"THE WO-MEN AND THE BOYS":
Patterns of identification and differentiation in senior women executives representations of career identity

Su Olsson
Department of Communication and Journalism, Massey University, New Zealand
Robyn Walker
Department of Management, Massey University, New Zealand

Abstract

Executive culture is constituted as a male domain through discursive practices, which sustain various masculine identities and advantage while placing women in an antithetical relation to power (Sinclair, 1994, 1998; McConnel-Ginet, 2000; Collinson & Hearn, 2001). In terms of career progression "corporate masculinity" operates as a norm "that all managers aspiring to the top must adopt, including male managers" (Maier, 1999, p.83). In practice, while managerial styles may differ, the adoption of corporate masculinity involves some distinctive, discursive patterns. The analysis of corporate "identity work" suggests that men attempt to position their difference, status and power through discourses which involve the subjective processes of identification with some men and differentiation from others, including women (Collinson & Hearn, 2001). These emphases have perhaps distracted attention from the discursive practices or `identity work' of women who have achieved senior executive status. Yet, it may be that these women engage in analogous strategies of power and identity analogous to those of men (Collinson & Hearn, 2001).

This paper examines career identity representations of 30 senior women executives in the New Zealand public and private sectors. Drawing on a social constructionist approach, we examine women's positioning of self within the discourse and discuss how they deal with the apparent paradoxes or contradictions of female identity within a world of corporate masculinity. Our findings suggest women engage in processes of identification and differentiation comparable to those of men. Perhaps unexpectedly, these processes often involve an assertion and celebration of female difference that includes distinctions between "the wo-men and the boys". They also involve a more tentative process of differentiation from corporate masculinity through the construction of an emerging, new culture, the culture of women in business.

Introduction

Executive culture is constituted as a male domain through discursive practices, which sustain various masculine identities and advantage while placing women in an antithetical relationship to power (Sinclair, 1994, 1998; McConnell-Ginet, 2000; Collinson & Hearn, 2001). In terms of career development and progression, "corporate masculinity" operates as a norm "that all managers aspiring to the top must adopt, including male managers" (Maier, 1999, p. 83). In practice, while managerial styles and approaches may differ, the analysis of executive "identity work" or self-representation suggests that "men attempt to

position their difference, status and power through discourses which involve the subjective processes of indentification with some men and differentiation from other men, and from women" (Collinson & Hearn, 2001, p.151). Yet women managers, as well as men, seek career progression to executive leadership, and women are increasingly achieving substantial positions of executive power (Halford & Leonard, 2001). It may be that these women "invest in equivalent discourse and engage in analogous strategies of power and identity" (Collinson & Hearn, 2001, p.152).

Research into gender and power relations that underlie career progression in management has tended to focus on issues of equity. On the one hand, the growing critical concern with men and masculinities in management, including the "crisis of masculinity" thesis, render women invisible and fail to recognise that women as well as men are involved in the exercise of power in the workplace (Fitzsimons, 2002). On the other hand, research on women in management has tended to focus on the material, structural and discursive practices that inhibit women's career progression. For example, statistical analyses of western countries reveal that while the number of women entering management positions continues to increase, women remain under-represented at senior executive level (Davidson & Burke, 2000; Vinnicombe, 2000; McGregor, 2002). In attempts to explain these statistics, other analyses explore the gendered perceptions and attitudes that form barriers to women's access to leadership positions, result in differing evaluations of women and men in the workplace, and/or render women "invisible" once they have achieved leadership roles (Marshall, 1995; Sinclair, 1998; Wilson, 1995). These emphases in both masculinities and women in management analyses have perhaps distracted attention from the self-representations and discursive positioning of women who have achieved senior management status and power.

 Yet, as suggested by the research into attitudes that render women invisible in leadership roles, the behaviour of men and women is "is invariably read through a more general discourse on gender difference" (Stubbe et al., p.236). This discourse on gender difference separates women, whatever their behaviour, status and power, from the dominant, executive discourse of "corporate masculinity" (Maier, 1999, p.83). Thus, both women's positioning and their construction of executive, career identity involve inherent contradictions or paradoxes.   Describing organisations as mini-patriarchies, Collinson and Hearn (2001) claim that "men's power in organizations is maintained through unification with each other"(p.153) so that "[men's differences] must be examined in connection with the stated unities that co-exist between men in organizations" (p.154). If women executives engage in analogous strategies of power and identity to men, they must also deal with the inherent contradictions of their gender within executive culture.

A social constructionist approach: Theory and methodology
Our approach draws on a social constructionist or performative model, which problematises gender and identity as social constructions constituted through language and transacted through the positioning of male and female within discursive practices (Stubbe et al, 2000; McConnell-Ginet, 2000). This approach should be distinguished from essentialist models, which frame gender as a given, linked to a predetermined set of

linguistic behaviours or roles. Instead, social constructionist models view gender as relational, a process, something that is done, and something other than a two-system category (Weatherall, 2002). Within this framework, identities and roles are not fixed or static, but shifting, fragmentary, multiple, frequently contradictory, and constantly in the process of being constituted and negotiated in discursive practices. A social constructionist approach is not merely concerned with gender and identity as an effect of language; it is also concerned with providing a basis for understanding workplace interactions and social changes (Stubbe et al, 2000). At the same time, language is viewed as a site in itself; it is not just a medium to convey social life and interactions, it is an essential constructive factor (Marshall & Wetherell, 1989).

Our analysis is concerned with women executives' self- representations of career identity gained through personal interviews. Given our concern with how these women attempt to make sense of self, identity and gender within the context of corporate masculinity, our focus is on the content of what is said. McConnell-Ginet (2000) states, "Speaking and having your contributions recognised is part of constructing engagement, of positioning yourself and being positioned by others in ongoing discourse" (p.269). Thus, our focus on the content of what is said seeks to examine women's positioning by searching for patterns of identification and differentiation within the discourse.

The Study Procedure
The study specifically targeted women senior executives in the New Zealand public and private sectors. These women were identified through public documents and professional magazines. Participants were informed that the study sought to explore senior managers' self-representations of their career identities.

The study used a qualitative approach whereby the perceptions and experiences of 30 senior executives were gathered through personal interviews. All interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis at the interviewees' workplaces. The interview style was informal and conversational but covered the same questions for all participants. The interviews were taped and subsequently transcribed under a code number with names and organisations omitted to ensure confidentiality.

In this study, half the executive sample occupied a chief executive level position (CEO, partner, director or managing director) and the remainder were all in senior management positions: general manager, senior manager, national manager, regional manager. Two thirds of participants were in the private sector (19); the remaining third were in the public sector (11). Ninety percent of the women were of Anglo-Saxon origin and 10% of Maori origin. Three-quarters of the women were aged 41-55 (average 46-50) and were highly educated (70% had tertiary qualifications, 40% post-graduate degrees of diplomas).

In the following account of the interview material, women's positioning of identity is discussed under the five headings; these five headings comprise the major patterns of identification and of differentiation we found in the discourse.

Female identity in a world of corporate masculinity

An overriding similarity between all women in this study was the positioning of self through the skills and qualities they brought to their executive roles. Their stated success factors included "people and communication skills", "creativity and risk taking", "passion", "the ability to motivate others", "vision", "intuition", "an acceptance of difference" and an ideal of "respect" for people. This identification with the role of executive resolved the inherent paradox of female identity in a world of corporate masculinity by positing a gender-neutral context and/or by downplaying gender as a factor in career progression. As one woman stated, "I'm just someone in business who happens to be a woman". When asked directly if they could describe an incident in which gender had affected their careers, some women suggested it had made it harder to get started and that women had to work harder than men to get the same recognition. However, all the women denied that gender had affected their personal career progression.

At the same time, acknowledgments of the male-dominated context of executive culture occurred mainly in incidental comments such as, "All of my colleagues are men", "My 100 percent male colleagues", "It's a little unusual to find a woman running a manufacturing company". Within this context, recurrent themes of career progression involved "making yourself invaluable", "not only achieving, but overachieving", "putting in the hard yards" and "earning credibility through performing and delivering". One Chief Executive suggested that her early career strategy in a male-dominated industry had been, "to learn what the men knew. If I learnt those skills then I had a lot more credibility with the blokes". A number of women suggested that Equal Employment Opportunities (EEO), even when part of the fabric of public sector organisations, did not really help at executive level, "The only way we're going to make change happen is by earning respect". This belief in the need to earn credibility and respect was a major point of unity among women in the study. Thus, while acknowledging the need for change in women's representation at executive level, the women implicitly resolved the issue of gender by adhering to a merit principle as the basis for executive success.

"The Men": Identification with supportive males and mentors

Women executives identified with men who they saw either as gender neutral or as supportive of women. Descriptors of such men often included their ability to show or appreciate stereotypical feminine qualities:

> *We've got a Chief Executive who's totally -you know, he's gender neutral. He grew up in a family of women, his father died when he was a little boy. He's done a lot for women in this organisation and knew he wanted a softer side and a more –well he knew it just didn't have to be adversarial, the way we went through changes.*

More specifically, a number of women from both sectors mentioned the career assistance given to them by male mentors, with only one woman referring to a female mentor. Collinson and Hearn (2001) claim that the study of management and power needs to include an analysis of "the impact of `mentoring' between older and younger managers

and the transferring of power from one generation of male managers to another" (p. 163). Our study suggests that successful female managers are also mentored by men. Often male mentors gave women their career breaks, "You just have to find someone to give you a chance and then you're away". A Chief Executive acknowledged her gratitude and continuing loyalty to her male mentor, "He developed me, he believed in me". A senior executive in a multinational described her ongoing support by male mentors, "Three men have started to emerge as kind of mentors to me and it has been a great experience". While a Maori executive spoke of the role her grandmother and a female English teacher played in "the educational part of my upbringing", she then went on to describe her career advancement as opportunistic, "the result of being mentored along the way" by "three male influences through different organisations I've worked for."

Establishing relationships with "the men" in key or powerful positions is seen as an essential factor in career progression. One woman suggested, however, that relationships with male mentors are not automatic but need to be established and nurtured by women, "I worked out that obviously it wasn't going to happen automatically, so that I then had to nurture the men to get their support. The best way to nurture them is to get them to come and sit down with me and comment on my different products and explain how they can be improved". A woman partner describes how the importance of this relationship is evident to staff from the outset:

> *The staff quickly work out that the careers are going to be with the men*
> *...Certainly, in terms of the core work they're doing, they go quickly for male*
> *partners. And I recommend it to them, to female, to new female staff especially.*
> *That's very important to getting on.*

This need to identify with powerful males stands in apparent contradiction to women's downplaying of gender and their construction of a gender-neutral world.

"The Wo-men": glass ceilings, corporate transvestites, dolly birds and sissy women

In turn, the women executives in our study differentiated themselves from certain other groups or types of women in business thereby enacting an analogous pattern to men who assert power and status through differentiation from other men and from women. Most immediately, in a parallel to their denial of gender as a factor affecting career progression, a number of women rejected the operation of a glass ceiling in their own career experience, thus implicitly differentiating themselves from less successful women:

> *People talk about glass ceilings for women and so on and so forth and I don't find*
> *it difficult to accept it exists. I guess I don't recognise it for myself and therefore*
> *it doesn't exist for me.*

One senior executive, while acknowledging a glass ceiling may exist for some people, implied such barriers were partly to do with mind-sets which impaired effective action: "I'm never going to have one [a glass ceiling] there, because I'm going to jolly well find a way round it, through it, I'll destroy it, I'll do something".

The emphasis on empowerment through personal action was a recurrent theme in women's patterns of differentiation from other women, including women's lobby groups and academic women. One highly successful executive described how she became disillusioned with a group who wanted to see more women in business because they were full of theory rather than action:

> *I kept on saying, well here I was doing it with no help from anybody else and by doing it gained confidence and I could see women progressing by actually being out there and doing, being in positions or getting themselves into positions and gaining respect. Sitting around in rooms and theorising about it and writing papers about it, wasn't going to get women anywhere.*

The women executives also differentiated themselves from the behaviours of some other women. Most immediately, there was a clear rejection of women who took on stereotypical male styles and behaviours in management:

> *Some corporate women can be quite hard. We joke about them being corporate transvestites, because they look like women but they dress and act like men.*

Alternatively, some younger senior executives distanced themselves from women who use their sexuality in the workplace. One senior manager said that in her experience being young and attractive (32 years) was a negative because of the "dolly bird" stereotype:

> *When you enter a business environment it's actually a negative, because there is a strong stereotypical dolly bird and unfortunately there are women who have used that image to attain to power, to attain positions. And there are a lot of intelligent women out there -it doesn't do well for those women when that happens.*

For successful women executives, there was sometimes a fine line between not being one of the "boys" and not being associated with stereotypes of femininity or the "sissy women". One executive, who had started her career in the military, likened her experiences there to the situation for women in senior management: "You were hugely conscious of walking a line between not being one of the boys but at the same time not being in a group with sissy women".

Collinson and Hearn (2001) suggest that corporate women face less hostility if they adopt conventional women's roles; however, the executives in this study continually distanced themselves from stereotyped expectations of femininity. A Chief Executive described how she deliberately set out to disrupt any such stereotyped expectations when she realised she was the token woman on an advisory board:

> *I made a point of not behaving like the token woman. Because I felt that they needed to break down the stereotype, so –and often I would argue things and challenge things where a lot of the men would just sit there and say 'Yes,*

minister', 'No minister', just like the TV programme, but I wasn't sort of interested in playing the same game. And I think that in most cases really worked in my favour.

Differentiating themselves from stereotyped female roles includes the rejection of dependence on a man for financial security in favour of women pursuing their own careers. A Chief Executive provided a whimsical account of her own pursuit of career:

I think it's [my career's] very important or I wouldn't still be doing it. I mean sometimes I think why didn't I marry a rich chap. I could just be one of those women who toddle around. But I think I'd rather be independently wealthy and toddle around on my own if that was to be the case. No, I think my career is important. I can't imagine not having it.

"The boys": game playing and bullshit

While women wanted both equal and supportive relationships with male colleagues, they distanced themselves from the behaviours of certain male executives. Sometimes unacceptable behaviours were attributed to being part of the old generation of male managers: "There are still times when I go into situations where there'll be the grey suits, or the 'Men in Grey' as I call them, who are sort of the old generation, who can be very heavy, they can undermine you, they are hard work." Some women also suggested that male colleagues attempted to dismiss their ideas: "You get comments like `You're only a woman'". A more sophisticated version of this undermining of women was described by a partner in a multinational:

One thing is quite clear. When you're speaking to male partners it needs to be exactly where they are sitting at the time. You can't expect to get anywhere by making even an authoritative statement. If they don't want to believe you they won't.

In turn, women executives distanced themselves and were distanced from much of the informal or "Locker Room Culture" of male interactions and relationships. Maddock and Parkin (1993) point out, "It is not just junior women who are subjected to Locker Room Culture, women with power but who are isolated as chief executives or directors tell us that they have to listen to endless references to sport and sex in both formal and informal situtations" (p.5). Informal, male, decision-making processes are often associated with this culture. Women executives mentioned decisions made in washroom breaks and in lifts as well as in informal social contexts: "If you're not going to be drinking beer and talking about rugby with the boys, sometimes you miss our on crucial conversations where decisions are made in an informal sense". In a send up of "the boys", one women claimed : "When I get to the top there will be corporate shopping days and corporate cooking classes! No more yachting, no more rugby, no more cricket!"

Women also differentiated their own relationships and "political awareness" from the game playing of male, internal politics: "What aggravates me is the extent of the boys' regime in the place and, you know, the bullshit that comes with that, which is around

internal politics". In similar vein, a Chief Executive described her rejection of aggressive male game playing and politicking on her appointment:

> *It was very male dominated and it was very much the old boys' network. And they used to spend all their time fighting and putting out fires. Since I've come along I just say, "I'm not going to get into that crap. We don't do it like that. We don't play party politics".*

In differentiating themselves from male game playing, women often constructed unities with other women. For example, some women compared their directness, openness and honesty with male indirectness and manipulation: "The male game tends to be more about wait and see, I'm [the male] not going to say, I'm just going to do this". Associated with this indirectness and game playing are male codes of owing favours:

> *Men are much more "you do this for me and I'll do this for you". And they remember things over long periods of time and women will do what is intuitively right -and they do harder things than men. Women are not "you do this for me and I'll do this for you". You don't even realise that's the game half the time.*

Similarly, male executives were seen to present a public mask of control and success, which prevented them asking for help when they needed it with sometimes serious results: "Men will say, 'Oh, you know, everything's wonderful and I'm doing this and I'm doing that' and there's always that sort of –I guess, the ride before the fall, where women tend to talk much more from the heart, if they need help they'll ask for it." One woman contrasted female directness with male evasion in decision-making:

> *I think a lot of women are more direct and more -honest is not the word- but if there's an issue let's confront it, let's sort it out and move forward, whereas I think men will –they are delayers, they think, "Oh well, I'll just put that on the back burner, and it'll go away".*

Women counteract the contradictions of female identity within male-dominated executive culture by constituting some men as "the boys". In so doing, they differentiate themselves from the behaviours of "the boys", while constituting female behaviours as providing a more valuable contribution to executive management.

"The women": Unities and networks

One of the recurrent paradoxes in women executives' identity work was that, although they denied gender as an issue in their careers and rejected female stereotypes, they nevertheless asserted their femininity at various points throughout the interviews: "We can't deny our femininity. It's what we are!" Indeed, the women in this study suggested that female difference provided a competitive edge in the current climate of organisations seeking innovation and diversity; "I think women are lucky because we can do it differently [from men]. We don't have to be the stereotypes." Ironically, while rejecting stereotyped behaviours in the workplace, the women executives often defined the difference or female advantage they brought to executive culture by drawing traditional

female qualities. Thus, women were said to be "intuitive and in touch with people", having "a different way of talking to other people", "more adept at reading non-verbal cues", more "transformational" and better listeners than men. One Chief Executive stated, "I think the intuition that women have is a huge advantage in business and I think it is hugely underestimated."

Women executives were also aware of the importance of unities with other women within their organisations: "It's important you've got the other women in the organisation on your side because there's a network operating." A number of executives suggested there was a growing culture of women in business. For some women, being part of external female networks was a new and developing experience of unity:

> *For the first time I've been in a women's network lunch and what I'm seeing is, what's developing because it was lunch two, is a feeling that we're in a safe zone. And there's quite a lot we can share that's poignant and funny –okay to share without betraying secrets.*

One Chief Executive suggested the relative newness of the culture of women in business in comparison with male support networks:

> *Men have been in management longer and there's that culture. They [men] have a support network, which is relatively undeveloped in the culture of women in business –it's quite a new culture.*

Finally, one senior executive, who described being part of a strong female network, suggested that the over-riding unity between successful women was their competitiveness in a male-dominated corporate world:

> *Actually, most of my networking in New Zealand, that are my big female sort of, big organisation network, we've often talked about the fact that we've all got brothers…. Maybe that equips you to be in big, blokey organisations where competition is the name of the game and you'd better like it or you're not going to survive. Because you don't only compete with external competitors, you compete to stay where you are, to hold ground, so you have to have a taste for it, a liking for it. And you don't meet many successful women who haven't got that I don't think.*

Ironically, the members of this female network constitute identification with the male behaviours of brothers in order to lay claim to the stereotypical male characteristic of competitiveness, which they then construct as an essential attribute of successful women.

Concluding remarks:
Our analysis shows that women's identity work involves shifting, relational and frequently contradictory discursive constructions. At the same time, in a parallel paradigm to the identity work of men in management, women position their difference, status and power through discursive practices which involve identification with some

individual men, unity with some individual women and differentiation from other groups of both men and women.

More specifically, women's self-representations of career identity constitute an unfolding series of paradoxes. One of the most immediate ways of constructing female identity in the corporate culture is through identification with the qualities required for the executive role and the denial of gender as an issue in their career progression. This positing of a gender-neutral world is contradicted by the identification with and recognition of the need for male mentors.

 In turn, the unities between women often arose out of differentiations both from some men and some women. Thus, women executives were united in their differentiation from women who take on stereotypical male behaviours and from women who use sexuality to gain career progression. They were also united in their differentiation from the "Locker Room Culture", the game playing and the "bullshit" of internal male politicking. This construction of unity through differentiation was often compounded by the distinctions women drew between their own directness, openness and ability to focus on the issue or problem and male indirectness, public masks, evasions and codes of "owing favours". Yet, despite the rejection of both female and male stereotypical behaviours, the stated unities of female difference and advantage draw on traditional female qualities such as women's intuition. A further paradoxical construction is the claiming of the traditional male stereotype of competitiveness as the essential quality of successful women.

Nevertheless, the representation of female difference also involved a wider, more tentative alternative to corporate masculinity through the construction of an emerging culture, the culture of women in business. Further research may explore the nature and extent of this culture of women in business and its relationship to wider patterns of social change.

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Address for correspondence:
Su Olsson
Department of Communication and Journalism
Massey University
Private Bag 11-222
Palmerston North
New Zealand
S.C.Olsson@massey.ac.nz