

# Careers of Women Managers in the Retail Industry

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*This paper reports on the aspirations, ambitions and careers of women managers in retailing. Questionnaires were distributed to women managers awaiting promotion to senior positions, and interviews were carried out with women store managers and also head office personnel managers. Findings reveal that women are recruited to retail management programmes in equal proportions to men and are reaching deputy management positions. However, few women achieve the position of store manager, the senior operational position in retail, in spite of their expressed ambitions and commitment to the job. Possible factors which emerged from the questionnaire and interview data were: promotional procedures and criteria; persistent perceptions of management as male; networking, political awareness and mentoring.*

## INTRODUCTION

### *Retailing and Women*

Women are highly visible in the world of retailing, being the most likely shopper and, even more likely, the shop assistant. Retailers employ substantial numbers of workers, 2.2 million in the UK, and consequently they undoubtedly have an enormous social impact through their employment policies and business strategy [Sparks, 1987].

Retailing is one of the fastest growing service sectors in the UK [CSO Social Trends, 1991], with 62 per cent of retail workers being women. Therefore one might expect that this would make it easier for women to reach senior management jobs. But an EOC survey showed that although a

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*The Service Industries Journal*, Vol.17, No.1 (January 1997), pp.133-154

PUBLISHED BY FRANK CASS, LONDON

growing number are in management positions in retail distribution, they are likely to be found at the junior management level [EOC, 1991].

Collins [1990] states of a national survey that 'although men were only 28 per cent of the retail workforce, they dominated all the top management positions except in personnel and that in the 20 largest retail companies only 3 board members were women'. This confirms the presence of a 'glass ceiling' in retail as with other managerial professions, with only 6.7 per cent of women holding senior management positions [Hansard, 1990]. Findings from a recent study of 16 UK retailers with more than 1,000 employees suggest that women's representation at senior management levels has improved and varies from 4 to 60 per cent, with food retailers having fewer senior women, and department/chain stores having more [Brockbank and Airey, 1994].

There is a widespread tradition of store management being the preserve of the male manager, whereas personnel management is perceived as the domain of the female manager [Marshall, 1984]. This view of horizontal segregation in the retailing industry is backed up by Cockburn [1991] who comments on the fact that products and procedures gender jobs. In addition vertical segregation is apparent in the way the company is structured, a 'pyramid with its female base ... topped by a pinnacle of men' [p.38].

## WOMEN'S RIGHTS, ATTITUDES AND CHOICES

### *Feminist Theories which Underpin the Research*

Early liberal feminism built on the concept of 'rights' as defined in national and international declarations. The assumption that citizens are men is embedded in these declarations, rendering women invisible and consequently giving them no 'real' rights [Wollstonecraft, 1792]. Academic research persists in rendering women invisible [Gilligan, 1982] and the struggle for equality had to begin with making women visible [Walby, 1986].

Socialist feminism builds on the Marxist notion of surplus value, created by the unpaid labour of the housewife. Her work in the home 'refreshes' the male worker so that he may sell his labour for less than its value, enabling the capitalist employer to make a profit. Women's work in the home is overlooked as 'their work is excluded from the realm of value' [Walby, 1986: 38].

Radical feminism confronts the power of patriarchy, a system which predates capitalism, and persists in a social system where women are disadvantaged economically and socially. The demands by women for equal treatment with men have been resisted by two versions of patriarchal attitudes. The concept of 'sameness' – the innocence displayed by the

gender-blind who claim that 'we are all the same'. Alternatively the concept of 'difference' – the innocence displayed by traditional men who treat women as special and thereby keep them in their place [Baddeley and James, 1991; McIntosh, 1989].

Two important developments have emerged from the recent literature on feminist interpretations; the sameness/difference debate and the combined effects of capitalism and patriarchy. Walby [1986] identifies capitalism and patriarchy as confounding variables in her feminist theory, with important consequences for the interpretations of data. Cockburn [1991] has admirably clarified the tension between competing with men on their terms, being 'the same' and, alternatively, competing on the basis of 'difference'. She correctly states that sameness and difference is not the issue and equality may be claimed as a right in the form of *equivalence* and *parity* rather than equality.

#### *Women's Own Attitudes and Choices, Commitment and Motivation*

The dilemma faced by many aspiring women managers is the choice between home and family. The socialisation of females in a patriarchal society prepares women to be responsible for the running of home and family. Women who seek a career outside the home need to deal with conflicting demands and take dual managerial roles, managing the job and managing the family [Scase and Goffee, 1989]. An early release from the dilemma faced by aspiring women managers is unlikely as women in full-time careers are still carrying the burden of domestic responsibilities [Hall and Hall, 1980]. Furthermore, women who deviate from the sexual stereotype of desired feminine behaviour can expect to be penalised, socially or personally [Marshall, 1984].

The importance of the choice of functional area for probable career success is highlighted by Hirsch and Jackson [1990], Nicholson and West [1988], and Rycroft [1989] in that women are concentrated in support functions such as administration and personnel, which are perceived as peripheral and traditionally carry little authority in businesses such as retailing.

The assumption that women are less motivated and less committed towards their work than men – is an enduring one and can be seen to be influential in the career opportunities offered to women. 'Women are traditionally excluded from management jobs because they are judged less serious, less highly motivated than male employees' [Marshall, 1984: 21].

Brief and Oliver [1976] examined motivation at work with a comparative study of male and female retail sales managers' expectations of job outcomes based on Vroom's model of motivation [1973]. No significant pattern of male-female differences was found, after accounting for variables of occupation and organisational level. This is confirmed by

Davidson and Cooper [1983] who reported no differences between male and female managers on achievement motivation, aspirations towards promotion and motivation to manage.

Another assumption about working women is that they are believed to be less ambitious than men and less career oriented [Kaufman and Fetters, 1980]; however Nicholson and West [1988] reported that the women managers they surveyed were slightly more ambitious than the men in the group. This is further supported by Alban-Metcalf [1989] who concludes from the results of a BIM study that 'there appears to be little foundation for the popular myth that women are less ambitious and career-oriented than men'. Alban-Metcalf's data showed that if anything women tend to be more ambitious and also more committed to their careers than many men.

### *Women's Preferred Management Styles*

Evidence exists that attitudes pervading the work environment suggest that the 'good manager' coincides more closely with the male manager model. This has been influenced by the fact that traditionally most managers have been male. Studies of the relationship between sex, managerial stereotypes and gender stereotypes were carried out in the early 1970s by Virginia Schein. Both men *and women* respondents believed that successful middle managers possessed an abundance of characteristics that were more associated with men in general than with women in general [Schein, 1973]. Recent replications of Schein's studies [1989] have yielded essentially the same reactions from men but different ones from women, who no longer see the same association between each sex and the managerial role. Women's stereotypes of women have changed, but not their stereotypes of managers. The fact that managerial stereotyping persists has consequences on women's careers in management.

Managerial/sex stereotyping is also prevalent in consideration of leadership, valuing task-oriented behaviours (considered to be masculine) over interpersonally oriented behaviours, such as showing consideration towards subordinates and demonstrating concern for their satisfaction (considered to be feminine). The concept of 'androgynous' leadership was adopted by Sargent [1983] who took account of the feminine behaviours displayed by the increasing number of women managers and therefore expanded the idea of what makes a good manager beyond its male definition.

This view is further enhanced in recent research by Rosener [1990] who shows that the non-traditional leadership style of women can be successful. The survey showed that men are more likely than the women respondents to describe themselves in ways that characterise 'transactional leadership', i.e., using reward/punishment methods, and the power that comes from their organisational position and formal authority. The women respondents, on

the other hand, described themselves in ways that characterise 'transformational leadership', i.e., getting subordinates to transform their own self-interest through concern for a broader goal and using the power of personal characteristics such as interpersonal skills and personal contacts.

Gareth Morgan emphasises the political relevance of gender in the culture of organisations and states that: 'Many organisations are dominated by gender-related values that bias organisational life in favour of one sex over another' [Morgan 1986]. Characteristics or common traits associated with male/female stereotypes are identified in Morgan's work. Hearn has explored the 'sexuality' of organisations and confirms that gender is a powerful factor in workplace relationships [Hearn *et al.*, 1989].

The possibility that managerial style is exempt from gender influence is unlikely but the 'power of innocence' enjoyed by the dominant class, race and gender remains [Baddeley and James, 1991]. Strategies used by women to survive in so-called 'male' cultures include 'blending in' [Sheppard, 1989] with consequential role conflict [Marshall, 1984], and attempts to penetrate the 'informal' networks known as 'the old boys' network' from which most women managers are known to be excluded [Coe, 1992].

#### EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES AND CAREER PROGRESSION

Traditionally the concept of 'career' relates to men, in particular white, middle- class males, and classic theories may be inadequate for women in terms of their life-cycle and particularly the social and personal demands upon them [Perun and Beilby, 1981]. Neo-classic theories modify the model to accommodate some of women's experience but the importance of self-concept is underrated [Super, 1984]. Other models acknowledge the power of women's motivation and the importance of their choices [Astin, 1984]. On the other hand the 'dual development model' accommodates both domestic/family factors and the possible effects of workplace factors such as disadvantage and discrimination [Gutek and Larwood, 1987].

A variety of legislation has sought to ensure equality for all in remuneration [Equal Pay Act, 1970] and in recruitment, selection and promotion [Sex Discrimination Act, 1975]. European directives have tightened up UK legislation for the benefit of women [Equal Pay Amendment, 1983; Sex Discrimination Act, 1986].

With respect to equal opportunities in the retail industry, according to Maxwell [1993], 'the first implication of the preponderance and status of females in retailing is a major, if dormant, equal opportunities issue.' Many retailers in the UK have subscribed to Opportunity 2000, the business-led initiative to improve the position of women at work. However Dr Annette Lawson of the Fawcett Society, a pressure group which campaigns to break

down the barriers blocking women's advancement, has reservations about the effectiveness of such an initiative. She said in interview that 'some of the goals the companies set themselves are so vague as to be insignificant'. Yet she believes that Opportunity 2000 is correct in addressing the culture of an organisation and that as 'it will affect men ... it will have to be the men who change' [*Retail Week*, 22 Nov. 1991].

As Howe and others [1992:192] say, 'As retailing is an industry dominated by women and managed by men, considerable scope exists to break down attitude barriers affecting career development and equal opportunities.' Retail organisations have traditionally organised promotion on an informal basis, with senior management posts being 'offered' to selected candidates, on the recommendation of a district or area manager. When criteria are undefined for whatever reason, there is always the danger of gender or other bias being present, with selectors unaware of it [O'Leary, 1977]. The absence of systematic promotion procedures may lead to 'potentially discriminating decision-making' [Collinson, Knights and Collinson, 1990: 179]. Recourse to grievance procedures is rare as candidates need to preserve their line relationship and avoid being labelled as trouble-makers because this also would work against their promotion prospects.

The role of mentors in women's career development is just emerging and successful women are acknowledging the part a generous senior male mentor may have played in their individual progression [Hennig and Jardim, 1978; Arnold and Davidson, 1990]. 'Mentoring' is known to influence successful careers of men managers [*Harvard Business Review*, 1978; Clutterbuck, 1991]. Women managers as protégés are high-risk for mentors, largely male, as their chances of success are low, and other factors may mitigate against them [Ragins, 1989]. Therefore many women work in a career vacuum, with little company-provided structure to help them to progress. Where mentors do exist for aspiring women managers, the career benefits of mentoring are equally valued by men and women, but the psychosocial function [Kram, 1988] is given more importance by women, trying to survive in 'a man's world' [Arnold and Davidson, 1990].

#### METHODOLOGY

The significance of theory has been addressed in our research approach in the following ways:

The 'liberal' emphasis on rights and equality is expressed in enquiries relating to promotion and progression procedures.

The 'socialist' position is addressed through an examination of the status of work in relation to a woman's traditional role.

The 'radical' perspective records the persistence of patriarchy in the organisational structures of the retail industry and drives exploration of maleness and femaleness in the perceptions of managers.

### *Hypotheses*

Hypothesis 1: women are under-represented in senior retail management positions as a consequence of their own attitudes and choices.

Hypothesis 2: women are under-represented in senior retail management positions because the management styles of retail organisations are biased against them.

Note that management style is defined for this research as 'the style valued by a respondent's employer', *as perceived by the respondent*.

### *Questionnaire survey*

Questionnaires were sent to 111 women holding the position of deputy manager or assistant manager, reporting direct to the store manager. The sample was drawn from a pool of available women at the appropriate level within the 11 retail companies who agreed to co-operate. Thirty-four women returned questionnaires, giving a response rate of 31 per cent.

The questionnaire covered issues relating to career aspirations, career progression, promotion and support for career. Additionally respondents were asked to comment on the link between their commitment to the organisation, and their progress within it.

### *Response Rate to Questionnaire Survey*

All 11 companies provided returns, suggesting that store managers were consistent in their distribution pattern. Clearly the possibility of non-response being related to women managers' reluctance to expose perceived company shortcomings is worthy of consideration. However, scrutiny of returned questionnaires revealed a healthy proportion of critical responses, suggesting that the respondents were able to express their views. While it is not possible to generalise from this sample, we have no reason to believe that our respondents were unrepresentative.

### *Interviews*

A series of in-depth interviews with women store managers is in progress to support, validate and provide a context for the questionnaire data. Seven women were chosen by senior personnel managers in three leading retail companies, covering food and non-food sectors. The seven store managers, one store personnel manager and the four personnel managers at head office gave information, confidentially, relating to their own promotion and career

experience, their preferred management style, commitment and motivation, as well as personal factors which played a part in their life choices. One-to-one interviews were conducted in store, and at head office, with guaranteed anonymity and tapes were transcribed by researchers. Details of the women's ages and parental status are shown below:

personnel manager, head office, aged 29, no children  
 personnel manager, head office, aged 31, no children  
 personnel manager, head office, no data provided  
 personnel manager, head office, no data provided  
 personnel manager in store, aged 32, two children  
 store manager, aged 38, no children  
 store manager, aged 39, two children  
 store manager, aged 35, one child  
 store manager, aged 28, no children  
 store manager, aged 29, no children  
 store manager, aged 29, no children  
 store manager, aged 31, no children.

Again, it is not possible to generalise from the sample interviewed. The possibility of bias, conscious or unconscious, in organisational choices cannot be ruled out, in that our personnel contacts at head office determined our sample. Therefore findings from the research may not be entirely representative of women store managers' views. However, there is no reason to suppose that respondents were chosen on any other basis than availability and willingness to participate. Those women who chose to take part may be more likely to hold particular views on the subject under study, but our findings do not suggest a consistent bias in any one direction, showing a range of attitudes and views.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Functional areas*

Our questionnaire sample of 34 women came from functional areas within their businesses as shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1  
FIELDS OF EMPLOYMENT

|                      | per cent |
|----------------------|----------|
| store management     | 50       |
| personnel management | 23       |
| administration       | 7        |
| buying               | 7        |
| other                | 13       |



Interview data revealed that women store managers have needed to persist in their desire to become commercial managers in spite of suggestions from trainers, personnel practitioners, line managers and district/area directors that they 'should' go into personnel management. For example:

I wanted to be in commercial management, not personnel management. I knew what I wanted to do. It was very rare at that time for women to do that. I had to battle my way through the interviews to get there. I ended up with five interviews as opposed to the normal two, because I was a woman going into commercial management [store manager, aged 39, two children]

and:

I couldn't believe the effect I had on people because I trotted along and said I've decided now I want to be a commercial manager ... they were all horrified... [store manager, aged 38, no children]

and:

you could either go into commercial management or personnel management and they got a bit shirty when I said I didn't want to do personnel management. 'Why not,' they said, 'don't you like people?' 'No, I don't dislike people,' I said, 'but I'm interested in the commercial side of it' ... quite honestly back in 1979 ... I've never experienced such a sexist interview in all my life. [store manager, aged 38, no children]

The 'right-sizing' process has led to some alteration in functional/gender expectations, as more men are encouraged to accept positions in previously gendered functional areas:

customer service managers used to be mainly women ... After restructuring ... I only have two trading managers and we have a lot more customer service managers. It's a senior team position and they put the men into it. Quite competent female checkout managers who could have done the job didn't get it [store manager, aged 35, one child]

and:

[speaking about role reversal] my customer service manager, a predominantly female role, has gone into a fresh-food trading manager's role, predominantly male. We have a lot of roles called customer service/personnel and a lot of guys do that role now [store manager, aged 29, no children].

*Attitudes, Choices, Commitment and Motivation*

Fewer than a third of the women who completed questionnaires had children. Of those respondents who had, when asked if parenthood had affected their career in any way, most reported in the negative adding that their approach to life had improved as a consequence. One manager reported that, as a parent, she was perceived as less committed, implying that such perceptions could affect her promotion prospects. Only one respondent agreed that *by her choice* her career had been affected.

The majority of questionnaire respondents (74 per cent) reported that they wanted to progress in their career, that is, move higher than their current level of management, countering the belief that women are less ambitious and less career oriented than men. When asked about their degree of commitment to the business/company 88 per cent of respondents reported that their career decisions had not been affected by the commitment required. This was confirmed by the high percentage of women who had never turned down a career move (79).

A high percentage of the women surveyed wanted to reach store manager and above at the peak of their career (74) and 83 per cent of respondents had shown upward progression in their last three career moves. Even when asked what level they realistically expected to reach at the peak of their career, 71 per cent of the female respondents still indicated store manager level or above.

However, there was a distinct shift in the proportion of female respondents who indicated that they realistically expected to reach area manager or director level; although 42 per cent of the women wanted to reach this level, only 17 per cent believed that they would. Those who indicated a reason why they would reach a lower level than the one they aspired to gave a variety of responses, though the highest number (three) related to the belief that job opportunities would not be given to them in their company.

The high number of women *wishing* to make progress in their careers may relate to the high percentage (74) who felt that to date their careers had not been blocked. However, the desire to move higher in the company by the women respondents does not seem to be linked to a notion of a career plan less than half of the sample (41 per cent) giving some support to the idea that women do not plan their careers formally but instead are inclined to make the most of opportunities as they present themselves.

Interview data suggested that the women's commitment was questioned by their line managers and their appointment to store management positions was perceived (by both men and women) as a serious risk for the company:

they accepted they would let me try commercial management but they sat me down and they told me if I failed it would be because I was a woman and nobody would be able to help me [store manager, aged 38, no children]

and:

The male manager rang back a couple of days later and offered me the checkout manager position. I'll be eternally grateful to him ... it was such a risk for him to take. I had more staff in one department at the new place than we had in the whole store at Y. It must have been quite a risk [store manager, aged 29, no children]

and:

they will test just to see the reason that something isn't as good as it should be ... Once you prove your credibility it's no barrier [being a woman] any more. It depends on how you conduct yourself. You can actually get by, by asking *them* the questions [store manager, aged 35, no children]

and:

career progression could have been quicker for me. I think the time I spent as assistant manager was a test of character and endurance rather than actually learning anything ... I think I proved out of that that I had staying power [store manager, aged 35, no children]

and:

people appointing you have not had the experience of senior store female managers. They're taking a risk as well [store manager, aged 39, two children]

and:

I'd have never moved from personnel ... it was his [the mentor's] idea really that I moved into trading. He was prepared to take the risk and give me the opportunity. He was a very traditional manager but incredibly forward thinking. Not one you'd have thought was going to push ladies into store management. I am the only female store manager in London at the moment [store manager, aged 29, no children]

Those women who had children felt 'tested' by their male and by their female colleagues: can she still do it now she's got two children? [store manager, aged 39, two children]

and:

I feel as if I've had to prove myself all through my career because I was one of the first, with or without children. It's proving it ... Being a store manager with a child is quite unusual and therefore it's important to have proved that ... There's still an element of 'we haven't had many of these [women] so we don't know how it's going to work, let's see' [store manager, aged 39, two children]

and:

I built up credibility by being there when they were there, that worked well. I never said 'I must go now'. If they set a meeting at 6.30 am I would be there. They are only doing it to test you out, pretty soon they don't do it any more [personnel manager, head office, formerly in store, aged 31, no children]

The belief that omnipresence is part of good management and proof of commitment prevails:

if a store manager is not in the store by half-past seven then they're not fully committed and if somebody leaves before 6 o'clock then they're not fully committed [store manager, aged 29, no children]

Reported customer attitudes reveal strongly stereotypical beliefs relating to women being too 'small' or 'young' to do the job, or simply disbelief that a woman could look after a 'whole' store.:

I got a lot of women when I first opened the store coming up to me saying how nice it was to have a female branch manager ... Other individuals feel fobbed off with you because they're used to having a middle-aged man in a suit. He's the real manager, somehow you're not because they say 'I want to speak to the manager.' You say, 'I'm the manager.' Then they say, 'What, of the whole store?' and I say, 'Yes of the whole store.' They think maybe you're the manager of a department. Elderly men who haven't grown up with this concept still don't feel comfortable. They still feel they're being fobbed off with second-best [store manager, aged 29, no children]

and:

I suppose I don't feel unusual. I tell you who find it unusual: customers. They can't understand that there's not a guy coming down because they can scream and shout at a guy. It's their preconceptions ... we've told society that all our managers are going to be guys ... They perceive that's who should be in charge. When a customer

phones and I say, 'I'm not the secretary, I'm the manager', they say 'Are you sure?' [store manager, aged 28, no children]

and staff:

one sales assistant said, 'When I first saw you you just looked too small.' [store manager, aged 32, one child]

*Management Style*

The management style of an organisation was defined for the purpose of this analysis as: 'valued management style as perceived by respondents'.

In his book *Images of Organisation* Gareth Morgan sets out two sets of personal characteristics traditionally seen as 'male' and 'female' [Morgan, 1986: 179]. Morgan states that, 'Many organisations are dominated by gender-related values that bias organisational life in favour of one sex over another'.

Questions were designed to test some of these claims, and in particular to ascertain whether such invisible, values-based bias might be forming a barrier to women's progression in retailing. Fourteen items were adapted from Morgan's lists of 'male' and 'female' characteristics, as shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2  
CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SEXES

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <p>'Male'</p> <p>forceful</p> <p>independent</p> <p>logical</p> <p>manipulative</p> <p>competitive</p> <p>resilient</p> <p>decisive</p> | <p>'Female'</p> <p>intuitive</p> <p>spontaneous</p> <p>caring</p> <p>co-operative</p> <p>flexible</p> <p>emotional</p> <p>thorough</p> |
|---|--|

Source: Morgan, G., 1986, p.179.

The women who completed questionnaires were asked to rate the characteristics which *in their opinion* were valued by the business/company employing them. The results appear in Table 3.

The characteristics which the 34 women managers reported to be most highly valued by their organisations in store managers were: competitive, co-operative and decisive. The characteristics which they reported as being least valued were: emotional, manipulative and forceful. This result therefore does not support the argument that these companies value 'male' characteristics more highly than 'female'. The characteristics reported as being most and least valued by the organisations are a mixture of the 'male' and the 'female', suggesting perhaps that the most valued manager would be one with the 'androgynous' mix of characteristics suggested by Sargent [1983].



TABLE 3  
WOMEN'S VIEWS ON HOW THEY ARE REGARDED BY THEIR EMPLOYERS (%)

Please rate the extent to which [in your view] your company values the following personal characteristics in its store managers:

|              | Not Valued |    |    | Highly Valued |
|--------------|------------|----|----|---------------|
|              | 1          | 2  | 3  | 4             |
| Forceful     | 10         | 35 | 48 | 7             |
| Intuitive    | 0          | 17 | 48 | 35            |
| Independent  | 7          | 31 | 38 | 24            |
| Logical      | 0          | 3  | 52 | 45            |
| Manipulative | 28         | 35 | 28 | 10            |
| Spontaneous  | 7          | 24 | 52 | 17            |
| Competitive  | 0          | 3  | 28 | 69            |
| Caring       | 3          | 24 | 21 | 52            |
| Resilient    | 0          | 10 | 52 | 38            |
| Co-operative | 0          | 3  | 28 | 69            |
| Decisive     | 0          | 3  | 28 | 69            |
| Flexible     | 0          | 3  | 35 | 62            |
| Emotional    | 55         | 24 | 21 | 0             |
| Thorough     | 0          | 3  | 31 | 66            |

When respondents were asked to rate *themselves* on these same characteristics results were as shown in Table 4.

TABLE 4  
WOMEN'S EVALUATION OF THEMSELVES (%)

Please rate yourself on each of these personal characteristics:

|              | Not at all me |    |    | Very much me |
|--------------|---------------|----|----|--------------|
|              | 1             | 2  | 3  | 4            |
| Forceful     | 10            | 53 | 37 | 0            |
| Intuitive    | 0             | 17 | 63 | 20           |
| Independent  | 0             | 20 | 37 | 43           |
| Logical      | 0             | 13 | 50 | 37           |
| Manipulative | 23            | 50 | 27 | 0            |
| Spontaneous  | 3             | 23 | 50 | 23           |
| Competitive  | 3             | 14 | 59 | 24           |
| Caring       | 0             | 0  | 27 | 73           |
| Resilient    | 0             | 10 | 70 | 20           |
| Co-operative | 0             | 0  | 37 | 63           |
| Decisive     | 0             | 3  | 73 | 23           |
| Flexible     | 0             | 0  | 37 | 63           |
| Emotional    | 7             | 37 | 43 | 13           |
| Thorough     | 0             | 3  | 47 | 50           |

The characteristics which the 34 women reported as being highest in terms of their own personal characteristics were: caring, co-operative, and flexible. The characteristics they reported as lowest were: manipulative, forceful and emotional. Our survey results do not support the hypothesis that management style, as defined above, is biased against the profile valued by the women in themselves.

This finding replicates Schein's conclusion that women's perceptions of themselves have changed, but not their stereotypes of managers: an example of women seeking 'sameness' with men in order to overcome the power of patriarchy. For example, the characteristic 'competitiveness' (considered masculine and valued by employers) is valued by females, while 'emotional', the quintessential female characteristic is valued by neither. Clearly the prospect of developing androgynous management styles where male and female characteristics are valued equally requires that women hold on to some of their own 'difference' while adopting the best of masculine management styles.

Interview data revealed that the women store managers are perceived differently from their male counterparts, by staff, colleagues, customers and seniors. The women themselves confirm that they have more relational styles of leadership and management than their male colleagues and they see this as a distinct advantage:

historically they [men] set the culture of the company and there have been some women before me who have succeeded and from those that have I know they're all very aggressive women and I always said, I want to be as good as a man but I don't want to change my personality and management style to fit with the corporate culture. Having said that, I'm realistic and I know that in order to get on there's a bit of play acting required so I mean I play the game really. I can play it as well as most people should I have to [store manager, aged 31, no children]

and:

I was very task-orientated and quite abrupt, perhaps aggressive almost. With my mentor I changed. I learned that that just wasn't how you got the best out of people. [store manager, aged 28, no children]

and:

staff tend to come to me, they find me more approachable than they might do a man. A lot of the staff are women and they tend to knock on my door; you can use that to real advantage, can get good relationships with grass roots. I've never truly had any thought that I wasn't getting on because I was a woman [store manager, aged 29, no children].

*Equal Opportunities and Career Progression*

Happily the majority of questionnaire survey respondents (74 per cent) reported that their career progress had not been blocked. Of those who believed their progress had been blocked, reasons cited included: limited mobility, internal politics, senior management blocking, personality clash with senior manager, and, interestingly, 'there is no career progression as a part-time member of management'.

The majority of these respondents (62 per cent) ascribed to the view that their company did not have clearly defined criteria for promotion. Of those who stated that their company did use such criteria, the majority said that these were well communicated and consistently applied – an encouraging sign.

Interview data suggested that informal promotion procedures are persistent in the three companies concerned. Candidates are unable to compete openly as positions are considered by district/area-operations directors and promotion procedures are less than transparent:

person whose face fits or who's been spotted for stardom by someone who's really very senior ... I'm not a bright young thing [store manager, aged 38, no children]

and:

you're told there's a position available ... they put you on a pre-appointment course ... and provided you get through then you've got promoted [store manager, aged 29, no children]

and:

it's generally done through some curious way of dropping a couple of hints in some right ears that could speak to the person who's actually going to make the decision ... its quite political as well because you've got to try to speak to the right person; if the wrong person gets to know that you're thinking of looking at another job ... It's quite tricky. I think it's a particularly stupid way personally, I think they ought to advertise them and interview [store manager, aged 31, no children]

However, competence profiling in one company is changing this and increasingly posts are advertised:

if we want to appoint a store manager these days we run a selection panel, based on behaviours; people both apply and are nominated. We use a formal, consistent, selection process ... and a critical success factor framework ... referring to the behavioural profile [personnel manager, head office].



Women returning after a career break may find themselves particularly disadvantaged and may find their right to retain their seniority being questioned:

district managers will always say 'she's going to want to go home on time so I won't give her quite the responsibility she had before because she can't do the hours [personnel manager, head office, aged 31, no children]

they were very surprised that I was actually contemplating returning to work ... surely I should go into personnel ... they actually appointed someone to my position before I went on maternity leave ... that really annoyed me. I told him, 'You are acting', but his letter said 'You will be the deputy manager' ... I was offered the deputy position in a new store that was opening ... folly for me with a new baby [store manager, aged 35, one child].

Most questionnaire respondents did not have a company mentor. Of those who had, slightly less than half considered that having one had helped them in developing the skills and personal qualities for promotion purposes.

The influence of powerful male mentors in promoting and encouraging women to be considered for store management is revealed in the interview data. In one organisation 'mentoring' activity forms part of the appraisal process for senior managers. Interview respondents reported the influence of mentors on their own management style, and the significance of one individual in developing staff in an organisation:

the store manager had a big influence on my people style of management [store manager, aged 28, no children]

and:

he took me on even though I was a staff trainer and walked me round the store and told me what was wrong. A lot of tuition ... he has developed an awful lot of managers for the company [store manager, aged 28, no children]

and:

his personnel manager has just become a store manager after a year, so he did it again [store manager, aged 29, no children].

The importance of mentors/networking is not always perceived by interview respondents, and this confirms the questionnaire data:

no, I think I'm just too busy to spend hours on the phone doing that kind of stuff [store manager, aged 29, no children]

and:

haven't too much time really [store manager, aged 32, two children]

and:

I haven't got one. They do exist. I am lazy. The perception of it being remedial rather than developmental has disappeared. It's now seen as a positive move and part of the developmental process. High flyers are picked out and mentored [store manager, aged 39, two children].

Data suggested that women managers may be politically unaware of the key role played by the network in getting on. However, those with experience at head office revealed evidence of political nous:

I suppose I'm quite lucky; having worked at head office, I've got quite a lot of contacts [store manager, aged 32, two children]

and:

at head office, I networked with other female managers, informal, still exists, two of us still in the business, two have left [store manager, aged 39, two children]

and:

it [the old boy network] does exist, official/unofficial network groups; there are meetings to discuss business issues ... much more powerful *en masse* than you are as an individual and we're just beginning to recognise the power of that [store manager, aged 39, two children].

Interview respondents tended to emphasise their plans for the future in terms of their whole lives, rather than focusing on their job:

I've got a life plan, not a career plan necessarily ... my career plan has got to be woven around the other parts of my life [store manager, aged 31, no children].

## CONCLUSIONS

The questionnaire survey and interview findings do not support the first hypothesis, that women are under-represented in senior retail management positions as a consequence of their own attitudes and choices. The questionnaire sample of women appear to be highly motivated and committed to their careers. It is evident from the data that the women managers had very positive attitudes to promotion, and their responses showed high levels of motivation towards furthering their careers. Questionnaire survey respondents' job histories showed a clear pattern of upward movement, and their career progress appeared to be undaunted by

the demands of their companies for job moves and the high levels of commitment required in the retail sector. Most significantly, three-quarters of the questionnaire sample group wanted to move higher than their current level of management but were not confident that they would get the chance of promotion. This illustrates that the women respondents believed very much in their ability as managers but possibly perceived that a 'glass ceiling' exists at about area management level.

However, women store managers revealed at interview that they had experienced considerable pressure for them to choose the 'personnel' route rather than commercial management, traditionally a more assured way to a senior post. If women are perceived as more sensitive to the needs of others than men they are likely to be put in staff rather than line positions, and thereby do not gain the skills and knowledge of the upwardly mobile. Interviews also showed that women's progression is more influenced by perceptions of risk and lack of confidence in the female ability to manage than by attitudes to work, personal ambition and life choices.

This research therefore does not support the hypothesis that women are under-represented in senior management as a result of their lack of ambition and commitment, thus replicating earlier research. What is of interest is the persistence of this belief and its invulnerability to research evidence to the contrary. The levels of ambition revealed in this survey are dramatically different from the perceptions of decision-makers at high levels in retail management.

The questionnaire findings do not support the second hypothesis relating to the perceived management style of the organisations, since results suggest that the characteristics valued by the companies (as reported by the female respondents) did not conform to a male model of management as the hypothesis would predict. The 'androgynous' set of characteristics perceived by respondents as valued by the companies was significantly different from the set by which the female respondents described themselves, and this was owing to the respondents' characteristics conforming more to a 'female' stereotype. Our findings show that women managers at middle levels perceive characteristics valued by employers as what has been called 'androgynous' and their own profiles as more feminine. For these women at least, all below store-manager level, there was little support for the notion that women are under-represented in senior management because the management styles of the organisations are biased against them.

However, when women store managers were asked in interviews about management styles and company culture, they reported an environment, largely task oriented, to which they were required to conform in order even to be considered for promotion. The women conveyed a sense of being continually tested before, during and after their promotion. If gate-keepers

(district/area managers, almost all male) perceive that women lack the so-called male characteristics believed to be valued among managers, that is ambition, competitiveness and aggressiveness, women may be denied developmental opportunities and their promotional potential may suffer. Interview evidence also revealed a persistence of stereotypical attitudes from colleagues, staff and customers, a constant source of frustration and stress for senior women, who are consistently challenged to justify their position. The interview data, therefore, support the second hypothesis, suggesting that a change occurs at the point of promotion. Interview accounts recorded experiences of company culture which suggested that the reality is less egalitarian than the women managers had expected.

It seems likely, from the questionnaire survey and the interview data, that informal processes affect women's promotion prospects. Such informal procedures have been identified as likely to be discriminatory and the invisibility of women and their rights is fostered by the persistence of these informal practices. *Equivalence* or *parity* for women can be achieved by transparent selection and promotion criteria and open procedures for career progression. Employers who consistently adopt informal promotion processes only encourage suspicion that the criteria are not as clear and unbiased as fairness and equality require. While senior positions continue to be held primarily by men, such procedures may be perceived as increasing male advantage in the workplace to the detriment of women colleagues. In such circumstances 'innocence' may be challenged as reprehensible.

Furthermore, the second hypothesis suggests that many of the female respondents would report feeling excluded from male networks and experience a lack of support from male colleagues: neither of these was found to be the case, in either the questionnaire survey or interview data. However, powerful evidence emerged in the interviews regarding the key contribution that male mentors had made for many respondents in their achieving store management positions. These varying attitudes to the usefulness of mentoring show that it is not the simple solution to increasing the proportion of senior women managers which is sometimes suggested in the literature. A minority of interview respondents with experience at head office were clearly aware of the benefits of political intelligence and it seems likely that those women managers who do progress are politically sophisticated, networking to advantage, capitalising on influential contacts – abilities which are known to be characteristic of successful women.

The lack of career planning, in the conventional sense, revealed in questionnaire and interview data by many of the women may well be militating against them. While having ambition and the will to progress, many respondents are not aware of what they must do to achieve their desire. Given the lack of career planning and the non-political nature of many of our

questionnaire respondents, it seems likely that their ambitions will remain unfulfilled. Additionally, while promotion criteria and procedures operate informally, non-politically-astute women are further disadvantaged. Clearly the development of political sensitivity in aspiring women managers can only benefit their careers. Mentors, although known to enhance male career prospects, are not yet rated by women and may be part of that politicisation. Similarly, awareness of power networks and their functions in organisations may benefit women who have traditionally networked primarily for personal support. The existence of equal opportunities policies and robust legal sanctions can help women, but the political nature of retail organisations must be appreciated for them to achieve the representation at senior management levels that they want and desire.

This study has dealt with the attitudes and commitment of women retail managers and has found high levels of ambition and commitment. How such levels compare with those of equivalent men in the retail organisations is part of the programme of research presently in progress. In addition, company culture is perceived by the deputy women manager questionnaire respondents as 'androgynous', but by our women store manager interviewees as predominantly male. The male managers' views of company culture within the same retail organisations are currently under exploration.

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