lack of support from her immediate boss:

I guess my decision to leave was a pretty clear cut one … I observed him [executive
director] systematically putting each of the other jobs up to be advertised and filled.
Mine was the only one that was held back and when I approached him a number of
times to ask him what was the problem here or did he have a problem with me, was
he thinking of doing something different with the position – oh no, no, no, it was
just he hadn’t quite got around to it yet. That went on for a year so I got a pretty
clear message that he wasn’t supportive of me personally nor the area that I was
working in. I didn’t think it was direct discrimination; I thought it was more benign
neglect.

She realised the problems started when her line manager was replaced and she lost the
support that was so vital to her career progress:

I used him [line manager] as a referee and he was a very good referee, very fair but
very supportive. I guess it was when he was replaced as the executive director that
things really went awry for me. The next person in line is always incredibly
important in terms of your career … I guess I slipped into the comfort of thinking
I’ve got one sponsor and one supporter. Something happens to my sponsor and
supporter … then bang!

W1 said that although she had management opportunities, she also had a number of
experiences similar to the above where she had been bypassed for promotion, including
two instances where a male member of her staff (whom she had mentored!) won the
position:

I mean I guess in some ways I’ve been very fortunate and had a lot of opportunities
to develop right from the very beginning but I’ve also had a number of experiences
like the one I’ve described – that was about the third time something similar had
happened. I had been offered the opportunity of a challenging and interesting
position and to all intents and purposes done the job for a two to three year period
and then when it was finally resolved and appointed, somebody else won the job. In
the other two incidences I’m thinking of it was a male who won the job – one of my
own staff actually, someone I mentored and developed. [laughter]
Rather than being marginalised by the restructuring process, she was central to it. She felt however that she hadn’t developed enough support for what she was trying to do. Unlike the men, who spent large chunks of time managing up, she hadn’t gained the support of the people in high places. She blamed herself for this whereas other women in the study expressed a disdain for the inordinate amount of time that the men put into self-promotion:

So I should have really been [careful] particularly when I identified that the person directly above me was going to be problematic. I should have been lobbying, working, identifying who my sponsors on corporate executive were, making sure that they understood, that they were committed because this was committing the organisation to a whole series of change initiatives over a long period of time, huge budget dollars. Somehow I just expected that they would see how wonderful this was and just take it on board. Of course they didn’t and who could expect them to?

I didn’t have a supporter in my direct supervisor which was a problem, but I didn’t do anything to counter that negativism and garner the support that I needed from other people, so of course the inevitable happened. W1

W7 was sidelined following a restructuring process. Her performance in the job selection interview was a defining factor, a common problem for women, who are often judged as ‘lacking’ in comparison to the ‘charismatic’ male. What bothered her most was the lack of honesty as to why she didn’t get the job:

I got the interview then didn’t get the job … It went to somebody who had absolutely no experience … Well, by way of getting feedback, as one was encouraged to do, I went to X [executive director] to seek feedback because it was X1 who got the job. As I say he had no experience in the area so I was curious as to what X would say and … I guess my frustration was the deceptions. I would have been quite OK if he had said anything like, “We were wanting to spread HR expertise more widely around the place.” When you’re talking about acting positions there’s a whole range of reasons, experience and so on and I would have been quite happy with [that] but in actual fact I was told that X interviewed brilliantly and … the implication was that I was hopeless, which I found bizarre, to say the least. I then subsequently was very, very angry about that response because … I had taken that whole area through a restructure and an election campaign …

W7 discovered that her sidelining was political and she felt that her personal integrity was questioned:

… it was seen that I was somehow affiliated with the Labor party and presumably the Minister didn’t want such a person and so my professional integrity and loyalty were being questioned. I think it was largely political, I mean big P politics. I think for whatever reason I was seen as persona non-gratis and I had to be sidelined in some way. And of course restructures are a convenient technique for doing that.

Well, as you can expect, I came to the conclusion that my career possibilities in that place were less than zero … There would be no tears if I decided to leave. When we had my farewell, the executive director didn’t even bother to show up … ‘the nail in
Being bypassed for promotion

the coffin’ if you like. Two weeks after I returned to my substantive position as director, I had a chat with [my new manager] … I guess [he] was giving me the good oil on what he wanted in the area … he’d been there for two weeks, and he told me that he was going to be re-structuring and my area would be going [eliminated] as an area. Well, you don’t have to be Einstein to figure out what was going on.

…I like to trust people and I always saw myself as a good public servant. I always tried to do the very best for our community out there and I recognise that sometimes that means doing things that I personally don’t agree with … but … I guess the quid pro quo for me is if I’m asked to do things, I want to be trusted and it appeared to me that I wasn’t being trusted, so I withdrew my trust … [very emotional] W7

W11 also commented on the influence of ‘big P’ politics on merit selection processes: who was in favour depended on which government was in power:

… when the new Government came in, a whole new group of people was promoted … some of the new comers were appalling, in terms of competence and lack of it. So really I thought regardless of which system was in you had to question whether there was an open merit system.

W9 managed an area that was sidelined in a restructure. It was an innovative, cost effective unit that was completely self-funded and working highly successfully in the area of training. But it was staffed mainly by women, not seen as a core function, and therefore subject to internal politics [‘little p’] and marginalisation:

We had to shift a whole way of thinking and cultural [expectations] … it was breaking that new ground … breaking down that barrier … but we [our unit] had always been subject to internal politics … We were always subject to sniping and backstabbing and having to justify our existence to executive directors in other areas. It wasn’t so much us as the internal politics at the top level, power base stuff and all that, so … In the end it came down to the fact that the original executive director who set it up had gone … it wasn’t so much that they didn’t want a [training unit]. It’s to do with the perception of power and strength in the different divisions … a different executive director … wasn’t openly antagonistic and did support us, but was willing to trade us away.

Things that are seen as non-essential, not core functions, such as training and development will always go first in any restructure. We’d seen it happen in the last five years in so many different government departments … So although it wasn’t directly a gender issue – because women are in those sorts [of areas] – it affected a lot of women, particularly Human Resources. It’s always been seen as an area that women have gone into.

So you can see the culture that was operating at the time. All those sorts of things were no longer valued or needed. There was a push away from the HR developmental type model into the more hard-edged, outsourceable – just have your core business.

W14 felt her career was progressing buoyantly until she did not win a position that she had acted in for over two years. The realisation that she was being sidelined after being
seen as a possible threat to the men in power led to her decision to seek a more supportive working environment outside of the Department. She described her ‘elimination’ as part of the process of ‘gender cleansing’:

Well the conditions in which I left the Education Department were that I had acted as a director – two and a bit years – and that job had been advertised and I’d applied for it, and I was unsuccessful in getting it substantively.

I felt my career [was on a high], I felt in quite buoyant halcyon days really – that things were on the up … Yes I thought they were. I was managing my career well, I was enjoying it, one way was leading onto another way [but] I think it was a difficult time for the men because, for the first time ever, there had been a female Director General. They thought that she was perhaps favouring people like me, W6 and others, when in fact she was also working us pretty hard in the sense that she didn’t want to show favouritism. But whatever [she] did, I don’t think it really mattered because of people who just thought that she had earmarked me for a position later on.

It seemed like I was getting that kind of reaction. They thought I was in line for Director General but I didn’t aspire to that job. I think what they do is the ‘scorched earth policy’ – I mean just gender cleansing and that’s exactly what happened of course … my strategy basically is not to stay for too long in an environment where you just know that there is not going to be support.

The theme of repeated change and restructure, throwing out the old, discarding experience, not valuing knowledge, perhaps being threatened by that knowledge and experience, recurred throughout the thesis. The constant restructuring and change meant that jobs could be manipulated to advantage the newcomers (ironically, often members of the old boys’ network), those who wanted to show their capacity for bringing in the new.

Well we have the STAR selection process, as you know. I think we can have short-term results, and long term, but maybe we’ve looked too short term. I’ve no problem with change, but when do we stop? We keep on turning over and turning over … you see … there is no history. In First Steps I’ve got a huge history, but now they are introducing another literacy program. I remember when the Labour government got in, they introduced First Steps and now here we are again, a new Labour government introducing a new literacy program, and no-one can remember … we tried this, we tried that, this worked but this didn’t. They won’t listen, full steam ahead, they get rid of people who have history; they don’t value what they’ve done in the past. W17

W17 observed, with frustration in her voice, that women who speak out are seen as problematic whereas men who speak out are considered good leadership material.

… I think personalities come into it. Rather than valuing the expertise for the good of the students, there are personality clashes. I’m thinking of one woman in particular who is brilliant in literacy, she’s been sidelined totally and none of her expertise, knowledge, history (that goes back to 1988) is being used.
It’s to do with personalities, but I think if this person had been a man, it might not have happened, because I think he would have been more political, not rub people up the wrong way, judicious in his comments, etc. Perhaps looking after himself rather than the big picture, the students out there. Yes, I think men can speak out more than women. I think when women speak out there is almost a resentment by all. I think if men speak out it’s valued – if a man says it he’s seen as leadership material! Maybe I’m being a bit harsh.

Powerful enemies

At least three women who had reached executive management positions were ‘warned off’ by long standing male executives who did not like their territory being invaded (see also Chapter 6). In one example, an executive director was given a clear warning by an acting CEO to reign in her career aspirations when he realised that she was potential leadership competition. In an interesting inversion of thinking, she talked about his inability to separate emotion from logic, a criticism often aimed at female leaders. Thus the argument that men are not emotional is challenged, bringing into question the traditional image of the male leader as stoic, rational and detached.

The only one he was really worried about in regard to leadership was me … After the first day (of his appointment to Acting DG) when we had this stunning corporate executive meeting where the battle lines were well and truly laid down [I knew]. Not that I was going to fight … He said, “People who are posturing in order to gain credibility as potential Directors General …” and after I realised he wasn’t talking about himself, I thought, “Oh it must be me!” There was no doubt that it was directed at me – it was like, “You’re gonna cop it!” – a very clear threat. I was happily doing my job but I had made it clear that if the circumstances were right I was interested in the job of DG. Getting stuck into me; it was about psyching me out of the competition.

There was the personal interview that he and I had … The interview was just amazing – it was about personal feelings stuff, accusations of disloyalty during Y’s period [of leadership]. I was very upset by it – upset also in a funny way – because I could not believe that someone who was going to be my leader was incapable of logical thought, that it was all this personal feelings stuff, that it was all emotionalism, that it was all about his feelings. W21

Another research participant, a project leader, related her experience of winning a position when a female line manager with an orientation to social justice was in charge. As a result of a restructure, the new job was moved to a different section headed by a ‘powerful’ male. He was used to the complete adoration of the ‘up-and-coming’ young men in the boys’ club, had the full support of the old boys’ network and used bullying tactics when he couldn’t get his way. Refusing to play the game was dangerous:

When I applied for promotion he dragged out every structural barrier he could find. I couldn’t believe his tactics; they were so transparent. When I said the rules were ridiculous and discriminated against temporary teachers, most of whom were
women, he went red in the face and nearly exploded. He tried to scare me and on more than one occasion harassed me by shouting, with no justification other than he was threatened by my potential to succeed. He couldn’t take the fact that I was neither adoring nor fawning. W13

The ‘danger’ for women who questioned and refused to play the game was compounded for W18, a senior manager who was forthright in her campaign for both gender and cultural change:

To me the environment in central office is actually dangerous for women who want to be leaders. It is not dangerous for women who are compliant and who suck up to the men to get what they want. But for women like me – who are culturally different, who are educated, who are articulate, who are qualified and who know their own minds; who are very assertive – we are dangerous; we are seen to be people who can actually take over the bridge of the Titanic and get it away from the iceberg. The problem is that the current ones don’t know the iceberg is there, so they don’t believe in change.

If I had wanted to sleep with certain men, I would have been looked after; if I had wanted to act like they were superior beings and I was just their doormat, I would have been looked after; if I had underplayed my intelligence and had let them take all my ideas and my creative thinking I would have been looked after. I was never any of those things; so I was never looked after. Basically I didn’t get a lot of support from the men or the women. I got a lot of resistance because I challenged a lot of the processes that I knew were about maintaining the status quo. If the people in charge at that time had been wanting real change then they would have been prepared to listen to some of my suggestions and use different processes. But I was put there to do what they wanted, to look good, to basically not change the system. Because if the system changes, and advances are made for Aboriginal kids, that would be unthinkable. My God! Aboriginal people might come from the bottom of the ladder and start to climb up in the way other people can. What I found about other Aboriginal people in central office is that they had learnt to be compliant to what non-Aboriginal people wanted them to do; or they got by operating in a stereotypic fashion as to what was expected by the system of Aboriginal people.

The negative influence of ‘powerful enemies’ is an idea put forward by Judi Marshall (1995a) who studied 16 women who had reached middle to senior management levels in a variety of occupations and either left or were contemplating leaving their organisations. It may also apply to some of the women in this thesis as many left the Department after a change in line management or a restructure where a new boss sought to replace the previous management regime. Marshall points out that perhaps “how to deal with powerful enemies needs as much attention … in women’s [career] development as the more popular theme of establishing mentor relationships” (p. 223). She also points out, as have other researchers, that relationships can change as power alliances in an organisation shift.
Reflection

Being bypassed for promotion was one of the main reasons many of the women left the organisation. Missing out in a close contest would be understandable, but being bypassed in favour of a mediocre candidate (usually a man) was a debilitating experience. The lack of recognition of the achievements of highly competent managers who did not fit the traditional mould was a major concern, as was the inequity in job selection processes. Women had to prove themselves over and over again, yet could find themselves still locked out. Most talked about a clash of values. Often the final straw would be yet another missed promotion and unfair treatment after ‘acting’ in a position for a long time; a job going to a man with less experience and, in some cases, a history of poor performance. But it was more than the personal loss; for many it was a deep frustration that working for the good of education in a people centred and inclusive leadership style was neither valued nor rewarded.

The lack of honesty as to why the women missed out on promotion and subsequent shabby treatment by the hierarchy left them feeling undervalued after years of loyalty to the organisation. People are damaged in a culture that does not recognise their talents and commitment. And, as noted by Mitchell (2000), even more damaged when their departure goes unacknowledged:

People work for money but they will go the extra mile for recognition, praise and rewards… Good leaders never forget this … We all need to feel that our efforts are valued. One of the biggest challenges facing the corporate world in this climate of rapid economic change where companies are daily being merged or restructured, is the management of workers where layoffs are minimised and displaced people are ensured retraining.

Every time an organisation treats one of its workers as a statistic instead of as a human being, [it] has a ripple effect and all workers feel undervalued. When people who have worked for the organisation and given good and loyal service are given notice and management makes no effort to farewell them or thank them, loyalty is dead. (p. 122)

Some women encountered direct opposition – powerful enemies – as their success became a threat to the men in power. Dealing with such power games was exhausting in terms of time and emotional energy. Women who reached executive management levels generally found that support (and honest feedback) was difficult to find. Women are disadvantaged by a lack of access to informal networks that are the norm for most men – powerful networks dominated by men at the top. Men may feel more comfortable working closely with other men (sexual inferences are avoided and the status quo is
maintained) or they can resent the intrusion of women into traditionally male territory, feeling that their job security is threatened (Cleveland et al., 2000). Due to her token status, the lone woman on senior executive is highly visible and her performance under scrutiny. Some men, accustomed to the benefits of the peak masculinist culture, do not help women succeed, “thereby validating the men’s perceptions that women are less competent” (Cleveland et al., 2000, p. 267).

Failure to recognise the management skills of project leaders, mostly female, meant that they could not compete with the predominantly male line managers in the promotional stakes. Although project skills included policy implementation and the management of change, often on a large scale, this was rarely recognised by the men in power. These complex and highly developed skills were ‘disappeared’ (Fletcher, 1999) but used to the advantage of an organisation that depended on women to get the work done.

Only two women made it to the top of the organisation. The first appointment, of a woman who had made her career with the Department, was groundbreaking at a time when women rarely made it to the top of organisations. In education this was a first for Australia. The second, but not consecutive, appointment of a woman at the top was made from outside the organisation. Neither woman cited gender discrimination as a reason for leaving. The first CEO was especially concerned that talented and competent women managing projects missed out on promotion due to narrow definitions of leadership potential. The second was unsympathetic, blaming the female leaders for their lack of progress and claiming that women could create the culture, reflecting a change of attitude and rejection of feminist analysis. This view, perhaps linked to positional power and rationalist thinking, was not shared by the other interviewees who saw gender politics and the masculinist culture as central to inequitable treatment.

Other women who were in senior and executive management positions (including two Executive Directors and four Directors) eventually found that they were not welcome, they were subject to internal and external politics, their values were different and they disliked the cultural environment. Hitting the glass ceiling became a reality. When they became a threat to the male status quo, they were conveniently sidelined in the next restructure. Mediocre men, men with less experience and men with connections won the positions. Outstanding performance was not necessarily a criterion for success.
Moving On

Do we want to join the procession or don’t we? On what terms shall we join that procession? Above all, where is it leading us, the procession of educated men?
— Virginia Woolf  (1938)

Many women globally are still asking the same questions about participation and more poignantly why, having decided to join the procession, they are still at the back of the parade.

New directions

Since leaving their former organisation eight of the 21 women have set up their own consultancy businesses, consulting in areas such as research and development, human resource management, mentoring, leadership, EEO, diversity management, organisational transition, career development, personal development, relationship skills, life coaching, policy, curriculum and professional development for teachers and administrators. At least four of these women combine their consulting with other initiatives such as managing a small retail business, developing/managing property; contract work in the tertiary education sector, or in one case, with the Education Department37. One interviewee, a former executive director, is consulting to a significant national education project.

Others setting up their own small businesses were also managing staff: one is a director of a training and development company owned jointly with four other people; another was joint managing director of two small businesses, one of which was incorporated by a multinational publishing company, making her a managing director for Australasia in the process.

Some took up significant leadership positions in large organisations: company CEO; principal of a large independent school; state manager of a government department; state general manager in the not-for-profit sector; and personnel director at a large university.

37 After two years working as a consultant, this research participant returned to a temporary Education Department position for three years, then left again after once more experiencing the impact of gendered micropolitical practices.
Two of the latter moved on again, one to semi retirement, consulting and board directorships and another to the position of executive director with an international career management company.

Four are senior policy consultants/officers/analysts with government departments or universities. Two stayed with the Department, but as a result of their central office experiences one is planning retirement and another is a manager at district level, deciding not to work in the central office environment again. Since leaving, at least five women have completed further qualifications at postgraduate level.

All of these women are leaders who enjoyed being part of important decision-making arenas within the Education Department, yet for multiple reasons they eventually left. Marginalisation, exclusion, and a clash of values in a masculinist work environment were major factors for most. All but two of the women said that they would have been happy to stay with the organisation if the cultural environment had been supportive and if the opportunity to continue to develop their careers had been there. Only two women, both at the pinnacles of their careers, in the most senior executive roles, expressed a different reason as the prime impetus to leave. W2 wished to work as a school principal (a job that in the past had been closed to women) and felt that it would be quite difficult to take voluntary retrogression from her existing high profile position while continuing to work for the same organisation. The timing was right and she was comfortable that she had completed her planned five-year term in a senior executive role. When the opportunity she was looking for became available in the private system, she took it:

… I felt it was about the right time … I was fifty that year, and I realised that if I was going to make a move I had to make a move then, just in terms of sheer pragmatism [considering] at what age people would appoint a principal. So that was the circumstance for me … it was done totally within a situation of feeling comfortable and being committed to a five-year term [in executive management].

Unlike many women in the sample, who talked of careers not planned38, W20 explained that she had actively planned her career. She had held a number of executive leadership

38 The pattern of unplanned careers was revealed by at least one third of the women interviewed for my thesis. Yet despite this pattern they had recognised good career opportunities when they arose. Although usually deeply immersed in their current jobs, they remained open to change. Similarly, Currie, Harris and Thiele (1995) found in their study into gender and organisational culture at a public university in Western Australia, that women were less likely to plan their careers and were more likely to question the appropriateness of the notion of career. This was especially the case when their careers were ‘contingent’ with a risk of their positions being terminated.
positions and was now exploring the next stage in her career development. As she had
planned, after three years in a leading senior executive role with the Department, she
moved on:

I had planned to spend three years there and when I got to post-retirement age and I
could access my superannuation and do a bit of playing around, and a bit more
planning about the rest of my life, it was time to go. Family reasons were part of it,
but it was deliberate career planning that when I got to post fifty-five I would then
start to wind my career down and look for a position in higher education or
somewhere that was going to lead me on to the next trimester of my career. So
middle management, senior management, then Chief Executive Officer and now to
consultancy and community services work (being able to please myself a bit more).

Self-employment

Several of the women said they enjoyed the freedom and challenge offered by taking on
multiple career roles. Combining consulting with operating a small business, post-
graduate study, developing properties or short-term contract work were examples of
‘portfolio careers’. Some talked about more quality time for family or a more balanced,
rounded lifestyle, although those involved in consulting and contract work encountered
extended periods of intense work and looming deadlines. Finding meaning through work
was important to them. Money was not the primary impetus for these women who were
motivated by making a difference in an area that mattered and feeling authentic in their
work. However, most emphasised that while money was not the driving force in their
careers, their definition of success would include working hard and being paid
accordingly.

The women working as consultants generally said that they missed being part of a big
organisational network and managing on a larger scale. This resonates with the work of
Leonie Still (1993) who notes that despite the fact that Australian women are clear as to
why they choose self-employment, most express an overwhelming sense of isolation – a
feeling of being alone – and few develop large companies.

Faye Crosby (1991) found that women who combine significant life roles are better off
emotionally than women with fewer roles:

Even as they acknowledge stress and time pressure, jugglers demonstrate less
depression, higher self-esteem, and greater satisfaction with life generally and with
different aspects of life than women who play fewer roles. (p. 15)
Speaking at a conference on ‘Millennium Changes’, Dale Spender (2000) described the concept of the portfolio career in which women are leading the way:

It used to be that people who took ‘time out’ from the workplace were generally disadvantaged … but as we move to an information economy, these patterns are also changing. For the trend is towards the portfolio career. Interruptions are to be expected: they can be positive.

The pattern is there already. In the gold collar industry, the move is towards part time, temporary, contract and consultancy work – with each worker becoming more and more responsible for nurturing their own skills – and their own working conditions.

Of course choosing a portfolio career is only a beginning. It’s not enough just to do it on your own – women are increasingly becoming commercialised – starting their own small businesses. More small businesses were started by women over the last 3 years than by men. More of them were successful. More were started by women over 55 years of age – and more women’s businesses were likely to use the internet as part of their business structure – than were those of men. (p. 9)

Peta Tancred (1998) argues that women with ‘non-standard’ careers with flexible working hours and conditions are posing significant challenges to the professions and, in the process, will inevitably transform them. She quotes a female architect from a study by Caven in 1998 who talks about the portfolio career:

Perhaps women are more prepared for what’s going to come in employment than the average bloke … come the 21st century it’s going to be the portfolio career and I think women are better prepared for that … Our profession is changing and in many ways we’re ahead of it, in that we’re changing to adapt to it before it has happened … perhaps women going off in slightly different ways are showing the way. (p. 14)

Leonie Still (1993) says it is because able women continue to face discrimination, both overt and covert, that many have left organisational life in preference for their own businesses. Equity in employment and opportunity has been seen as a social issue and not an economic imperative. Consequently the rate of change is slow and talented women continue to be denied career advancement in organisations. Still refers to self-employed women as “‘escapees’ from an insensitive and unyielding corporate world” (p. 59).

Martin and Meyerson (1998) point out that, despite optimistic predictions that increasing numbers of women in the paid workforce and in high-ranking positions will lead to a more equal distribution of power, the ‘add-women-and-stir’ approach has had mixed results. They confirm that “high-ranking women continue to exit mainstream corporations at a startling rate” (p.312). In a study of 16 middle and senior managers, Marshall (1995a) confirmed that dissatisfaction with, and disapproval of, male-dominated characteristics of organisational cultures is a key reason for women managers leaving their jobs. As both
Sinclair (1994) and Saunders (1996a) found in their studies of male CEOs, the continued exclusion of women is linked to the ways conceptions of masculinity (and heroic notions of leadership) continue to be inextricably linked to conceptions of executive eligibility. Whilst recognising that self-employed women are undoubtedly becoming an important economic force both in Australia and overseas, Still (1993) raises the thought provoking question of whether women who set up their own small businesses are further losing power by becoming increasingly marginalised from important decision-making arenas:

Despite their obvious success, and their increasing penetration of the small enterprise sector, does self-employment give women the power and status that they seek, let alone access to the important decision-making arenas? ... In a sense ... the movement of women into self-employment is serving to perpetuate and accelerate the marginalisation of ambitious women in the workforce. (p. 59)

Acknowledgements

All of the women in this research study made a point of acknowledging the support and recognition they had received at various points in their careers, prior to hitting the glass ceiling. For many the reasons for leaving were directly related to a lack of acknowledgement of their skills and abilities when their careers were stalled. However, all could cite earlier career experiences when their leadership and management potential had been recognised.

The value of mentors, sponsors and role models

Most of the women had good support from their female networks and several found significant male mentors (who shared similar management philosophies) during the course of their career development. For some, a powerful male helped to open doors in an almost exclusively male environment. Often, it was only when an influential and supportive male left or was replaced in a restructure that the climate changed. Then the negative influence of line managers with deeply entrenched attitudes (often linked to age and gender) led many of the women to conclude that their careers had stalled.

Mentorship is related to career progress, organisational influence and advancement in organisations. “Most successful women, like men, have had one, or several, mentors in their background” (Still, 1993, pp. 158-159). Without a mentor, women often remain invisible to the most powerful people in an organisation (Smith & Hutchinson, 1995). Unless more senior and influential ‘sponsors’ validate them, even outstanding achievements can go unrecognised. In her research involving 12 senior executive women
and 11 male chief executives, Sinclair (1998) found that an older male mentor was influential for many women and often acted as a catalyst, especially early in careers:

In early career the support of men is a constant theme … Older male managers can be either models or mentors. Men employed in the same organisation can be effective sponsors, providing advice, encouragement and opportunities to women. The older man often gets satisfaction and feels flattered in guiding a young woman’s career, and typically the young woman is respectful and grateful for his help. (p. 87)

However, as noted by W3, the relationship can be threatened when the woman grows in success and status:

This strong paternal/filial relationship may not last, particularly if women become successful enough to appear as competitors, or if they stop graciously accepting advice. (Sinclair, 1998, p. 87)

Thus issues of power and competition simmer close to the surface. And the paternal-filial nature of the relationship is threatened as the woman-child spreads her wings. Jocelynne Scutt (1996) explains that male mentoring “is about the mentee always remaining in a ‘beholden’ position to a mentor. It is about the mentor never being eclipsed by the mentored” (p.13). Limerick, Heywood and Daws (cited in Roan, 2003) point out that much of the literature on mentoring does not deal with issues of power, particularly when linked to access to senior levels in organisations. The second issue raised by Limerick et al. (1994) is whether mentoring relationships are insensitive to women’s needs and simply reproduce an organisational culture that is dominated by hierarchical systems of authority. Roan (2003) extends this argument by asking whether mentoring perpetuates elitism within managerial ranks, bolsters the ‘deficient woman’ argument, and, at the same time, excludes those not willing to accept ‘the way we do things around here’.

Mentorship is usually considered in terms of ‘organisational fit’ and rarely in terms of finding a mentor who challenges the dominant culture. Rather than turn to men for this kind of support, many of the women in this thesis found collegial support in other women who questioned and challenged the system. It was common for one interviewee to acknowledge another during the course of the interviews.

Male mentors

Powerful and influential men played a significant role in the career development of some of the women in senior management. The interviewees were quick to recognise good role models and supporters. W1 mentioned her admiration for a male leader, stating he was not only inspirational but valued the contributions of others:
He was a real leader … I think he was one of the inspirational leaders, and male/female, it didn’t make any difference. He valued people for the skills that they brought and had a real vision for shifting the organisation around.

In another example, she illustrated mentoring as a two-way relationship. Both the mentor and the mentee learn from the process. Male mentors can gain a new understanding of the contribution women make to management:

… I must say there was one director I had who was very supportive and I learnt a lot from him. I worked with him on a restructure and part of what I had to do was manage a downsizing process, to work with a lot of people whose jobs were targeted to go, set up a new structure and manage that whole change process. He watched that happening and said how surprised he was that I was able to carry all of that through and acknowledged that he hadn’t really valued that part of my management skills before. He had seen my conceptual skills and my policy ability and saw those as strengths but hadn’t seen me as a hands-on sort of manager until he actually observed me at close quarters.

Adding a new dimension to the discussion, W3 stressed that a mentor relationship could be with people both senior and junior in the work hierarchy. She felt she was lucky that, for a time, she was part of the ‘in’ crowd and worked with an exciting group of people. However she also felt that a more formal mentoring relationship could have been helpful when she needed career guidance.

… when I went into the research branch I was really lucky that I fell in with a lot of people, many of whom I worked with subsequently over the years in all the things I did. They are people with influence … There was a lot happening in the Education Department [at that time], a lot of ideas … it was just a fascinating time and I was fortunate to be involved with all those wonderful people.

X was a very big mentor of mine. I had mentors who were more junior than me as well; you know I don’t think a mentor necessarily has to be senior. I mean some people in the organisation, like Y, would probably be terribly embarrassed to hear me say this, but she was just wonderful to me. They were people with whom I shared passions, ideas, perceptions and orientation to change. So I never sat down and thought, “Now I need a network here”. It just never crossed my mind; I’d just meet this fantastic person and we would share a whole pile of ideas and …

In retrospect I wish I had someone who could have tutored me a little bit because I think basically I bit off more than I could chew. So it would have been good if someone who had a wiser and cooler head, could have said, “Back off W3, don’t do that”, or whatever.

A male manager building his own career took others along with him, realising the benefits of working with talented individuals. W9 recalled the particular school principal who supported her early in her career:

He was an unusual mix … an unusual person. He would be considered in the system as a complete authoritarian, chauvinist, you name it – sexist – but there was another
side to him which I was lucky enough to be part of. He put a lot of opportunities my way and then encouraged me to move from the school into the central office role … he wouldn’t suffer fools gladly … he would be very hard on people who wouldn’t work, who wouldn’t achieve, you know … He was probably furthering his own career as well, there’s no two ways about that, but on the way he brought other people along with him … He was a young principal … still climbing the ladder himself and so certainly he was doing it for his own ends, but on the way he encouraged others.

She was also fortunate to find a supportive line manager at district level and again when she began her career in central office. Attributing the ability to attract mentors to luck (despite her obvious talent and ability), she described the career advantage this offered.

Then when I did go into central office I had my immediate boss, my superior was extremely supportive. He did everything for our development and gave us every opportunity … then of course X [regional director] was extremely supportive. Yes, so he was the one that sort of got me going and then I guess I was just lucky, I worked with people who encouraged me – provided development. W9

Nevertheless, as the quotes from W9 highlight, there are advantages for the mentor in encouraging talented individuals on their teams. This is where making visible relational behaviour through a ‘language of competency’ (Fletcher, 1999) can demonstrate the strength of relational skills (such as mutuality and fluid expertise) where both parties stand to benefit from the interaction. In this way women such as W9 (and the many talented women in this thesis) can be acknowledged for the skills and abilities they bring to the mentoring relationship.

W2, who reached senior executive ranks, acknowledged the support she received from a number of powerful men, whose management styles she admired, and whose influence at each critical stage of her career was very important. It seemed essential to her career development, as she paved the way, being the first woman in a string of leadership positions. She also realised that support for women in the late ’70s was driven by equity requirements and as one of a very small pool of eligible women, she reaped the benefits of change. It was good while it lasted:

I was encouraged by various people to apply for superintendent positions and those people were actually men. I’m going to wreck your research! [laughter] … I suppose today we call it mentoring, but it wasn’t an ongoing mentoring situation. So I did apply. I would be realistic enough to acknowledge that, at that time, which was the late ’70s, it was necessary for organisations to show that they were appointing women – so it was that phenomenon. Organisations got brownie points for having appointed women to promotional positions and because … of the regulations about marriage there were not a lot of women in promotional positions who could establish a case that they were ready for the next step. Again you were in
Moving on

a fairly favoured position, so I moved into the superintendent thread and then moved through that way.

Now after I made that decision, I then really did start to think about career quite consciously and to look at what development I needed and those types of things. I then had a couple of very strong male mentors while I was superintendent … I think you needed that otherwise you wouldn’t have seen too many signs that it was worth going on [said with humour]. I had great support from the regional director with whom I worked when I was first appointed as a superintendent. Both as a human being and in his style of management he was just very inclusive and very genuinely collegial … his outlook on life was that he just absolutely trusted and respected every human being so his was very practical support. I would go to him as a novice and say, “Look I’ve got this situation …” and he’d give me a couple of suggestions … maybe you could deal with it this way or that way … but it was always really helpful, really practical, and he’d always go out of his way to follow up afterwards and ask how did it go, did it work and whatever.

It was terrific. We also had a very primitive setup in that the regional office was actually in a classroom. So the regional director and the three superintendents shared a classroom … we heard every phone call. For the regional director it must have just been intolerable to have four people there. For me, as the only woman … it meant that I heard all their telephone calls, I sort of watched their style; people came in … pulled up a chair at the desk – there was no privacy – you could see and hear everything that was going on … It helped me in watching [the regional director’s] style of operation in that situation. It was very practical, very genuinely affirming, full of praise when it was warranted, sharing, openness. That was all terrific, that was wonderful.

A powerful and progressive male, interested in supporting and promoting able women, had a significant influence on her career success:

I got real support from the Director General. I think he genuinely did want to encourage women to take positions. I think he was probably one of the few in head office at that time who wanted, for the right reasons, to be fostering able women and I think he got quite frustrated with the selection processes. He had no tolerance for the bureaucratic selection process and would often say to me, “But how do I get these able women into the positions when they haven’t [previously] held positions?”

Another male was very supportive when W2 moved to a public service position:

When I went into the public service I was fortunate there in that the person I reported to really did become a very strong mentor and went out of his way to give me opportunities to understand the public service; [encouraged me to] take some responsibilities in particular areas; was always there to give advice, and I felt easy asking him for advice – his advice was always very straightforward and sound. So I think I was really fortunate that I had three influential human, humane [supporters], at each of the critical stages of the more advanced stages of my career.

But life at the top was lonely for a woman; support there was much more difficult to find:

CEO support? No, that was very much more difficult. The support there would have been … ringing an interstate colleague in the same position. There were two or three of us who felt an affinity; we’d all been appointed about the same time,
were experiencing the same situations … It was really that … I had no one who could be a direct support in that position. W2

Other research participants, in consultant or middle management positions, had no direct role models or mentors and found that a real disadvantage:

I had no role models – there were very few women in management roles. I would have liked support, someone to guide my career. I have that now. W4

… just somebody to sit down and say, “Look these are your career options and what are you going to do?” Just to help me work out whether I was going to stay in teaching or … perhaps somebody who could tell me what was in the pipeline. W11

Similarly W17 expressed regret that she had never had a mentor to support and encourage her both practically and emotionally in her career ambitions. Mentoring had not been ‘in vogue’ in her formative career years. She felt that having that support would have been wonderful:

Mentoring wasn’t in vogue when I started out and I’ve never picked up a mentor … It’s a shame, I wish I had … I don’t have a mentor and probably won’t now. I don’t think I am going to go very much further, but I just think in terms of my applications and my ambitions, it could have been much richer I think … a sounding board, someone to talk to, especially for women, someone to say, “Believe in yourself … don’t hold back, you can do it! You’ve got the strength!” I think that’s very important for women – [a mentor] to say, “Look at the strengths you’ve got” and to make those strengths explicit to the person being mentored.

Although she did not have the advantage of a mentor, W11 did cite one instance where a supportive male manager (a ‘new age man’) rewarded her initiative and helped give her career a boost. This gave her a taste of the support that, for most men, was a normal part of working life.

I know this goes on [for the men] – informal mentoring, informal tapping on the shoulder, networks, people to talk to and toss things around maybe over a drink. Having said that, I did single out a male acting director of HR, whom I knew was more of a new age man in terms of his attitudes to these things, and I think that helped me enormously. He gave me some support … I went down to [his] office and tapped on his door and said I’d like to speak to you. [At first] I actually couldn’t bring myself to go down to his office so I rang him up – he knew me, but not well – and I just said, “I’ve got a Masters in Educational Management and my contract is coming to an end; this is what I’ve done; if you’ve got any projects coming up let me know.”

Now … I hadn’t been in a culture where you actually asked for work and I know a lot of people wouldn’t have done that, but he rang me, literally, within days … I mean there was not merit selection for this, I was tapped on the shoulder really, but I had initiated it myself. “W11 we’ve got two really interesting projects coming up for three months each.” I guess I made that happen but he supported me … getting
the contract to do the two projects which was a huge step for me – to go from never having done anything in management, other than my Masters degree assignment – to being responsible for two projects that lead to publications. They were quite highly visible projects and got me well known.

W18’s experience was influenced by her cultural difference but she pointed out that gender and culture intersected in her choice of mentors:

I did have a champion, and the champion was an Aboriginal man who … was the director of the branch. He was my first mentor in the education system. He gave me lots of opportunities to be innovative. He wasn’t a male chauvinist because he hadn’t been socialised as that; he was more of a balance of masculine and feminine energy. The other Aboriginal men in the directorate at that time were more male chauvinist than he – into power and control.

Perhaps the following comment, from another Aboriginal woman in the research sample, sums up the complexity and the tension for women, as outsiders in a male system, in trying to build and maintain support while at the same time remaining true to themselves:

I got great support from women, but I also got very, very good support from men, which (I think) was a good way to do it. I think that is the reality: if we try to play the game in a different way, I think we would be kidding ourselves. The challenge for women is in not sacrificing the things about us that make us women, because we act differently, we react differently, we feel differently. I remember this absolutely great quote – it’s along the lines of – the measure of success of a woman being not by how much support that she gets from men but the support that she gets from other women. That I think indicates, not that you don’t need support from men, but if you step so far away from what is your natural support base just how much of yourself are you sacrificing? That is a balancing trick that I think we all have to do. Similarly, most of my life has been in mainstream, but being Aboriginal you can’t ever, as an Aboriginal person, allow yourself to be so distant from the community that you don’t have their support. W19

Female mentors and role models

The first women in executive management positions found that they were chartering new territory and in doing so became agents of change and role models for other women. W2 reflected on the historical status of women in management and the effect that managing by example could have on changing stereotypical perceptions and attitudes:

At that time there was starting to be a move amongst the Principal Mistresses a) to get the name changed to Deputy Principal and b) to ‘put to death’ the stereotype. So I was able to do two things; I was able to work on my own [profile] within the school to show that this was a senior role and, at the same time … contribute to the wider cause and elevate the awareness. Over that time I think that I did act out and develop the role so that the staff and the parents and the kids actually saw me equally. In fact what happened as a result … I perceived it as a result of personalities … I think I actually was seen as the [main] deputy and the male deputy was back in the ranks, which caused a lot of angst for him. [There were] a lot of problems – needing to work that through – and I mean I could appreciate that he
found that hard. And of course he then found it hard to relate to me in a way that was open. So … I think being able to make some impact on that dreaded stereotypic bit was one of my first successes.

Having been in the rather isolated position as the only female on the executive management team, W6 (like W3) talked about the support she received from ‘surrogate mentors’ – other women who were in less senior positions throughout the organisation. Her mentoring relationships held mutual benefits for ‘fellow travellers’ in a traditionally male world. This female support was in direct contrast to the lack of support from male leaders for women at and near the top:

… I probably found that the greatest amount of support … was from women at maybe one or two levels below me. Over the years … I got quite a solid group of women behind me who would feed me information and be supportive in public environments … when you’re under attack, they might speak up or … So it was basically from women in similar circumstances to me because I guess they saw me as a fellow traveller in a difficult situation. They agreed with the directions that I wanted to take and they were prepared to stand up for me. And that was in both a professional sense and a personal sense. So yes there was a really good group of women.

I used [women subordinates] as sort of surrogate mentors. I guess that’s what I would have liked to have had from colleagues who had been there for a lot longer than me, to guide me in the system … how the system works. I might know my professional area but they knew the Department and the people within it … so giving me some shortcuts to learning those political processes would have been helpful.

I think I could have got more support from the male CEOs who were completely unaware – ignorant or not wanting to know – about the particular difficulties that I had, and not willing to help at all.

A number of interviewees acknowledged the significant group of women who made a difference for other women. Many of these women were identified as interviewees in my sample. They supported them in their careers, particularly in the late ‘80s when Affirmative Action was having some impact. A career opportunity came W1’s way when W3, a female in senior management, recognised her potential. A similar story was told by W9 and W19.

… my director volunteered me; I didn’t volunteer (laugh). She thought it would be good for my development … I didn’t have any particular skills [in that area] but W3 just decided that here was someone who could do this. She was responsible for that one and subsequently, the connection with the technology [initiative], W1

Then … oh women! I worked in a section with Y for quite a while and she was always supportive and encouraging. And then of course women like W6. Yes, and W7, when she became director. I know, there’s someone else who was very supportive of my development – W3! – now that’s another person … She was one of the main agents of change in the late ’80s … she had an enormous role to play … It was when there was that real affirmative push … and [for example] it was seen to be doing the right thing to have a woman as the Director General. W9

When I first went into central office there was a group of women there, all at the same level … every now and then we would head off for an afternoon lunch, flex off … [Now], eleven and a half years later, we still catch up for long weekends and lunches. There are only two who are still in education, one still in central office, one back in a school in a promotional position – it’s fantastic and it is a reality check. W19

W10 described that brief window of time when women received support from a new wave of women in positions of power. She compared this to the support that is a normal part of working life for many men:

[The bias in job selection criteria] started to change when W6 was executive director. She changed some job descriptions at the time and brought people who weren’t even from education into Policy … They were women and they were highly skilled and they were able to take a different look at some of the issues in education, which was really valuable … For a short period of time some of the women experienced the support that is a normal part of the development of male managers.

W12 had a similar story to tell, listing the women who were influential. She also noted the influence of a particular male who had an understanding of gender equity through his own experience of parenting daughters:

… there were some key people; X – because he had daughters – and I have to say W3 was incredibly influential in changing the way people thought. I do think she made a significant impact and there are other women too … I think of W14, W6 … there was a significant group of women there who made a difference [emphasis added].

W5 had never had a male mentor, but named female mentors/role models and listed some other factors which she felt had assisted her career development. She had supportive (culturally different) parents who encouraged achievement in their children, regardless of gender. She had never married so could put career first. She also had strong friendships outside of the organisation as well as the internal support of a network of women (through their predominance in the equity area that she managed). As a senior manager she had facilitated the development of this network. Ironically, although she subsequently ran mentoring programs, she found more value in the informal support of her female friends and colleagues.
I don’t think I ever had a male mentor [but] in my days in schools I was teaching in the junior primary area and I certainly had a very strong mentor there. I didn’t realise at the time that she was a mentor but she was. She followed my career and she was the one who urged me to go to teacher’s college [lecturing]; she wanted me to become a [school] principal [but] I didn’t want that. Yes she was a very strong … she was more of an advocate than a mentor. There were lots of women who were role models. W14 was a strong role model and mentor; she’s been a mentor to a lot of people in an unofficial way.

I guess the other area in which I got a lot of support was from a whole network of female friends. They’ve been important to me all through my career and I think I’ve got more from those women’s networks, and I still do, than individual mentors. But then I tend not to be the sort of person to seek out individual mentors, even though I run mentoring programs.

… I just had a lot of supportive people around me. My parents were peasant migrants from [eastern Europe] and any achievement of mine was heralded as something marvellous. They pushed that I should go on and finish my education; in fact I would have quit if it hadn’t been for my older brothers who said I should [go on]. Our parents were very proud of anything we did so there was always that support [and] lots of supportive friends.

The fact that I didn’t marry and I didn’t have to worry about my own family responsibilities probably helped … There was a predominance of women in the … branch so I think that probably also helped.

W8 and W13 worked in specialist areas linked to social justice and often turned to interstate networks to overcome feelings of isolation and to gain support:

… when I was doing my interstate meetings and talking with the other consultants … I was operating on a level that was great. I mean, it’s awful to say, but sometimes you looked there for your support network to keep you going … because you didn’t always get it within the system here. W8

…. I achieved recognition for my work on a national level that I was never able to achieve within the Education Department here. Part of that was due to being an expert in a specialist field – most line managers had no experience in the area and therefore did not understand its inherent benefits for education. Being a woman with leadership ability compounded the problem. W13

**Executive coaching**

Like many of the interviewees, W14 stressed the importance of a mentor for the ‘lone female’ but she took this further by suggesting the possibility of tapping into a commercial executive coaching package. In her new leadership position she is very much aware that career planning and management are key ingredients to attracting and retaining talented and innovative staff (Karvelas, 2002). From her own experience she is aware of the isolation of the lone female and the need to be strategic, particularly for women at the senior levels:
… the importance of having male mentors to help shield you, like in the football team, shepherd you through the area … I think for women who want to make those [career] transitions it’s very important that they have men and women who can advise them – talk it through.

In fact I was talking to a company today that is offering senior executive coaching. So you talk through the whole scenario and so on. It’s a lifetime coaching package of about $20,000 but they coach you all through your senior executive life. Now for some people who are going to work for ten years that’s $2,000 a year. When you get more senior you have to be very careful who you speak to; what you say has prominence. So if you are able to bring to that [career] good counsel [it will be an advantage] because you are becoming more and more isolated.

W20, who had worked in a range of jobs at and near the top in organisations, stressed the importance of actively seeking out mentors, often more than one, and building strong and influential networks. Whilst supportive of executive coaching programs (for example, the Senior Executive Service program of the ’80s and the career and life skills coaching programs that were gaining popularity in the ’90s and beyond), she was openly critical of ‘remedial’ job skills programs, especially for women. Her comments contradict those of other women in the sample who actively supported women in leadership programs. However, her words resonate with recent research (for example Sinclair, 1998) that questions ‘fix the women’ approaches to gender inequity. Upskilling women can infer a deficit, a lack, and encourages the mindset that men are OK whilst at the same time failing to critique male behaviours. Nevertheless W20’s adamant rejection of ‘Women in Leadership’ programs comes as quite a shock.

We need to debunk some of these myths – we need mentors and coaches, we need to network. Excuse me! These shy retiring blossoms – the sun will not shine on you because you exist … or because you are good. If you are lucky you will get someone like me who will encourage people, but you have to get out there and do your networking, you have to know people. It’s no good saying he or she got a promotion because they knew this person – yes, probably, is the answer. But in any good public sector merit selection process, there is always a protection around straight up and down nepotism; you can’t do that. W20

You have got to go out and find your mentors – not necessarily [only] one person. And never ever go into a formal mentoring program. That’s the way in which organisations go about converting people into victims and losers – losers is a bit of a hard word – but by running special programs they can really contaminate you. If you want a mentor, you go out and find one yourself; you don’t go into a formal program, unless it is going to somehow give you another tick in terms of being cooperative with the program … [otherwise] people may use that against you and people will say, about both men and women, ‘We’ve tried really hard with this person, look at the training programs he/she has been on’, when in fact it may be the program that is holding the person back. It’s a bit like some of the early stuff that happened around women, when people said, “I don’t know why women don’t apply for these jobs, let’s have a CV writing program”. That’s the kiss of death for women, to go into those programs; never go into all women programs, or all male programs for that matter. You have your networks, factions, male, female, whatever
but they are all informal. Never go into a Women in Leadership program, go into a leadership program.

The best leadership program I went on was … a long time ago (about 1980) where the government had chosen about half a dozen men and half a dozen women who were the potential leaders of the future in [name of Australian state]. We were given a year’s scholarship to train up in different jobs, attend lectures and to do all sorts of things [to prepare] for what was coming.

Projecting forward to the next stage of her career, W20 was planning consultancy work. She was keen to use the wisdom gained through her leadership experiences to transmit to others skills that would enable them to better manage their jobs and to deal with uncertainty in a changing job market. As a consultant she planned to use a combination of career and life coaching techniques to help people “get out of the small stuff”. In the following example she offers some excellent advice on how to deal with difficult people:

People do need coaching; I’m very interested in coaching – that will be part of my consultancy. [Coaching] is a better word than mentoring. Mentoring sounds as though there is an unequal power balance, but coaching is simply about helping people keep the job they have and doing it better – so career and life coaching. And how to deal with anger for example, how to deal with difficult people and how to turn things around so that the difficult person becomes your friend and ally. There are a few people that we need to alienate – there are some evil people in the world [humour] – but by and large people are not. People behave badly because they are scared and therefore they have anxiety. So if you are feeling really, really angry about someone, let it go for a while and work out how that person can become an ally in some way, shape or form. I think that is an important quality of leadership, standing back a long way and observing the dynamics of the organisation – who’s anxious and therefore behaving badly – and trying to fix the root cause rather than give a person a good excuse to behave badly.

It’s always about survival – it’s got a lot worse in recent years because all the jobs are being lost. In Australia at the moment there are a frightening number of people who have been used to a certain lifestyle and no longer can afford that lifestyle, and have the commitments and expectations around it. Instead of saying, “My job may not be there tomorrow” [ask], “How can I prepare for that now?!” … accepting the ambiguity that no job is for life. Oddly this job is not on a contract – it’s for life! [laughter].

**Reflecting on the decision to leave**

All of the interviewees talked about careers that had moved in new directions. With the benefits of a supportive work environment foremost in their thinking, a buoyant, positive feeling was reflected in the following comments:

Oh it’s fantastic and this organisation is one where I don’t have to feel any sense that my values are being warped and twisted … So much more supportive, a much more collegial type of culture, a definite commitment to life-long learning. This whole job is a self-development process for me – I’m supported in any professional development that I want to do, ranging from speaking at conferences overseas to an
Moving on

[overseas] project earlier this year and a couple of months off to write a book … a whole range of things. The leadership program for women is very successful. I started that … but before then we had a female [in charge] – she was great, she’s had a great influence on the culture. W6

W6 described the wonderful feeling of working in an atmosphere of respect and trust, and the relief of no longer having to fight the political games:

I think that the element of the culture that I appreciate is the sense of respect towards others (this is not universal – there are individuals who are not like that) but there’s a level of basically wanting to like people rather than trying to use them. So you assume that they are good and competent and professional unless it is shown otherwise. [In my current position] I’m not fighting against a culture; I am within a culture, where they are delighted to be able to have someone who wants to lead them in a direction that they want to go. So it just makes it so easy to do lots of good things. That to me is success.

Respect and trust were also important to W4 who described her consulting work and the excitement of leading a team of motivated people as opposed to struggling against a ‘damaging’ culture and being ‘worn down’ by the bureaucracy:

I like ideas and challenge. I started to feel loss of passion – commitment in a bureaucracy grinds you down – and I do think that the culture is pervasive and I do think it pulls people down, that people get exhausted by struggling against it …And because it’s not explicit and it’s not visible they find it hard to explain.

My definition of success is leading a team of people who want to work – are excited, motivated to work – having fun, getting the job done. One woman [taking part in a current project] is an example – we don’t get on personally but she does a great job. She knows that, I know that … I respect her work. It’s about trust.

W3 spoke about her acceptance of the career move and the freedom of letting go of the security of a permanent job (an adaptability she linked to the common ‘female’ experience of an interrupted career). She saw men who didn’t take those risks, the ‘grey’ men, with ‘jobs for life’, an observation shared by a number of the research participants.

At the same time that I got sidelined, a lot of my male colleagues did as well. So it wasn’t just women. But I do think that my reaction was different to a lot of my male colleagues because I just thought, “Oh well that’s over, move onto the next thing.” Whereas a lot of men are still there – greyer … Some of them are just grey, you know, they had given in, they didn’t want to fight … I feel as though I had less invested in the system than my male colleagues and that gave me a freedom … a freedom to be bolder in the organisation, which probably enabled me to get squashed more easily; but also I didn’t feel as though I had as much invested in my career in there … I felt as though I could go … I think that’s probably common [to the women who left] … I didn’t feel as strongly as my male colleagues that this security was something I had to hang on to and I wonder if that’s not a female trait?
W11 had no doubt about her decision to leave and felt proud of her ability to take the risk, despite having the financial responsibilities that came with single parenting:

... I think leaving was the best thing I did. I think it’s disgraceful that they have so few women [in management] considering that they have such a high percentage of graduate women ... so looking back ... I feel quite proud of the fact that I took, what was an unbelievable risk for somebody as a single parent with no other income. I think to me that was a sign of the sort of passion I felt about getting out.

On reflection W5 knew that she has always been happier managing a range of things, having more diverse career options, a portfolio career. But as a woman in leadership, she had felt a sense of responsibility about climbing the career ladder, seeing herself as a role model for other women:

... I’m a woman and I keep urging that women should go further in organisations. So I felt a certain sense of obligation that I should follow that path myself. I really enjoyed managing the branch, we achieved a lot and ... yes, it was good working there. They were probably the ten best years of my working life up until that point [of stalled career].

I guess I’m not strongly career oriented at the moment, which is typical. I’ve got three or four things on the go and I like that. I don’t want to keep pushing in one area to get to the top ... I like diversity and a range of things ... I lead a very full life; it’s very satisfying and I don’t have the shackles and restraints of an organisation. It’s good.

She talked about coming to terms with her decision to leave and learning to value her new career choice:

I feel great about it now. At the time [of leaving] I didn’t ... I felt I was becoming a consultant because – not that I’d failed but that – I hadn’t really achieved what I’d wanted in working in the Department. And it wasn’t until I went to a one-day consultancy course, How to be a Successful Consultant, that I suddenly saw it as a real challenge and something to succeed at. There was something about being a consultant that was a whole new ball game and quite a challenge. So that changed my thinking and I guess it’s highlighted a certain competitiveness in me, setting up challenges and competing against myself. I really love getting contracts and I get a real buzz out of it. Last week I picked up two and by the end of the week I was on a real high ... that sense of achievement ... it’s good.

W1 realised, as did other women in the study, that not winning the central office position that she had worked so hard for had forced her to make a career change. Her decision could be viewed in a positive light:

I mean I guess had I won the position [in central office] ... I would have hung in there and been doing whatever I would have been doing now. And while it was a bit of a shock at the time, it actually has forced me to reflect on and make a career change and do some things differently, so it’s actually a very positive thing. Yes,
and probably all the women I can think of who left the Department, be it under a cloud [laughter], would probably relate it similarly.

W7 voiced similar sentiments and made a distinction between physically and mentally separating from an environment that was unhealthy for her:

In retrospect all those things that happened … where I was told the place would be restructured and politically my situation was changing, blah, blah, blah. Best thing that ever happened because it forced me to look seriously at my options and I realised that there had to be something better than that environment … there is a life outside … I don’t have wall-to-wall meetings all the time … I was away for seven months on leave and it was at least six months after that before I felt that I had psychologically separated from the place. It took me that long, which I think is incredible. I find that hard to believe.

In her new job she reported to a female director (who had also left the Department) who demonstrated an inclusive and interactive management style. As a result of the more supportive work environment, she felt valued for her ideas and contribution:

I made a very clear decision that I wanted a job in which I could have some semblance of a personal life and that I could do something … where I could actually contribute. What I have here, at this point in time anyway, I have access to senior levels – a senior [managerial] person who listens to me if I’ve got thoughts and ideas and takes me seriously. And gosh, to be taken seriously is quite a treat!

W8 was disillusioned in the restructure and was glad to leave although, like W11, she recognised the financial risks involved. She enjoyed the challenge of moving on and the creativity and diversity in her new work. Importantly she felt more in control, away from the atmosphere of uncertainty, downsizing and jobs for the boys.

I might be poorer but I’m not regretting it. I haven’t looked back in any sense. There was always the safety net of the Department behind you – the salary coming in [laughter] but I think it was probably time for me to move on for a whole lot of reasons … I just suddenly thought why am I working for an organisation that treats its people like this?

I’ve appreciated the freedom I suppose – to choose. It’s been hairy and exciting and uncertain and everything else … as I say about change, change doesn’t worry me as long as I can be a bit more in control.

W9 was one of two women in the sample who accessed redundancy offers. She now enjoys being a partner in a small consulting business where, as director, she can choose her own staff and work as part of the team. In leaving the Education Department she took a risk, leapt into the unknown, and didn’t look back:

At the same time they offered redundancy … the opportunity or the suggestion for setting up as a private consultancy came along as well. I took the redundancy and
took the plunge … because whenever I’m leaving I always look at worse case scenario – what’s the worst that can happen?

… we [the team] had built up a client base … almost … we were leaping out … I realise now if we’d really sat down and weighed the full risks we mightn’t have done it. But it was good that we did it … you don’t really know what you don’t know until you do it.

W10, who had also moved into consulting, reflected on the value of dedicated workers who worked passionately for the good of education. But she realised that there is ‘life after education’ and has met other change agents who feel the same way:

I just feel so fortunate that I got out [laughter]. I mean life’s never been better and I think that when you are in there you don’t realise there is life after education. And you know, it’s funny, all these people I meet now who are out of education and we meet in lifts and on street corners and in weird and wonderful places and our eyes light up. “There is life after education!” is the cry. I mean it’s wonderful to see people doing fabulous things and you know, some of these people were change agents in the organisation, and I regard myself as one … we did put in a lot of our lives to try to make the world a better place.

[Were] burnt out to a certain extent … they were never afforded the opportunities to go anywhere or do anything other than keep running around in the wheel. So it’s great, so encouraging to see people [who have left] … There is life after education! … The benefit is that I do not belong to an organisation, so I don’t have to play the politics and I don’t have to come up with the company line.

W12 knew that in setting up her own consulting business, she had moved to a more flexible and supportive environment. Like so many of the interviewees, she also knew that she was taking a leap, but confronted her fears and felt confident in her decision:

… I couldn’t see a change in that male model, [that] male paradigm for operating … I couldn’t see the key players changing … either moving on or changing their own paradigm. So that’s when I made the decision to cut my losses and leave. I was tired of trying to influence change … and not getting anywhere. So I needed to be in an environment again where I would be encouraged, where debate and risk taking would be valued and seen as an important part of a working world.

… how do I seize the opportunity? … You know … when I went out to my business [security] was critical for me. I’m a real security freak – I’ve got to have my mortgage, I’ve got to be able to pay my superannuation, I need that set income every fortnight – going into my own business, that was the biggest fear I had to confront. And I kept asking myself, “OK what happens if?; I’ll have to sell the house – so?; I can rent – so?; I can go and live with friends.” You talk yourself through all that stuff and it really doesn’t matter because at the end of the day what’s critical are your relationships with your friends and your family and people and they are the very people who are going to support you in bad times.
As a result of leaving, W13 moved into consultancy work and continued her studies. For a time she returned to the Education Department on a contract basis, but she had to deal with the feelings of loss:

I found it difficult at first because I had to accept that I wouldn’t be formally recognised for my leadership ability. I had resisted the culture, tried to change it, and that meant the doors were firmly closed. I now combine a number of roles. It gives me a chance to be a part of the bigger picture as well as developing my own business. I realise that with the clash of values, central office is not the place for me. I have better things to do with my time than applying for jobs I can never win. I like the freedom of managing in my own style and I like working in areas where I feel that I am making a difference.

W14 saw the tendency for women to get caught up in doing the job well, and for the men to encourage this endeavour in women while turning their own minds to promotional strategies. She became strategic in planning her next move:

In hindsight you probably see things a bit clearer than you do when you’re actually a busy director … I think basically the guys thought that if you were competition, they’d just overload you. So you don’t actually stand at a bird’s-eye view. I think men probably, on a weekly basis, stand at a bird’s-eye view and examine what’s happened to them. I think women just treat it as another sequence of points in a line of doing their job well – that is their satisfier. So I turned my mind a little bit more to some of the strategies that you’ve got to [use to] look after yourself in the environment by having a … kind of SWAT analysis of what’s happening here.

When W14 made the decision to leave, she was successful in winning a CEO position where her management skills were recognised and rewarded. In fact, she was nominated Employer of the Year! She was obviously enjoying the opportunity to lead and to encourage the talents of the team:

… I did make the decision that I would inform the Director General that I would look for something else and within six weeks I had applied for this position, I’d been interviewed for this position and I had been appointed to it … I guess my strategy was to not stay in an environment in which I was not going to be recognised. Then making some decisions and putting those into action, and I was fortunate to be able to demonstrate that I had competitive skills and competencies and that they would be picked up elsewhere.

I’m a democratic but decisive leader. I inform, involve, support, resource and publicly acknowledge those with whom I work/lead. I’m aware that mistakes get made in innovative environments and I ‘protect’ the secretariat from those consequences. Meanwhile we have a very good socio-critical performance review system and the staff know I appreciate them and reward them … I was nominated Employer of the Year. Something I’ll always treasure.

W16 explained she had no desire to return to the central office of the Department and while the new job was a completely new learning experience, she was enjoying the
challenge. Her new boss was female (also a new experience) and trusted her to get on with the job:

I don’t want to go back. Nothing is happening in central office; people are very disillusioned … I think that over the time that I’d been there I’d seen it go from a fairly reasonable, open type place (but maybe at the really top level it never was) into distrust. Where people basically didn’t trust because they weren’t sure who they could talk to – to know that it wasn’t going to be reported back. So it became a very closed … Oh yes [the new job is] a sideways move, but I felt I had to move sideways to find something else.

Well of course it’s all been quite new for me because I’m working in areas I’ve never worked in before … I am actually enjoying doing something different … I actually work for a woman at the moment. This is the first time I’ve ever done so directly I think. Yes it’s a different style … you have your job to do and you do it and she expects you to do it … basically it’s your work. So she gives you a lot of leeway; she has things she wants done, but she gives you a chance to do it your way first – it’s your responsibility. Sometimes it’s hard, because you’re actually not sure what it is that she wants you to get to, but that’s also probably a factor of the amount of work that has to be done. But you don’t have somebody watching over you all the time.

The issue of trust emerged repeatedly, especially being trusted to manage capably:

I would have to be really convinced to go back, it would have to be something that would really attract me. I find this much more satisfying, you have much more control and power here, whereas central office, when I was there, there was such a hierarchical way of operating that it was very frustrating. So you would write a letter and it had to go to the next person, the next person and the next person. It would come back down the line for a full stop to be changed …

I have complete autonomy here and [as a manager I am] valued. No one is checking up – I give my reports at the managers’ meetings and I just run my section. That level of trust is huge … I guess that’s the way I operate with my team as well – I treat them as professionals and they behave as professionals; they know that I trust in their ability and knowledge, but if they need to run things past me, they certainly do that. If something is going out to all schools, I have a glance at it, as quality control. W17

As the interviewer (and a participant) I reflected on the resilience of these women – experiencing pain in the process of self-development (Dabrowski, 1964; Piechowski, 1986; Queck, 1995; Noble, 1996) and having the courage to be true to their values – and their strength as leaders. Similarly, W18 talked about gaining strength through adversity:

I feel that I am a much stronger and more powerful leader today, certainly because of the hard experiences that I have had, but mostly because I have learnt how to let go of the negative experiences, the hurts, the anger, the resentment and the frustration … and be more balanced. Not complacent – complacency is a different thing – I have learnt to be more balanced. So when I need to be tough I am tough, when I need to be flexible, I am flexible. I live for the present more because I have realised that the point of power is in the present, not in the past and not in the future.
I am very much into empowering people so when [I encounter] people [who] want to control they find that they have a huge conflict [with me].

Some of the women did not rule out the possibility that they could return to the Education Department at some time in the future. But it would be on their terms and it would be in a context where their skills and abilities were recognised:

… and I guess I don’t bear any particular ill will – while there were a few individuals, and they’re not going to be there forever, in fact hardly any of them are there right now – and I don’t rule out the possibility that I’II go back one day. W1

On reflection, my heart still is in education, you know – I still watch the papers and see what’s going on and I sort of would like to go back but I’ve made a pragmatic ‘ditch wood’ choice – I’m not going back as a middle manager or someone else’s hand maiden, I’m going back in my own right! I’m going back in my own right to make a difference. W12

Incentives to stay?

When asked what incentive or change of circumstances would have convinced them to stay, the research participants gave a range of answers with a predominance clustering around the themes of recognition for performance; an appreciation of educationally focused and people centred management styles; and a supportive work culture, inclusive of difference. Elimination of those who obstructed progress for women, the ‘dinosaurs’ who would never change, seemed to be a popular choice. W1 reflected on the culmination of a series of events that led to her decision to leave and how difficult it would have been to turn that around:

I think my decision to leave was probably the culmination of a whole series of unsatisfactory experiences … the DG was very supportive and made me a number of offers [after I missed out on winning my acting position substantively] and was prepared to do whatever it would take for me to stay, but I chose not to and she was very supportive about that too. So I think by then what it would have taken for me to stay would have been years worth of things happening differently, not just one sort of final amazing thing.

Quite the opposite in view to W20, who was highly critical of special programs for women, W1 recommended a ‘Women in Leadership’ program with top down support:

Well, what I think should happen is what I tried to set in place while I was there – a Women in Leadership program … [to address] the fact that you’ve got 70% of the employed work force women … and less than 10% … in senior management positions. There is a problem. You cannot deny that there is a problem, and so … there has to be a confronting of perception versus reality and that only happens when you design a program that fits the organisation. So that you don’t get the backlash – that there is the potential for change. You actually have [the Director General] sponsor a program … working out who the sponsors are and working with
them. If senior executive is as important as it is, then how do you bring those people in, involve them in the process? I think we can learn some things from what UWA did in their Women in Leadership program … We need a critical mass. But I also acknowledge that with a government that isn’t particularly committed to this kind of issue, and a backlash that’s happening in the community generally, it’s pretty tough. It’s that extreme conservatism that led to Pauline Hanson and anti-race as well as anti-women sentiment.

Similarly W3 wanted top down and bottom up support for gender reform:

If you gave me ten years and the Education Department and said, “OK how are you going to fix it?” I’d say, “Well you need ministers who are committed, you need to appoint directors general who are committed, you need to have the senior management with their targets set in that area, you need PR campaigns, you need training exercises … you need a lot of support from the top down … and you need people at the bottom who’ve got resources and capacities and skills … you need the whole lot”. The closest we ever got to that I think was in the mid ’80s.

I suspect if you’re looking for the magic bullet I don’t think there is a magic bullet. And I think that of all the organisations I have to do with, the Education Department [here] would be one of the tougher ones, more entrenched … committed to the status quo. I think that’s [typical of this state] actually. You probably can’t separate it … we’re basically a big mining town. It probably took me a year to come to that conclusion. I guess if I hadn’t been sidelined I would have liked to have continued my wonderful career in the Education Department. It was great!

W6 felt that some people will never change and that getting rid of those key people with a negative influence on the culture is essential. She was quite emphatic in her decision to leave state government employment and a value system that clashed with her principles.

It’s very hard. I think a firing squad is about all that we can do. Line them all up out in the square and get rid of a few of them. No, there are some people who will not ever change and will never see the culture they create through the masculine processes that they engage in.

If I’d had more support from my director colleagues, some more understanding of what I was trying to achieve for them, which to this day I believe was [going in] the right direction … I think they went backwards from there. You can achieve a lot … despite resistance from elsewhere, if your colleagues and your immediate superiors are supportive and protective in the directions that you’re taking. I would have been able to stay longer [with that support].

I found the political process with the Minister very difficult … if things went wrong politically, you’d find the public servant was a scapegoat – blame them – and tell fibs and say, “Oh that wasn’t me, that was the public servant”. Or you’d be directed to do something that was against your principles. I found that very difficult and really I can’t see that I would ever work in state government again because of that.

Like many of the interviewees, W12 wanted recognition for talented women who knew how to manage people. She also targeted the key people to eliminate – those who had a
great investment in preserving the status quo and who contributed to a dysfunctional environment:

Just put the women in! Save the money – millions of dollars are being spent to train guys to do what women have always been able to do – to manage in a people-orientated way … The males who were in there for life, they were expecting promotion yet they did not have one ounce of idea about what quality teaching and learning is about, [which is] constantly challenging, changing, renewing, rethinking the way [of doing] things, open to suggestions, trying new ideas …

Risk taking in that environment, I mean you just look at it, you know it’s all the same brown … [occasionally] you see the odd naughty person with a little bow tie or the bright socks and you think, yes there’s a naughty person … Be a good PhD thesis that one … suss out the ones you could have influence on. But at the end of the day, there was just the constant reinforcement of the dominant culture, anything that was different, anything that was risk taking, anything that was good, honest – open debate was not valued or seen to be relevant.

W5 also wanted recognition and support for talented people and felt that managing them well was central to changing the culture. She was aware that maintaining an effective people centred management style requires conscious effort, that women can become entrapped by male norms (Gordon, 1991) and that even women with strong feminist values can “acquire values infused with ‘macho’ masculinities and the management narratives of business organisations” (Deem and Ozga, 2000, p. 154). W5 seemed resigned, despairing and disillusioned when she said:

… to me what’s important is how people relate to people and how they manage people. So the whole person orientation is really critical. And the levels of sincerity and integrity are really critical … I think I always saw the most critical aspect of what I was doing was allowing the talent around me to flourish and supporting that talent. There are a lot of talented people in there whose talents and capabilities are not allowed to emerge and be used, and that’s really sad. I mean I was constantly amazed at things that happened in the way people managed, really basic things. I mean managing can be so easy and so enjoyable [but] people made it such a burden, surrounding themselves with conflict … it’s just amazing, people stuffing up in that sense.

But I think women have to, when they’re in these positions [of management], consciously think about management style, how they are managing, and how they are operating with respect to other women. Because the way of the organisation can take over the way you might want to do things. [You can] … get swept up in the tide.

W17 was equally certain that things would have to be very different for her to want to return to the central office environment. There would need to be a complete cleanout of the politics of hierarchy and self-promotion linked to the peak masculinist culture. Following a similar line of argument to W5, she realised that women could be stymied in
their effectiveness by having to stave off undesirable practices (Deem & Ozga, 2000; Currie et al., 2002), in essence limiting their energy for positive change.

It would have to be very different, and unless you had a complete cleanout, I don’t think it will ever happen. The walls, the furniture, it’s all ingrained in this hierarchical, up the ladder, looking after yourself, politically maneuvering, making sure your voice is heard in case someone is trying to step over you … in meetings being seen to be important, knowledgeable, highly thought of, where the voices are heard.

Getting rid of those key people … those three or four key people. One who was a known harasser, another who operated in a very authoritative, inappropriate way. A new look organisation – that would have been a symbolic signal to me that things had changed. Yes, new women came on board and that was exciting and wonderful but again their effectiveness is stymied by having constantly to put out bush fires to do with the ways these people operate. Constantly being undermined, constantly having information withheld. It just wastes so much energy.

Both W7 and W10 were very disillusioned by the culture and built on the theme of elimination. They suggested that eliminating the entire central office might be the only way forward!

Can’t imagine a thing to be honest. I’ve sadly come to the conclusion that the Education Department’s a lost cause. Largely because of its size, whatever you do, you can’t change enough people to make a difference. The culture’s so ingrained that it’s … almost impossible. The best you could hope for would be to totally regionalise and basically get rid of central office altogether. In a sense I suppose that’s what they’re trying to do but they’ve done it in such a painful way, it’s been so hurtful to so many people, that the message they’re sending about values is nowhere near what might be written on a piece of paper … My sense is that [the restructure] was done in a way that was very damaging to people. W7

I always thought that the only way to change it would be to blow it out of the water and start again because this groupthink was so pervasive … management [personnel] wouldn’t stay in that organisation so the other thing you’ve got there is a succession of human resource executive directors and directors who would start something, find out how hard it was, and leave. W10

W10 would have liked to be offered an acting position in management, an opportunity often given to up and coming young men sponsored by the boys’ club. She objected to endless training for women who were already well qualified, thus resisting the ‘fix the women’ approach to gender reform. And she wanted flexibility in conditions of work.

If I’d ever been offered an acting opportunity anywhere, any time, any place … it would have been nice. So yes, if I’d been afforded some development opportunity, preferably an acting [position], I mean rather than more training. I was sort of fairly fed up with training. That probably would have done it … [and] more flexible work conditions would have been the other thing that may have encouraged me [to stay] because I certainly appreciate now the flexible work conditions that I have.
When I asked what would have kept her there W21 responded that, in genuine recognition of her achievements (described by the education minister of the day as outstanding), she would have liked to have been considered as a potential candidate for the top position, that of Director General. Instead she realised that she was seen as valuable for the work she was doing and would be kept doing it.

What could have kept me in the role? I think what would have kept me there would have been that the minister or the government saw me as a potential Director General at some time in the future. What I gained was an absolutely tremendous appreciation of what I was doing, which was very good. I was pleased that the new minister and the new government thought that I was doing an outstanding job, but nonetheless it became very, very clear to me that because I was from outside the state and not allied within the party, that I was never going to get to be Director General. What has also become clear to me is absolutely how naïve I was in thinking that merit alone [would lead to] the opportunity – I was naïve enough to think that high merit got you somewhere – but it became overwhelmingly clear to me that there was an absolute desire for me to stay on and do what I was doing, that other [less talented] people were going to [be considered for] the DG’s job.

W9 talked about the desire to make a difference and the impossibility of returning when there was no value placed on that concept:

I felt that … if I could have been involved in a section of the Education Department in a role that I felt was important for education, that I was still able to make a difference and that I was getting satisfaction in what I was doing in my role, then I would have stayed. But I didn’t see how that was going to happen when I left and I know that my management style, and my style of operation, is not valued now. So it would be almost impossible to go back now.

W11 recommended skilled people management but was doubtful about moving the culture – wading through the ‘labyrinth of rules’ to produce effective change.

I suppose if I had got a permanent public service position as a manager with a director who was a skilled manager of people … who was prepared to induct me, give me some time, I might have stayed. Yes, I might have stayed in a job that I was suited for … But it is a complex place, this labyrinth of rules and so on.

W2 felt that informed feedback was vital for any chief executive with a genuine desire for self improvement and, linked to that, explained the importance of executive support for women at the top and having the power to appoint a supportive executive team.

… on the boards that I’m on, I’ve watched the chief executive and I’ve thought, “Now who’s actually going to give feedback to that person?” Since then, very consciously, as a board member, [I have] felt that on occasions I was able to [but] even then it is only spasmodic. It’s not that daily or weekly ability to be absorbing feedback about your performance and getting satisfaction from it, or making adjustments, or realising that you’re not coming up to scratch in this dimension and doing something about it.
If you chose your own executive team, you’d expect them to give you those cues … they need to be able to give feedback to the leader too, and then you can I think continue to fine-tune your behaviour, and that’s where satisfaction comes … [but] it’s really hard to do that.

W8 suggested managers better able to recognise the diversity of talent available in the organisation. She referred to the relational management style that was the preferred style of so many women in this thesis:

It’s really … getting to know the individuals and what they can offer, so somehow tapping into that. And that obviously would help in terms of promotions … because people would know what you have to offer in a much better, broader way. It’s very hard in a big structure to do that. I mean I don’t think even a lot of schools do it well either, where individual classroom teachers might have a whole bag of talents and experience that they bring with them that the school never taps into and never knows about. It’s a rare school that does. So it all comes back to management style. I guess it comes back to that more open management style – listening and talking – many more consultative forums somehow …

W13 recommended taking some risks with people who do things differently – seeking out talent, not driving it away:

Recognise outstanding performance, reward excellence – don’t be threatened by people who think differently. Make that talent work for the organisation; don’t drive it away. Value commitment and passion and new thinking. Those who support mediocrity to maintain the status quo should be recognised for their controlling behaviour and eliminated from senior positions.

W14 also talked about eliminating those who refuse to grow and change. She talked about ‘real’ performance management, individual career plans, circles rather than hierarchical ladders, experience outside education, community links, marketing schools and actively supporting women:

Well they could have appointed me to a position that I had acted in for two years. They could have … real performance management … We could have had a real discussion about what other things I would like to do. [For example] for staff development here [new workplace] we work out an individual plan with each person – most of it is to be related to a career with us but there are some things that they may need for later on – we invest in that as well because we know that that loyalty will pay off … Something like that would have gone a long way.

What else could they have done? I think maybe … they should have a few sacrificial lambs where people [some of the men there] are relieved of their duties or given another position, until they can at least grow or go and do a women’s studies course or something … to have some understandings. Some of the women will tell you that for a while there they wondered if sexual harassment was a requirement for promotion.
What else do we need to do? I think we need to change this hierarchical thing. Basically you don’t need to break down the bureaucracy in its leadership positions but you need to kind of make them circles rather than ladders … the Norwegians and others have done this quite incredibly well. If I had a choice I’d have a good mix of people who had industry experience … people who have actually [had other experiences] … mix up that bit where they never really left school, they started when they were six and they go through to teachers’ college. They never leave and they never do anything else. That’s just got to stop. That is bad for students and it’s bad in the sociology of the development of leadership personalities – they need to do a lot of other things.

We need … a determination that this organisation is going to allow for development of all of its employees. [To quote] Richardo Semler [1993] who wrote *Maverick*, “I’m the head of this company and any woman who complains to me … I will take action.” So that strong endorsement of, “I’m going to side with the women, I’m going to call it in favour of the women.”

What do the men do? They’re preparing all the way … they not only want promotion, they want it more than anything else [speaker emphasis]. So that kind of pitches the motivation. I’m inclined to say, “Well you take it then!” … So, one, we need to describe it, we need to try to understand it more, and two, we need to get a totally different male profile.

In her consulting work since she has left, W4 has come to recognise two key areas that need changing. Again highlighting talent, she talked about tapping into the passions of talented people and developing rather than destroying them:

I think if we can begin to shift people’s thinking – just to challenge the culture … There are two things that could be done, given that there is definitely a boys’ club, and there are things that are very hard for women to achieve in that organisation.

One, we need to use people’s passions – in the main teachers are passionate people. Instead of destroying the passion, use it! Secondly … I think that we need a very consistent development program, particularly for women, who are excluded from masculine networks.

We live in a time of incredible change yet the wheels [in the Department] turn too slowly. There are people in central office without vision; and the people who hold the vision and the passion are not the people who are valued in that organisation … The development I am talking about would provide support for passionate people – how to use the passion, channel the passion, how to mediate the passion with the reality. Passionate people need a supportive community in which to practise speaking to an audience, speaking in context – communicating in a way that ‘turns on’ the listeners and recognises their concerns. Because women are excluded from the networks, they don’t get to know the language … they need to develop the strategies: how to survive, how to communicate and how to do well in the culture. These are skills that can be learned – if the passion is there, we can teach the skills to help direct that passion.

She emphasised that improving communication within the culture was a responsibility for men as well as women. Although many women had the management skills so often espoused in the management literature, W4 despairied that the men in charge would ever acknowledge that talent if it meant sharing power:
Communication should be both ways – there is a lack of understanding of the differences in the socialisation of men and women – men need to learn these things [relational management skills] but with some men it is very difficult. Why would you want to give up power? Trying to get the boys to change is futile; we can’t change other people. All of the management literature says that the management skills so many women have are the way of the future … but I think that is ten years away.

W4’s understanding of the attributes of a good leader – developing good interpersonal relationships, identifying the appropriate people for the job, having vision and passion, and engaging others in that vision – illuminated the management values that the women participating in my research espoused and practised. A willingness to keep learning and growing has supported them through the tough times and allowed them to move on, despite the risks. W4’s recommendation for other women was “to know and trust yourself”, reflecting the theme of self-knowledge that winds its way through this thesis.

Reflection

Reflecting on their decisions to leave, all of the women in this study viewed moving on in a positive light. They talked about the risks involved in stepping out in new directions and the advantages of more flexible, inclusive and supportive working environments. Most were tired of ‘the procession’ (Woolf cited in Morley, 2003) and questioned where it was all leading. As ‘escapees’ from a workplace where their talents were no longer valued, approximately half had set up their own small businesses or consultancies. Others had moved into middle, senior or executive management positions in other companies or organisations, seeking a closer alignment of values and renewed leadership opportunities in more supportive environments. Two senior women (both CEOs) viewed their move as part of their career progression rather than as motivated by any sense of dissatisfaction.

The interviewees acknowledged the support they had received from female networks, role models and mentors, many of whom were other women in the research study. In broadening the concept of mentoring from the traditional expectation that a mentor will be senior in rank to the mentee (Kram and Noe, both cited in Cleveland et al., 2000) to include women at less senior levels in the organisation (described by W6 and W3 as surrogate mentors or fellow travellers in a male world), at least two woman were able to overcome the isolation often experienced by the lone woman on senior executive. The idea of multiple mentors (Scott & McInerney, 1999), a series of mentors, peer mentors, a network of supporters or executive coaching was raised by a number of the interviewees.
and challenges the traditional expectation that a single mentor will take responsibility for the mentoring relationship. Identifying several mentors who can offer a broad range of skills, knowledge, information, support and perspectives can be advantageous in terms of work and personal development (Scott & McInerney, 1999).

Using networks outside the organisation, some women sought ways to judge themselves and their effectiveness, especially when their work in social justice areas was devalued within the hierarchy (Marshall, 1995b). The value of a male mentor, or sponsor, as a means of opening doors in a culture where women were viewed as outsiders was significant for some women. Most of these men were also managers who valued people and therefore stood out from the more traditional managers in their vision. Significantly, the reciprocal nature of mentoring relationships was pointed out by a number of the interviewees who realised that a mentor can learn from a talented mentee, especially if the mentee (who may have little access to positional power) has many other life experiences to draw upon. This aspect of mentoring often remains hidden, to the advantage of many male mentors, rather than being acknowledged and the competencies identified.

All felt that significant changes would have been necessary to keep them working in the central bureaucracy of the Education Department. Some felt that demolishing the structure and starting from scratch would be the only possible way forward. Eliminating the ‘dinosaurs’ was a recurring theme – remove the old guard – those men who refused to change, who used positional power and boys’ club tactics to maintain control.

The final chapter describes the kind of men and women who should replace the old guard. It suggests the way forward in terms of the attributes of senior managers needed to lead the Education Department and the kind of organisational culture that would be more supportive of talented women. It concludes that innovative individuals who are prepared to risk doing leadership differently – operating in an inclusive managerial style that welcomes difference and change – can rock the boat, creating waves in the sea of highly structured, patriarchal bureaucracy.
Rocking the boat:
Thinking, resisting and moving forward

Resistance cannot simply defeat, overturn or suddenly transform disciplinary power ... Resistance can, however, resituate the problematic of power abuse. That is, resistance weakens processes of victimisation, and generates personal and political empowerment through acts of naming violations and refusing to collaborate with oppressors. Feminist resistance, in particular, begins with the body’s refusal to be subordinated, an instinctual withdrawal from the patriarchal forces to which it is often violently subjected. Resistance is formed on the most visceral, personal level, and the compelling ‘No!’ which it incites is a political act.

— Faith (1994)

We also need to remember that there is a joy in struggle ... the struggle to be critically conscious can be that movement which takes you to another level, that lifts you up, that makes you feel better. You feel good, you feel your life has meaning and purpose.

— hooks (1991)

The theme of ‘rocking the boat’ emerges strongly from the stories of 21 highly capable women who voluntarily left employment in a large education bureaucracy over a ten-year period. The women created waves, not in a pejorative sense, but through outstanding performance, doing things differently, and in their desire to change a work environment shaped by men and for men. In a variety of ways the corporate culture is questioned and challenged as issues of power and advantage, competence, ethics and leadership styles are revealed in the interview transcripts. The women who left talked of closed doors, brick walls, marginalisation, sidelining, ‘selective’ job opportunities, men being ‘looked after’, the rules of bureaucracy and the male defined culture of central office. They named behaviours and identified games that worked against women and advantaged men. Despite being able to identify specific elements of the culture that supported a masculinist ethos and resisted diversity, they inevitably felt that the place would never change (Peters, 2003).

Their reasons for leaving centred on being treated differently; feeling isolated, marginalised and excluded (in some cases bullied); being bypassed for promotion (despite demonstrated high performance); having a different sense of professionalism, ethics and
good management; and not feeling supported in the corporate environment. Most felt that their values and ideals for educational leadership clashed with those of the dominant culture. They questioned the masculinist politics of careerism and managerialism which seemed to override educational ideals and detract from actually getting the work done. Many of the women found themselves sidelined in jobs outside the main areas of influence in the organisation, which raised questions about the valuing of work associated with the feminine. This marginalisation led to exclusion from significant decision-making processes and to energy being spent on resisting the political games. Others missed out on promotions and believed that expertise, experience and outstanding performance could count for little in the face of boys’ club politics designed to reward mediocrity and preserve the status quo. In summary, this thesis is a feminist account of the lived experiences of women in leadership, most of whom have questioned a masculinist work environment, decided to move on, and in the process reflected on those experiences. It has been about listening to their stories.

Through the text I have tried to “open issues and debate, to explore, and to share the complexities of making sense of [the] material with you as reader” (Marshall, 1995b, p. 317). Obviously my position as feminist researcher and as one of the participants influenced my interpretation of the data. My contextual relationship to the participants and my position as a former Education Department employee (a woman who left), located at the lower bureaucratic levels of leadership, has meant that my views directly influence the thesis. And as researcher my bias necessarily permeates the thesis. However, my direct voice in the stories is but one voice in a group of twenty-one. It is in my interpretation of those stories that I have tried to be reflexive — looking for tensions, ambiguities and contradictions, as well as for links and themes, while reflecting on my own processes.

There are many other aspects of this research that could be investigated. For instance, which features had an influence on the confidence, resilience and courage of these women, whether socio-economic status (advantage/disadvantage), cultural background,

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40 There were two exceptions: these women had both held CEO positions and did not express dissatisfaction.

41 This feminist analysis does not attempt to speak for all women and cannot “assume a commonality of women’s interests, ignoring the diversity which exists between groups of women” (Wilkinson, 2001, p. 1). It is an interpretation of the experiences of a particular group of women, at a particular time, in a particular context.
the presence of early role models, parental characteristics (Yewchuk & Schlosser, 1995), personality characteristics, evidence of gifts and talents (Yewchuk & Chatterton, 1989; Quek, 1995), voracious reading, time alone (Kerr, 1994) or feminist networks? The issues of the ‘colluded self’ (Gordon, 1991; Casey, 1995; Pringle 2003) and ‘false consciousness’ (Halford & Leonard, 2001; Pringle 2003) could be explored further, investigating to what extent women deny the influence of power and gender or use/subvert/ hide their femininity and to what extent men exploit the male image of dominance and power.42 To what extent is ‘having to be better than a man’ contributing to the culture of overwork?43 Are there significant differences between the women who stayed and those who chose to leave?44 And further comparative work could be carried out on both men and women who choose to leave. While Stuart & Barrera (1996) have conducted research on senior men and women who left the public sector (finding that organisational culture featured strongly in the women’s decisions to leave) it is not known to what extent the men represented minority groups, either by race, or sexual preference.

Another question relates to age and gender, an often volatile mix, affecting women to a greater extent than men and bounded by stereotypical perceptions of ideal womanhood. Women are perceived as either too old or too young for leadership and women at different stages in their careers experience the dominant culture and their place in it (or outside it) differently. Whilst this thesis touches on the complexities of age, gender and career, there is ample scope for further research into these intersecting factors.

In concluding this thesis I want to show how my research has the potential for new knowledge to influence the management practices of education bureaucracies – particularly state education departments in Australia – to develop more inclusive work


43 In asking this question I do not intend to evoke the ‘blame the women’ argument but to raise further questions linked to surveillance, trust, values, ‘adding value’, the ‘bottom line’, etc.

44 Would the stories have been different if I had interviewed women who were still there? One woman still in the Department who had been accelerated to a senior management position reported the ongoing need to remain “quite hardened and intransigent” or be squashed. She believed there was no honeymoon period for women and that even the smallest perception of error or misjudgement could do permanent damage to their careers. Fitting into the system did not come easily even to those who ostensibly succeeded … and as we have seen less easily to those who resisted being subsumed by the dominant culture.
cultures. In this chapter I explore the possibilities for change: ideas offered by the women themselves and ideas that emerged as themes in this thesis. Throughout the thesis I have linked these themes to the wider literature on women, gender and organisations. Now I want to end by outlining some ideas for a workplace more supportive of diversity and more people centred in its management practices.

Important implications of this study are that the leaders and managers of educational institutions need to interrogate deeply ingrained ideologies, ‘the way we do things around here’ (Toffler, 1986), which inform work practices and advantage the dominant males who hold positions of power and influence, thus limiting diversity and change. In the process of maintaining and protecting hegemonic power relationships, a peak managerial ethos (Currie et al., 2002) squeezes out diversity: those who are different may attempt to fit in but many eventually seek more supportive environments in which to work.

Looking through glass ceilings and brick walls: A view to escalators and executive elevators

The glass ceiling metaphor has been expanded to include glass walls, sticky floors, greasy poles and sticky cobwebs (Still, 1995 citing various authors) in a colourful description of gender discrimination and resistance to women’s entry to, and progression through, management ranks. In essence, feminist researchers have looked from every angle at the barriers: a series of ‘invisible’ barriers that limit women’s progression at each step in the management hierarchy (Hede cited in Still, 1995), effectively blocking the advancement of all but a few women to positions of power in organisations. The glass ceiling metaphor recognises that there is something which acts against women as a group yet, by definition, remains abstract and invisible. This abstraction can serve to focus the gaze solely on women, leaving its agency unspoken and unacknowledged (Ramsay, 1995). The challenge is to redirect the focus – away from women – on to men, the particular men who need to interrogate their dominant position, their own privileged status and their hegemony.

It is time to turn the spotlight from the glass ceiling, and the resultant career roadblocks for women, to identifying the processes that accelerate men through the management ranks. The stories in this thesis have identified many of the overt and covert (micropolitical) games that men (and some women) play in an effort to gain and retain their power. Other researchers (e.g. Cockburn, 1991, Burton, 1991; Eveline, 1994,
Blackmore (1999) have highlighted the advantage for most men in organisations governed by a dominant masculinist ideology. This thesis interrogates that advantage, the advantage that allows men with weaker performance records to gain promotion under the guise of merit. Climbing the steps of the hierarchical ladder is easier for men who ride the *escalator* or, for the privileged few, the *executive elevator*.

Definitions of merit are related to power: the power to define merit, to select and to reject. As Paige Porter (1995) says, “Gendered management is never seen as gendered because it is ‘gendered’ by the sex that has no gender: the generic human being, the male” (p. 241). At an organisational level this normalisation generally goes unnoticed. “Nevertheless”, says Porter, “at the level of individual women and their organisations, there is additional research that suggests that many women are not passive victims of ‘the system’” (p. 241). Indeed, the women in this thesis have amply demonstrated that they are not passive victims; neither will they accept discriminatory treatment. They have described many instances of self-serving practices, gender discrimination and even dishonesty in an attempt to redress the skewed dynamics of gender politics. They have taken action – moved on – they have learned and reflected, and they have told their stories. They have made a difference. However, the process of making the manipulation of power transparent carries with it the cost of ‘speaking out’. Such a challenge to assumed authority can invoke backlash, and backlash to resistance is often damaging when those in power deny their own powerful status (French, 1985), blaming ‘the victims’, casting women as the problem.

### The silence and the fear

Many women (and most men) are reluctant to raise ‘women’s issues’ because they fear harming their reputations and career prospects. When the penalty for speaking out or rocking the boat is the subtle but career destroying process of isolation and marginalisation, few women, and even fewer men, will want to join the chorus. “People with alternative values can be attacked, experience backlash and be ejected from organisations” (Marshall, 1995, p. 21). The traditional acceptance of the male voice, the male as leader, can lead to shock waves when a woman speaks out. Accusations of perpetuating the male-female divide can silence those who identify the micropolitical processes at work in an organisation in which the male-female binary operates at all levels. However these accusations can be challenged by reading the stories of the women.
in this thesis who come through as individuals, well and truly outside the male-female binary and certainly beyond the normative constructions of women.

The challenge to the status quo that inevitably arises out of resistance from the margins may create fear in those who are comfortable with ‘the way we do things around here’ and who fear loss of power and privilege. And fear escalates for men in power when a woman is obviously competent, prepared to question, and, even more threatening, riding on a wave of success. This success is linked to personal and professional growth-in-connection (Miller, 1976), and managing in ways that challenge stereotypically masculine assumptions of efficiency and effectiveness (Fletcher, 1999).

The silence arises from denial: denial that there is a problem for women or a belief that, if there is a problem, it is women who need to change so as to adapt to the existing rules of the game (Sinclair, 1998). But silence can also be used as a strategy to maintain power. “Dominant discourses permit and legitimate certain vocabularies and values while marginalising or silencing others” (Morrell, 2003, p. 44). The prohibition and policing of feminist discourses is advantageous to members, and aspiring members, of the dominant group, especially in times of uncertainty and restructuring when hidden biases resurface. Subtle but powerful discriminatory attitudes, simmering just below the surface can reemerge (Blackmore, 1999).

“[T]he underlying cause for the existence of the glass ceiling is the perception of many white males that they as a group are losing – losing competitive advantage, losing control and losing opportunity as a direct consequence of inclusion of women and minorities” (Renee Redwood, Executive Director of the US Glass Ceiling Commission, 1996). As Sinclair (1998) points out, “the perception that there is no systemic discrimination against women signals an underlying fear of loss of power and privilege. It justifies maintaining the status quo and resisting change initiatives” (135-136). Many of the women in my sample found that men in positions of power and influence often resisted women with strong leadership capabilities. The subtlety of this resistance can have the effect of denying gender inequalities.

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45 Although women have gained some access to power seats within some institutions “the gains come slowly and are impeded at every step by the conscious will and the unconscious fears of [most] men” (French, 1994, p. 32).
Fear also creates silence. Although there are women who do speak out, resisting invisibility and silencing\(^\text{46}\) (as have many of the women in my thesis), speaking out is a difficult and often lonely path to justice. Deconstructing the glass ceiling in terms of the everyday (micropolitical) experiences of women in, and aspiring to, leadership positions is an essential part of expressing the lived realities of women’s lives. It can build strength through dealing with adversity.\(^\text{47}\) It is also exhausting. Eventually the demands on energy and time lead many to seek a different path, to find a more supportive work environment. However, when women leave and develop their own companies and consultancies, they often rely on their former networks for attracting work and therefore cannot afford to compromise their chances.\(^\text{48}\) There is life after ‘the Department’ but a good working relationship with the biggest employer in the state is generally useful!

Women who challenge the status quo have learnt to be resilient (Noble, 1996) and to survive under enormous pressure; survive not only the struggle to claim a place in the leadership of organisations, but to survive huge workloads in a climate where women have to work harder than men to prove their worth. As shown in this thesis, some women resist performance measures based on rationalist models of accountability and seek to develop broader definitions of good performance. So perhaps we should stop trying to prove ourselves just one more time, resist the ‘critical surveillance’ (Eveline, 2004), insist on an equal sharing of workloads at home and at work, slow down, leave time and energy to think … to reflect … to rock the boat. Metaphors of rocking the boat, rocking the cradle, rocking with laughter (using humour as a resistance strategy), creating gentle ripples (evolution) or tidal waves (revolution) can offer a diversity of responses to changing cultures infused with hegemonic values.

\(^\text{46}\) Faith (1994) describes feminism as resistance to invisibility and silencing.

\(^\text{47}\) Marshall (1995a, 1995b) talks about the difficulties for women in organisations when their rights to inclusion are often in doubt and when their power and influence is often compromised. She suggests that one strategy for dealing with this is to live with ‘aware and chosen marginality’.

\(^\text{48}\) A striking feature of the stories as revealed in this thesis is the sense of professionalism (see Blackmore & Sachs, 2000 for a discussion of the changing nature of professionalism) that emerges – women responding reflexively, with dignity and fairness, never allowing their resistance to descend to the level of aggression so often displayed in the enactment of discriminatory practices. Acknowledgment of this professionalism (demonstrated repeatedly throughout the thesis) can assist in countering accusations of female aggression, paranoia and over sensitivity, allegations which are rarely directed at a man.
The power of resistance: Outstanding women rocking the boat

The unique issues that women in leadership encounter in their professional lives are linked to both their gender and their competence. As women of high potential they are more likely to aspire to positions in management, to seek leadership roles in areas where men still dominate and are generally regarded as more competent. The women in this thesis all wanted to make a difference for education. Most questioned gender politics and resisted and disrupted managerialist practices, often redefining the power of leadership through inclusive and relational (Fletcher, 1999) management styles. They were prepared to take risks in ‘rocking the boat’ by acting on their values, resisting rather than joining the masculinist culture. They were prepared to move on to work environments more in alignment with their leadership styles and values.

The combined strength of these capable women is tangible. They are all highly qualified and experienced, presenting confidently as leaders and managers, and know what they want from the work environment. Yet they are also reflexive – sensitive to the complexity, ambiguity and multiplicity of discourses surrounding women, gender and leadership. Through their stories and their questionnaire responses, they have demonstrated many of the attributes frequently cited as necessary for effective leadership: integrity, flexibility, creativity, empathy, verbal fluency, a sense of humour, advanced levels of moral reasoning and the ability to take risks (Hill & Ragland, 1995). There is ample evidence of reflective, analytical and intuitive thinking. They are strong leaders and managers who have had the courage to leave and have clearly articulated their reasons for doing so. They have moved on yet have taken the time and energy to tell their stories in the hope of influencing change by highlighting a culture which inextricably connects masculinity to “conceptions of executive eligibility, success and performance” (Sinclair, 1995, p.39).

Most of the woman in this research study left the Education Department after being either sidelined or bypassed for promotion. It was not only missing out on the job that mattered, it was a sense that justice had not been served. Despite working/acting in a position for two or three years (or more) and demonstrating outstanding performance, many saw the jobs they aspired to going to men whose management credentials they did not admire. A male (or, in some cases, a female) with a ‘tougher’ management style (infused with the rationalist imperative) was often selected in favour of a female with a more democratic and inclusive management style. There seemed to be little value placed on expertise
(apart from particular forms of technical expertise) and on performance in terms of actually achieving quality outcomes.\(^{49}\) Often the final ‘nail in the coffin’ was a perception of games being played and a lack of honesty in the job selection process.

Driven by a growing awareness of the micropolitical processes that marginalised and excluded women, many questioned the games and actively resisted inequitable treatment. And they eventually left. Perhaps, as suggested by Faith, (1994) their resistance generated “personal and political empowerment through acts of naming violations and refusing to collaborate with oppressors” (p. 39). As both the researcher listening to these stories and as a participant in the research, I felt the power of resistance – the visceral and political “No!” (Faith, 1994) that preceded leaving; the withdrawal from the culture; and the refusal to be subordinated. But there were also tensions and contradictions. I noted that the women’s identities could get caught up in the insatiably demanding culture – at times they became perpetrators, working long and demanding hours, part of the addictive and greedy system. In addition, one subgroup of the sample, comprising the two most senior women (both CEOs), revealed different responses to the corporate culture. One CEO was more pragmatic, the other more in tune with rationalist agendas; both (healthily!) challenging my feminist/glass ceiling interpretation of events. The CEO observations raise further questions. For example, did their comparative power within the system give them a stronger investment in the cultural status quo? What was going on between these women and the interviewer that encouraged them to be more guarded and defensive in their responses?

### Organisational culture: A matter of values / Values that matter

The issue of what is valued is a recurring theme. And the question of what constitutes merit is central to the thesis. “[M]ale cultural hegemony, in replicating itself, perpetuates structures and practices that are insular and designed to primarily benefit a narrow group of men in senior management” (Bagihole & White, 2003). This peak managerialist culture (Currie et al., 2002) is supported by deeply ingrained beliefs related to the ideal leader (Sinclair, 1998), but relies on formal assessment procedures to produce the illusion

\(^{49}\) Credit for actually ‘getting the work done’ can be minimised whereas ‘talking about it’ can be maximised in a culture that conflates ‘attention to detail’ with the feminine, and ‘the big picture’ with the masculine. The view that attending to detail precludes an eye to the big picture was challenged by women in this thesis who saw attention to detail as necessary to the achievement of quality outcomes, avoidance of error, and calculated risk taking (see Alissa Camplin, World No 1 aerial skier 2003 & 2004 reported in Yallop, 2004).
of equitable treatment. Perceptions of merit influence job selection processes, and when those processes are controlled largely by men in power, women and other minorities come off second best. The rhetoric of a collaborative, connected workplace and world is not matched by a corresponding valuing (or even recognition) of these behaviours when they happen (Fletcher, 1999).

The current climate of economic rationalist and managerialist thinking, with its emphasis on reducing educational expenditure; finance and outcomes; control from the center; and accountability measures, leads men to clamour for jobs in the core business of finance and policy. The school and curriculum context in which women are assuming leadership roles is, in effect, a new form of powerlessness (Limerick & Lingard, 1995). The men get on with the core business while the business of effective people management, including equity issues, is left to women, further distancing them from the seat of power. In addition, discourses of rationality undermine equity by artificially excluding compassion and emotion from decision-making processes (Putnam & Mumby, 1993).

Management texts today place great emphasis on ethics (Drucker, 1981; Covey, 1989; Senge, 1990; Fullen & Hargreaves, 1992; Fullan, 1999; Gryskiewicz, 1999), yet there is a gap between the rhetoric and the action. Enthusiastic talk of organisational change is often accompanied by more limited achievements. Self-promotion and pleasing the boss get rewarded and working connectively and inclusively to make a difference for education is undervalued. Dedication and passion are misused to the advantage of those in power. Significantly, many of these women had a social justice orientation. It is not surprising therefore to find that equity areas, dominated by women, were perceived as peripheral to the core function of the organisation. Education policies espouse ethics, change and diversity but often the reality is more of the same, a perpetuation of ‘how it is done around here’.

When asked what could have enticed them to stay, all but one research participant suggested radical changes linked to the culture of the workplace. Many felt that the bureaucracy was so huge and so steeped in traditionalism, conservatism, and boys’ club

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politics, that to demolish the whole structure (blow it out of the water!) and start again was the only way to go. Most felt that their desire to make a genuine difference for education – to keep close links with schools and children – became submerged in careerist politics and hegemonic values.

Many recognised profeminist men, men they worked well with, men they admired, who held similar values and who demonstrated both interpersonal and intrapersonal skills and abilities. Perhaps a way forward is through forming alliances with profeminist men, men who also question dominant cultural values and may have experienced a sense of powerlessness, especially within the context of economic rationalisation (Wallace, 2002, citing Kimmel, 1998). To work together effectively we need men who have the ability to learn through reflexive processes, men who are prepared to speak out, and men who have the courage to challenge dominant values and taken for granted behavioural norms. Wallace echoes the thoughts of many feminists when she asks, “How is it possible … to carry on a conversation that does not degenerate into a simplistic ‘But what about the men?’ list of winners and losers?” (Wallace, 2002, p. 92).

A questioning of excessive time commitment to work – a singular focus to the exclusion of a more developed self – emerged as another theme for change. Almost half of the women in my study did not have children and of the women with children most were able to balance family and career because their children were in their teen years and beyond. However, this did not mean that they approved of a workplace culture that failed to recognise that there is life outside paid work. Most recognised the ‘balancing act’ performed disproportionately by women. Some talked about creativity suffering in an environment that allowed little time for reflective thought, self-development and self-reflection. Others talked about the need to actively plan time for physical exercise in a working life that could be all consuming. Overwork and excessive time pressures can create stress, anxiety (Jones, 2004), ill health and a dramatic downturn in confidence, efficiency and innovation potential (Kellogg, 2002).

However, discourses that value hard work and long hours have gained increasing prominence in the wider culture (Franzway, 2001) in the last decade, perhaps in response to a culture of fear: fear of unemployment, or fear of being overtaken in the race to bigger and better jobs. In market-driven workplaces (including all sectors of education) subject to new corporate forms of management (Payne, 2004), the tangible markers of
commitment – a twenty-four hours, seven-days-a-week commitment – are intensified by a culture of masculine heroics where masculinity is displayed through physically strenuous work hours (Cockburn, 1991; Franzway, 2001). The expectation of long and inflexible work hours is problematic for women who are expected to take on a disproportionate responsibility for domestic work and family care.\textsuperscript{51} It is only by questioning the traditional division of labour in the home, by demanding that men take equal responsibility for domestic work and childcare, that we can hope to moderate such excessive work practices. This shifts the focus from women, as life balance becomes a priority for a community that can no longer rely on ‘wifework’ (Maushart, 2001) to support organisational dysfunction. Men too, as many are increasingly aware, will benefit from more time for family, community and life outside paid work.

Traditionally many women teachers have accepted social conventions about family and male/female responsibilities (Barrera et al., 1999) but the women in this thesis prioritised their leadership roles (or so it seemed, at the time of interview) and worked accordingly. They were not constrained by traditional expectations. Some achieved reasonable life balance; others were working extensive hours (thus perpetuating the culture of overwork) perhaps in an effort to prove their worth as females inhabiting masculine territory or simply to get the work done, raising further questions about women’s compliance and collusion (as well as resistance) in masculinist cultures.

**Changing the culture**

Cultural change within the Education Department is both desirable and possible, “recognising that such change will require a long term investment of resources, time and commitment” (Barrera et al., 1999, p. 9). It will also require genuine support from the top, regular monitoring of information on gender and promotion, improvements to selection processes and selection criteria (including the composition and training of panels and the introduction of field checks to substantiate performance claims), equal access to appropriate development opportunities (including short-term acting positions and aspirant programs), the valuing of disparate career experiences, the promotion of competencies linked to collaborative [and relational] management styles, and formal induction programs (Barrera et al., 1999). De-emphasising the ‘art’ of impression management (Peters, 2002) and re-emphasising ‘mutuality’ and ‘fluid expertise’

\textsuperscript{51} Can also be problematic for men with primary care responsibilities.
(Fletcher, 1999) can be fostered through insisting on confidential peer and subordinate referees in addition to the more traditional referees senior in status to the applicant.

Being treated differently as the gendered ‘other’, rather than being appreciated as competent leaders and managers with a range of different approaches and different communication styles, is a concern for many of the women in my thesis. Their suggestions for change were linked to the dominant culture of the organisation. Foremost in their recommendations were ideas for more equitable job selection processes that recognised a full range of talents and abilities; managers who were willing to give and receive honest feedback on performance; the valuing of a diverse range of management styles (including styles that demonstrate relational management skills); the valuing of ideas and continuous learning; an acceptance of difference; a focus on education (as opposed to managerialist and careerist politics); and more flexible working conditions to promote life balance. In summary, to encourage the development and retention of talented individuals, “We need managers who give help, support, guidance, encouragement, follow-up and feedback” (W9); managers who value a diverse and inclusive workplace that recognises and rewards talented individuals, regardless of gender or cultural difference; managers who realise that supporting growth in others can be a mutually rewarding process. We need not only women but men who are willing to learn, change and grow. Men who are able to reflect on their management practices, interrogate their own masculinity (Sinclair, 2000; Collinson & Hearn, 1996) and, in doing so, look at themselves.

Managing with care, like housework, is often invisible: invisible to those who don’t do it and undervalued by those who haven’t developed the skills for doing it. As I interviewed these women in leadership and management, I felt the frustrations many were conveying from working within a dominant culture that espoused good people management but did not value it in action. The invisibility of managing with care means that the time it takes is not factored into job descriptions. Rather than being seen as an intentional strategy to enhance organisational effectiveness, the practice of managing with care is commonly constructed as “a tendency to focus on minutiae, to exhibit an ‘excessive devotion to duty’ and an inability to prioritise and see the big picture” (Fletcher, 1995, p.451 citing Harragan, 1977 and Hennig & Jardim, 1978). Alternatively, it is seen as ‘wives’ work’ (Huff, 1990), further diminishing its value. Team members turn to managers who listen, who care, and who are sensitive to relational issues, arising both in and out of the
workplace. Relational issues impact on work performance. Support for the social, emotional and cognitive development of workers is vital to good performance and requires perceptive, sensitive and empathetic managers who are open to genuine debate and a diversity of approaches to thinking, learning and feeling at work.

Many of these suggestions for change are amplified in Fletcher’s work (Fletcher, 1999; Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000). She suggests that we need to use a *language of competence* to name relational behaviours, making the attributes visible and claiming recognition of their effectiveness. At the same time, she advocates drawing attention to normalised organisational behaviour that is ineffective, pointing out the potential costs and negative consequences of such behaviour. She lists ‘playing devil’s advocate’ (an assumption of reaching the truth through conflict), ‘self-promotion’ (for example, claiming individual credit for team efforts) and ‘never saying no’ (to career opportunities) as taken for granted behaviours that are often counterproductive, particularly for women. In one example, Fletcher talks about the negative career consequences for women who say yes to relational work, pointing out the likelihood that their efforts will go unrecognised, in contrast to men who are offered work that attracts financial rewards and builds career capital. She quotes Deborah Kolb (Kolb & Williams cited in Fletcher, 1999) who describes a negotiation strategy to ensure that relational work is recognised for the value it adds to the organisation. She describes this strategy as ‘always say yes’ to opportunities but at the same time attach conditions that make aspects of the ‘disappearing dynamic’ visible, leaving it up to the other party to meet the conditions, negotiate a compromise, or withdraw the offer. This means making visible taken for granted organisational norms, and making visible alternative and effective ways of working.

Policies are only of value if they can be implemented. People change when they are actively involved in change, when there is genuine support from the top, when their ideas and opinions are respected, when there is a valid reason for change, and when there is a balance between valuing good ideas from the past and embracing new ideas for the future. Insights into current problems can be the key to the future. Honestly evaluating performance and rewarding outstanding performance helps attract and retain talented individuals who build a corporate history. Teamwork means recognising, valuing, and developing the talents of the team – the whole team – including individuals who think

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52 See Chapter 2 for an explanation of Fletcher’s (1995, 1999) research into the ‘disappearing dynamic’ that renders relational work invisible in most organisations.
differently and who might question long established and firmly entrenched practices. Our future prosperity depends on developing the full range of intellectual and creative resources of all the population (Edgar, 2000; Spender, 2000), not just the privileged few.

The way forward

Rocking the boat is essential for change. Healthy debate; respect for ideas; questioning and challenging positional power; resisting inequitable practices and hollow rhetoric; and recognising diversity in leadership make for healthy organisations. Organisational transformation (a growing and learning organisation) is possible when managers are prepared to change, to recognise and value divergent thinking, to open the organisation to new and different members, to learn from others regardless of positional power, to take risks, to do things differently. Yet “[o]ften our fear stops us from encouraging such openness to new connections … We restrict freedom to assert control. We choose control over effectiveness” (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996, p. 102).

Speaking out is easier when there is a chorus of voices. What is needed is a critical mass of voices – voices of resistance – the feminist and pro-feminist voices of those who are prepared to question and challenge dominant practices.\(^\text{53}\) By speaking out, or acting differently, we can create (and recreate) new norms which challenge existing power structures and, in turn, stress mutuality, responsibility and equality. We can raise awareness through education – deconstructing advantage and privilege, investigating the complexities of gender (the multifaceted ways of being male and female) and shifting the emphasis from ‘fix the women’ solutions to change – working with the growing community of women and men who question inequality (gender, race, age, ability), power and dominance, and look towards new ways of being (Peters, 2003).

Moving forward means sharing power and it means acknowledging and building on work that has gone before. The concepts of mutuality, growth-in-connection and fluid expertise (Fletcher, 1999) can be more fully understood when the talents of others are recognised and valued. People feel valued when their ideas are acknowledged, when their work is acknowledged. A cooperative environment is built on mutual respect.

\(^\text{53}\) Increasing the numbers of women in organisations does not, in itself, change the nature of the organisation (Gordon, 1991) because we cannot assume that all women managers “are necessarily gender sensitive or politically committed to representing women’s interests” (Morley, 2003, p. 16 citing Luke).
To maximise the value of the full workforce, organisations must capitalise on the talents of women through a comprehensive and inclusive problem-solving approach (Catalyst cited in Oakley, 2000). Such an approach necessitates a genuine commitment by senior management to understanding gendered practices – the micropolitical power games that are played out in organisations (Morley, 1999) – and the effect of dominant discourses on perceptions and values. One of the most obvious effects is linked to the ‘disappearing dynamic’ associated with relational practice (Fletcher, 1999). “While both men and women may believe in the value of relational practice and have the skills to enact it, only women, by virtue of their subject position as women, are expected to work this way” (Fletcher, 1999, p. 118). In other words, the disappearing dynamic means that relational work is neither valued nor seen as a competent management practice. “Indeed, the twists and turns of this dynamic help us to see the inner workings of the glass ceiling quite vividly” (Fletcher, 1999, p. 118).

The voices of women questioning traditional workplace values are revealed in this thesis – raising further questions – perhaps striking a chord with others who ask, “Do we want to conform to the existing rules of the game, play it safe, tread carefully? Or do we want to be heard?” Issues of power and difference continue to surface and reveal a need for a growth in understanding of the complexity of gender relations and the need to question and disrupt peak masculinist cultures. But the whole responsibility for change cannot be placed on the shoulders of women. Training to raise awareness of intersections of gender, power and leadership must also target men, and performance management processes must measure the effects of such training (Peters, 2002). Establishing informal networks of marginalised workers within the organisation is perhaps another way of achieving change. There is power in working with others committed to equity and inclusive practices, and power in overcoming isolation and the risks inherent in the lone voice. However there is also the danger that such groups will be further marginalised as a backlash to the perception that women are gaining power.

The popular message emanating from organisations (including the central office of the Education Department) in recent years is that we must embrace change. Together with the almost constant restructuring, it creates an impression of forward thinking and continuous improvement. But at the core not much has really changed and the same old wheels keep

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54 As featured in the late ’90s with the ‘mainstreaming’ of equity (Dunn, 2003) and the subsequent decline of Women in Leadership programs.
on turning. There are the exceptions and there are those who desire genuine change, but the old habits of the hierarchy, the ingrained thinking and the nepotism, are well established elements of the dominant culture. Those who are different and who dare to think and act differently often have a “short and glorious career” (W3).

The challenge is to recruit and retain high quality employees who represent the workforce in all its diversity. The loss of people with a strong commitment to the organisation is a loss in terms of dollars but also a loss in terms of human potential. The women in this study have indicated that they want careers that are both professionally and personally fulfilling. They have reflected on their careers, their leadership styles, the culture of the workplace and life values, and in doing so have gained a greater understanding of themselves. Like Torbert’s (1987) Strategist who seeks to understand the conflicts and paradoxes of multiple perspectives, most “strive to find a way of weaving their passions and their intellectual life into some meaningful whole”, stressing integration, balance and inclusion as guiding principles (Goldberger, Clinchy, Belenky & Tarule cited in Marshall, 1995, p. 325).

Any change of dominant values in the system is not only achieved more effectively by offering viable alternatives (see Gryskiewicz, 1999), but by changing the structure to value diversity (and diverse thinking), and looking for difference rather than rejecting it. An environment which allows creative thought to flourish must recognise that turbulence and resistance are healthy precursors to organisational transformation. Morley (1999) recommends that feminists need both to read organisational politics and evolve their own micropolitical strategies for intervention and change. Meyerson & Fletcher (2000) similarly advocate a small-wins approach – incremental changes that have the power to transform organisations by addressing [micropolitical] acts of discrimination and uncovering subtle practices and beliefs that disadvantage women and other ‘outsiders’. However this is not to imply that subtlety, humour and empathy were missing in my research sample. On the contrary, many and varied approaches were employed in an effort to bring about change to the dominant ideology and to incorporate relationally

55 Torbert (1987) develops a framework of ego development stages to study leadership skills and phases of corporate growth. As pointed out by Marshall (1995) the transition from Achiever to Strategist is pivotal in Torbert’s developmental schema, leading to the acceptance/management of turbulence, multiplicity and fluidity in decision-making processes.

56 Gryskiewicz (1999) talks about developing climates for creativity, innovation and renewal through ‘positive turbulence’.
driven practices. As Faith (1994), drawing on Foucault, says in the opening quote to this chapter, “resistance cannot suddenly transform disciplinary power” (p. 39) but it can foster a strong sense of agency through naming and resisting acts of power abuse.

On the surface it may look as if there were no gains and some may cast the women as victims, or victims posing as angels. However a blaming the victims approach can shift the focus from the situational events or organisational practices that precipitate a ‘victim’s’ response to harm or wrongdoing (Bies & Tripp, 1998). Faludi (1991) identified this process as ‘backlash’. As participant researcher (quite obviously influencing the interpretation of data) I felt strongly that these women did make a difference; they demonstrated competence in leadership regardless of hierarchical positioning57; they refused to be passive victims of power games; they maintained their desire for authenticity, resisting assimilation options; and they were alert to the complexities of gender, power and change within dominant discourses – which may be all that is possible within the context of male cultural hegemony and organisational bureaucracies.

So the issues are complex, and just as the women in this study have made a difference, so others will follow. The difficulty of dealing with difference is what makes us human and ethical … which might imply that is OK, even strategic, for some women to become more masculine; OK, at times essential, for women to show their anger; and OK for some women to manipulate using femininity (after all men play their games! and the expectation of ‘niceness’ from women, even in the face of obviously unfair treatment, is another form of social control). But we all learn about ourselves through reflection on our practices and knowledge of such stories as the women here have told. Moving through adversity to ideas can be a rewarding process and a catalyst for transformation – of the self and others (hooks in hooks & West, 1991).

In a humorous summing up, W21 reflected the feelings of many when she said that “there was an overwhelming gender discrimination that was going on.” Women in leadership are open to attack, “particular aspects of their style[s] are picked up as unacceptable” and attract comments such as, “She talks over everything with her staff” (collaborative leader), “Oh God she’s so emotional” (leader with a social justice orientation) and “…she never consults anybody!” (leader with a masculinist style, seen in a woman as

57 See Eveline (2004) for a view of leadership from the ‘ivory basement’.
railroading over other people). As W21 concluded, “There is almost no way that you can do it right!”

Margaret Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Rogers (1996), authors of *A Simpler Way*, talk about the link between self-awareness and change; the need for both individuals and systems to be open to new ways of being and to learn through interdependence with those they previously ‘refused to see’:

This means supporting the system to explore new connections, new information, new ways of being … When diversity abounds in an environment of freedom, the result is strong and resilient systems. (p. 101).

Systems become healthier as they open to include greater variety, “free to look outward, to bring in others, to contemplate new information” (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996, p. 101) growing more aware of interdependencies, more creative and more effective. A healthy system recognises power in multiple ways, realising that growth and transformation will never evolve without resistance – resistance from both the establishment and its challengers.
Thus, the task is not so much to see
what no one yet has seen,
but to think what nobody yet has thought
about that which everybody sees.

— Schopenhauer
Appendix 1a

PhD Research Project Questionnaire (Cohort 1)

Background

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research project. The project will investigate reasons for gifted women in leadership and management leaving the public education system. To keep the study manageable in size and context and to retain an in-depth qualitative perspective the study will focus on the management culture of the Education Department of [name supplied] through the experiences of women who have voluntarily left their jobs in central office during the 1990s. The investigation will seek to highlight workplace barriers to women of high potential.

The objectives of the research are to identify the following:

- Reasons why gifted women in leadership and management positions have voluntarily left the Education Department in the last five years.
- Where these women are now.
- Organisational initiatives that might have resulted in the women staying with their former employer.

Some specific areas for investigation include the following:

1. How are women in leadership and management coping with the ‘glass ceiling’?
2. Are bright, highly capable women in leadership and management perceived as a threat to the status quo?
3. What is the impact (if any) of indirect discrimination on promotional opportunities for women in leadership and management?
4. What other factors are in operation either promoting or limiting women’s progress?
5. How can factors promoting progress be built in and factors limiting progress be reduced?

The research will be guided by a feminist methodology. Feminist research focuses on women and on creating knowledge about women’s experiences. Studying women’s lives from a feminist perspective also means that the issues of male dominance, masculinity and men are essentially part of the research. Accounts of women’s experiences can provide an insight into the strategies men and male-dominated institutions use to maintain their power. Women’s disadvantage (and men’s advantage) can be examined in the light of institutional structures, practices and policy, the social system of patriarchy and male behaviour.

In this study the term ‘gifted women’ is used interchangeably with ‘women of high potential’ with the understanding that giftedness is found to varying degrees (see Table 1) and in various domains in approximately 10% of the population (Renzulli, Reis & Smith; 1981; Gardner, 1983; Gagne, 1993). It is important to note that definitions of giftedness as eminence or unusual or remarkable attainment usually fail to consider the degree of women’s marginalisation, that is, women’s relative distance from the mainstream of their societies’ achievement centres (Noble, Subotnik & Arnold, 1996). Attached to this questionnaire are checklists of learning and behavioural characteristics of gifted children and gifted adults.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Levels of Giftedness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Profoundly gifted IQ 180+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exceptionally gifted IQ 160+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highly gifted               IQ 145+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderately gifted IQ 125+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Gross (1993)

58 Note to reader: References to giftedness are not relevant to the final thesis.
Confidentiality
All information gained will be kept strictly confidential and the dissertation prepared for my PhD will cover the issues identified and not individual women. A consent form is attached to this questionnaire.

Questionnaire and Interview
The following questionnaire is designed to provide me with some information about you and your former employer, as well as your experiences and ideas relating to leadership. Please contact me if you require clarification of any of the questions asked and miss any questions you do not wish to answer.

Either before or after completing the questionnaire you will be asked to participate in an interview which will require you to draw on experiences in your working life, particularly those with the Education Department. The interview should take about an hour to an hour and a half. You are encouraged to be as open and frank as possible.

The question and interview format is adapted from the work of Bellamy and Ramsay (1994) as outlined in their Australian Government report Barriers to Women Working in Corporate Management.

Researcher: Carole Peters, PhD Candidate, Murdoch University

Questionnaire
An exploration of the reasons for women of high potential in leadership and management leaving a state education department

IDENTIFICATION (Name or Initials):

JOB TITLE & EMPLOYER (Current):

CONTACT DETAILS:

1. What was your position title in the Education Department? What level was your position? Briefly describe your responsibilities and accomplishments.

2. What was your age when you left?

   Under 30 □
   45 – 49 □
   30 – 34 □
   50 – 54 □
   35 – 39 □
   55 – 59 □
   40 – 44 □
   Over 60 □
3. *How many years of service in the Education Department did you have?*

- < 2 □
- 2 – 4 □
- 5 – 8 □
- 9 – 12 □
- 13 – 15 □
- 16 – 20 □
- > 20 □

4. *How many years in the paid workforce did you have?*

- < 2 □
- 2 – 4 □
- 5 – 8 □
- 9 – 12 □
- 13 – 15 □
- 16 – 20 □
- > 20 □

5. (i) *Did you have any breaks in service – longer than three months?*

- No □
- Yes □

(ii) *If yes, what was the leave for? (tick any/all)*

- Maternity Leave □
- Partner moved job/location □
- Burnout □
- Child/ren related reasons □
- Career change □
- Complete degree, etc. □
- Other – Specify □

6. *Post-school education – please specify including the area of major study*

- e.g. BEd / BA Psychology
- PhD
- Masters Degree
- Graduate Diploma
- Undergraduate Degree
- Diploma/Assoc. Diploma
- Certificate
- Other – Specify

Appendix

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7. What was your marital/partner status?
   - Single
   - Partner

8. Did you have the primary care of children who were under 12 years of age?
   - No
   - Yes

   If you have children, how many, current age, male/female?

9. What is your cultural background (family history/parents/where born)?

10. Equal Employment Opportunity/Affirmative Action initiatives
    Briefly outline any affirmative action initiatives that were helpful to your career progress or promotional opportunities.

11. Briefly outline your current work situation.
    Include any work you have done since leaving the Education Department.

12. Achievement potential and characteristics of leadership style

   (i) From the checklists of characteristics of giftedness (attached) can you identify any characteristics which seem to describe you either as a child or an adult (please tick and enclose with this questionnaire). The notes on ‘Issues Confronting Gifted Women’ may be relevant.

   (ii) Have you ever been identified as gifted/talented/highly capable?
   - No
   - Yes

   (iii) Do you consider yourself in the gifted range or as having high potential?
   - No
   - Yes

   (iv) Has there been a time (or times) in your life when you felt you had to hide your ability?

   (v) What achievements do you consider outstanding, in your work and in your life in general?

   (vi) What personal qualities guide your achievements?

   (vii) Have you ever taken a strong stand, or voiced or acted on your convictions or sense of justice e.g. justice in the workplace or the wider community?
(viii) Have you encountered the ‘tall poppy’ syndrome and can you describe any occasions when others have been threatened by or jealous of your success?

(ix) What do you believe are your leadership qualities?

(x) Do you think your leadership style differs from other managers you have worked with? If so, how? Indicate if you are making the comparison with male or female managers.

(xi) How would you define career success?

(xii) Does this fit with your observation of the definition of success adopted by those adhering to the dominant culture of central office?

(xiii) Do you have any recommendations for other women?

Please send this completed questionnaire and the relevant checklists to:
Carole Peters, School of Education, Murdoch University, WA.
Appendix 1b

PhD Research Project Questionnaire (Cohort 2 Introductory Letter)

An exploration of the reasons for women of high potential in leadership and management leaving a state education department

Background

This project extends feminist research begun in 1998 to investigate the reasons for women with high potential in leadership and management leaving the central office of the Education Department of [name supplied]. A questionnaire and interview process provided the data for a MEd(Hons) project which I am now continuing, with the assistance of a Murdoch University research scholarship, at PhD level.

Whilst investigating the experiences of women in management and leadership I have placed a greater emphasis on identifying outstanding ability and performance than was evident in the women in management literature to date. The research is intended to highlight the interviewees’ high capabilities and their potential contribution to leadership, management and change in the workplace.

Some specific areas for investigation include the following:

- How are women in leadership and management coping with the ‘glass ceiling’?
- Are bright, highly capable women in leadership and management ‘rocking the boat’ i.e. challenging the status quo?
- What is the impact of indirect discrimination (if any) on promotional opportunities for women in leadership and management?
- Are there other factors in operation either promoting or limiting women’s progress?
- How can factors promoting progress be built in and factors limiting progress be reduced? (Adapted from Barriers to Women Working in Corporate Management, Bellamy & Ramsay, 1994)

Past employees, all of high leadership potential, will be interviewed using a qualitative research approach (in-depth interview and questionnaire) to gain insight into women’s experiences and to view the findings from different perspectives.

The following questionnaire is designed to provide me with some information about you and your employment history, as well as your experiences and ideas relating to leadership. Please contact me if you require clarification of any of the questions asked and miss any questions you do not wish to answer.

Either before or after completing the questionnaire you will be asked to participate in an interview which will require you to draw on experiences in your working life, particularly those with the Education Department of Western Australia. The interview should take about an hour to an hour and a half. You are encouraged to be as open and frank as possible.

Confidentiality

All information gained will be kept strictly confidential and the dissertation prepared for my PhD will cover the issues identified and not individual women. A consent form is attached.

Researcher: Carole Peters, PhD Candidate, Murdoch University
Appendix 2

Interview Prompt Questions

An exploration of the reasons for women of high potential in leadership and management leaving a state education department

(i) Separating – the conditions and events surrounding your decision to leave.

(ii) Career prospects – how your career path looked at the time of leaving.

(iii) Authority figure – issues surrounding how you were related to as an authority figure.

(iv) Status and power – how was it when you first started to ‘climb the career ladder’?

(v) Ability and Potential – did you find that your capacity to do the job to a high level was appreciated? Was it ever perceived as a threat to the status quo?

(vi) Organisational culture – how would you describe the culture of the Education Department, particularly central office? The typical ‘model’ of success?

(vii) Life balance – what expectations did the central office of the Department have, for example, hours expected to work, availability outside regular hours? Were out-of-work activities supported? How were women with children perceived?

(viii) Support – who supported you in your career? Was there other support that would have been valuable?

(ix) Value and Validation – times when you felt your work was properly valued and times when it wasn’t. If involved in restructure what kinds of work lost value? How did this effect you? Did you experience discrimination of any kind?

(x) Dissonant Perceptions – Did the Education Department management believe that women managers received the same career development as men? Did you believe this? If there is a difference in perception what needs to be done to bridge the perception gap?

(xi) Conclusion – What specifically could the organisation have done, at any time in your career, to keep you there?

Appendix 3

Copy of Consent Form

MURDOCH UNIVERSITY LETTERHEAD (used for original documents)

PhD RESEARCH

An exploration of the reasons for women of high potential in leadership and management leaving the public education system in [name of Australian State]

CONSENT FORM

I (the participant) have read the information attached explaining the nature of the research and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this activity, realising that I may withdraw at any time without prejudice.

I agree that research data gathered for the study may be published provided my name or other identifying information is not used.

I am aware that I am free at any time to withdraw consent to further participation without prejudice in any way.

________________________________________________________
Participant (NAME & SIGNATURE)                                                                Date

_____________________________________________________________
Investigator (SIGNATURE)                                                                                Date

Investigator:                     *Supervisor:
Carole Peters                      Prof Jan Currie PhD
School of Education
Murdoch University

*Second Supervisor: Dr Felicity Haynes, UWA
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