

Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences

Revue canadienne des sciences de l'administration

26: 179–196 (2009)

Published online in Wiley InterScience (www.interscience.wiley.com). DOI: 10.1002/CJAS.111

# Reasons Women Chartered Accountants Leave Public Accounting Firms Prior to Achieving Partnership Status: A Qualitative Analysis

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## Abstract

This paper reports on the stories told by 13 Canadian women Chartered Accountants (CAs)—why they pursued the CA designation and why they chose to leave public accounting firms. Their stories provide deeper insights into the previously reported reasons for female CAs leaving firms that are often reported within broad categories. Work-family issues received limited attention in the participants' stories. Two major themes emerged: the absence of stated aspirations/desire to become a partner; and frustrations with the intrinsic and monetary value of services delivered by public accounting firms. The implications of these findings for the profession and public accounting firms are examined and future research directions are discussed. Copyright © 2009 ASAC. Published by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

**JEL classifications:** J24, J44, J63, M12, M40

**Keywords:** accountant, gender, professional, public accounting firm, turnover/retention

## Résumé

Cet article est un compte-rendu des histoires racontées par 13 femmes canadiennes exerçant la profession de comptables agréées (CA) : pourquoi ont-elles choisi de démissionner des cabinets d'experts-comptables pour rechercher le titre de CA ? Leurs histoires permettent de mieux comprendre les raisons (du reste déjà connues, mais souvent présentées de manière trop générale) qui les ont poussées à la démission. Le problème de la conciliation famille-travail n'est que marginalement évoqué par les participantes, ce qui suggère que ce dernier n'est pas le motif principal de départ. Deux motifs majeurs sont mis en évidence : l'absence d'aspirations déclarées/l'envie de devenir partenaires, et une frustration par rapport à la valeur intrinsèque et monétaire des services assurés par les cabinets d'experts-comptables. L'article analyse les résultats de l'étude et ses implications pratiques. Il propose également des pistes possibles de recherche. Copyright © 2009 ASAC. Published by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

**Mots-clés :** comptable, sexe, professionnel, cabinet d'experts-comptables, roulement/rétention

*I remember one of my clients said...she was just frustrating me because she wasn't being cooperative at all and I remember [her] looking at me and saying Amy we really like you but we hate what you do. And*

*that just summed it up because I felt the same way [laugh]. (Amy, who pursued a CA designation on the advice of her mother, describing her interaction with personnel at an audit client)*

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*...[but] I had a habit of every 3½ to 4 years on average another opportunity lands. I don't necessarily go looking for them but something comes up and I get this urge that I've got to try [something else]. I've got to go somewhere else because I find the most*

*fascinating part of the work has been more the cultural differences in the company.* (Kathy, a former associate partner and a corporate officer in a public corporation, describing why she has changed organizations and twice left public accounting firms).

In 1975, Barcelona, Lelievre and Lelievre published their study entitled *The profession's underutilized resource: The woman CPA*. Their examination of women accountants' experiences found that the most frequently cited factors for leaving public accounting firms were: limited chance for advancement, better professional opportunity elsewhere, long hours, discrimination, poor salary, family priorities, and excessive travel. The authors concluded, however, that there was *something* else that pulled these women away before they reached the partnership level and called for further research of this phenomenon.

For over two decades academics and accounting professionals have attempted to determine why women CAs leave public accounting firms in greater numbers than their male counterparts before reaching partnership level (Johnston and Kyriacou, 2006). The academic research, often survey-based (Anderson-Gough, Grey & Robson, 2005) typically takes a person-centric perspective leading to recommendations that women accountants should change to "fit in" and advance in public accounting firms (e.g., American Institute of Certified Public Accountants [AICPA], 2004; 2005; Doucet & Hooks, 1999; Hewlett, 2002; Howell, Carter, & Schied, 2002; Pillsbury, Capozzoli, & Ciampa, 1989). Studies, with some notable exceptions (e.g., Maupin, 1993a, 1993b, Anderson-Gough, Grey & Robson, 2005), have either ignored or left unchallenged the possible influence on career decisions of structures and practices in public accounting firms and within the accounting profession more generally.

Public accounting firms devoted significant resources to developing and implementing programs (AICPA, 2004, 2005; Christie, 1997; Flynn, 1996; Kinard et al., 1998; McCracken, 2000; Toner, 1996; Wooten, 2002) that included mentoring, female professional development networks, gender-awareness training and work-life balance programs such as flexible work arrangements (Dwyer and Roberts, 2004). Particular attention was given to work-family issues on the premise that a long-hours culture, prevalent in public accounting firms, interferes with women's family obligations (AICPA, 2004, 2005; Barcelona et al., 1975; Cheramy and Hooks, 1988; Dalton, Hill & Ramsay, 1997; Greenhaus, Collins, Singh & Parasuraman, 1997; Johnson, Lowe and Reckers, 2008; Johnston and Kyriacou, 2006; Kinard, Little and Little, 1998; Pillsbury et al., 1989). Following AICPA's

identification of the retention and upward mobility of women in public accounting firms as a key issue in 1984 (Dwyer and Roberts, 2004; Pillsbury et al., 1989) all of the large international firms took some action with regard to high turnover rates. Over a ten-year period beginning in 1984 the firms implemented formal "work-family programs that were supposed to improve retention rates" (Trimberger, 1998, as cited in Dwyer and Roberts, 2004, p.167). Yet an AICPA survey (2004) found that "over three-quarters [of] male and female professionals [in public accounting firms] expressed high levels of concern about 'work-life' effectiveness" (p.7). At the same time the 2004 survey results found average turnover rates were high, consistent with findings from the 1993 and 1997 surveys (AICPA, 2004).

The accounting profession's concern with high turnover rates for women accountants and the underrepresentation of women in the upper management levels of public accounting firms (Lowe, Reckers & Sanders, 2001) have contributed to a "plethora of gender-related studies" (Lowe et al., p. 53). Missing from this literature, however, is an adequate discussion of the role of the individual (Nord and Fox, 1996). Experience is made sense of, constructed and told in many different ways (Alvesson and Billing, 1997) yet there is still limited "insight into the day-to-day lived experience of women accountants" (Johnston and Kyriacou, 2006, p. 52). When women accountants' experiences are reported in the research they are often sound bites taken from open text fields on survey questionnaires (see, for example, Maupin, 1993a, 1993b).

Coffey (1994), Grey (1998) and Anderson-Gough et al. (2001, 2002, 2005) provide insights to the subjective experiences of individuals working in public accounting firms, but Anderson-Gough et al. (2005) is the only study to explicitly address the meanings within a gender context. Access to the environment in which informal and tacit processes and knowledge shape and influence meanings within public accounting firms is key to understanding individual subjectivities (Anderson-Gough et al., 2001). Thus the inability to gain access to this environment for research is problematic (Anderson-Gough et al., 2001; Johnston and Kyriacou, 2006).

Barker and Monks (1998) noted that individual women accountants in their Irish study had "very different attitudes, values and needs" (p. 821) leading them to recommend that future research should be directed at the individual level of analysis. Even when research participants have similar profiles and biographies there can be significant differences in the meanings ascribed to particular experiences (Haynes, 2008). It is women accountants' individual subjectivities that are, for the most part, missing from the research.

Two notable exceptions to this general trend are found in the work of Haynes (2008) and Johnston and Kyriacou (2006). Their qualitative studies utilized in-depth interviews, referred to as *oral histories*, to gather stories concerned with the gendered embodiment of accounting professionals and ethnic women accountants respectively. While oral history has "great potential to tap into institutional structures of accounting" (Johnston and Kyriacou, p. 56) it is "rarely used extensively in the accounting context" (Haynes, p. 331) thus limiting insights to "subjective meanings given to experiences by individuals in their organizational and social settings" (Johnston and Kyriacou, p. 58).

While the more traditional research may claim to present / represent women accountants' voices and experiences regarding their careers, it frequently silences and marginalizes alternative voices and takes the legitimacy and efficacy of established patterns of thinking and action for granted (Alvesson and Willmott, 2003). A notable example is the research conducted by AICPA (2004), which excluded women accountants working in such internal client-service areas as accounting and auditing research departments in public accounting firms. No explanation was provided for the exclusion. Partners and those non-partner women accountants who did not have a spouse or children were excluded from Greenhaus et al.'s (1997) study of work and family influences on the departure of women from public accounting firms. The exclusion was intentional as the researchers wanted to ensure that "the respondents had at least moderate home responsibilities" (Greenhaus et al., p. 256) although they later acknowledged that "unmarried individuals and those without children also have home and personal lives" (Greenhaus et al., p. 256). These exclusions can affect the research results leading to recommended changes in policies and programs that do not benefit the targeted audience. The presumption is, in the absence of any evidence to the contrary, that firms are concerned with high turnover rates for all women accountants and not just those who have a spouse or children.

The opening quotes of this paper illustrate the subjective meanings that women accountants assign to their experiences in public accounting firms. It is insight into the existence of multiple meanings that has been missing from the research. Amy's narrative on hating her job (auditing) begs the question as to why she pursued a CA designation—a question seldom asked in the literature. Kathy has changed roles and organizations because of her desire to acquire varied experiences and to gain exposure to different organizational cultures. While research suggests that women CAs leave their firms to pursue *other opportunities*, this broad category is not well defined. That is, individuals may assign different mean-

ings in specific situations and /or in different contexts. Kathy's narrative illustrates one possible interpretation of "other opportunities". Different interpretations were identified in the stories of career told by the 13 participants in the current study. An examination of subjective meanings can advance our knowledge concerning the reasons for the departure of women CAs from public accounting firms.

This paper, drawn from the author's unpublished dissertation, examines the career stories told by women CAs using narrative inquiry in an effort to obtain more in-depth insights to the career choices made by women CAs. Its focus is the individual stories concerned with the pursuit of a CA designation and those concerned with departure from public accounting firms.

### Women-in- Accounting—An Overview

#### *Setting the Stage*

There is a significant volume of published research concerned with women accountants in public accounting firms. Johnston and Kyriacou (2006) note that early work in this field studied women accountants with a focus on: tracking the numbers of women in the profession (i.e. body counting, Alvesson, 2002); identifying historical barriers to advancement; and highlighting retention rates together with proposed solutions for improvement.

AICPA and American accounting journals regularly report statistics on the gender and ethnic demographics of accounting professionals. For example, the Public Accounting Report ("Women Continue to Post Steady Gains," 2008) reported that 16.9% of the equity partners in the largest accounting firms in the USA were women, representing an increase of .7% over 2007. Among the Big 4, KPMG reported the highest percentage at 18.6% followed by Deloitte & Touche LLP (18.1%), Ernst & Young LLP (17%) and PricewaterhouseCoopers (16.9%).

In their annual survey of the gender and ethnic composition of college and university accounting graduates, AICPA (2008) reported that the number of female students graduating from accounting programs had increased from 25,253 in the 1999/2000 academic year to 33,395 in the 2006/2007 academic year although the ratio of female to male graduates declined from 55:44 to 52:48 over the same period. The US public accounting firms hired 18,778 female accounting graduates in 2007 representing 52% of the total number. While this percentage dropped from a high of 61% in 2002, the actual number of females hired at the entry level increased.

In Ontario, the Institute of Chartered Accountants (ICAO)<sup>1</sup> reported that the percentage of women entering

the profession declined from 51% in 2004 to 47% in 2008 although the actual number of female students entering the profession during that period increased from 393 to 603 students (Institute of Chartered Accountants of Ontario, 2008). At February 29, 2008 the total number of CA students registered with ICAO (i.e. pre-qualification) was equally split between females (2,498) and males (2,498) (Institute of Chartered Accountants of Ontario, 2008).

The published statistics from AICPA (2008) and ICAO (2008) are consistent with earlier studies that reported that the number of women entering accounting firms is the same or greater than for men (Christie, 1997; Flynn, 1996; Kinard, Little, & Little, 1998; Maupin, 1993a, 1993b; Pillsbury et al., 1989). The comparable participation of men and women in the accounting profession has been evident since the mid-1980s (Flynn; McCracken, 2000; McKeen & Bujaki, 1994), thus negating the oft used explanation that as more women enter the profession, more can be found at the partnership level. It takes approximately 10 to 12 years on average to gain admission to the partnership (Larkin, 1997), suggesting that there has been more than ample time for women to progress to partnership level.

#### *Personal Choice*

Although the numbers clearly indicate that more women are entering public accounting firms and have been doing so for some time, neither the academic research nor the accounting profession has provided specific insights as to the reasons for this phenomenon. It is not clear whether the increased number of women is a consequence of (a) more women entering accounting programs at universities (AICPA, 2008); (b) an increase in the number of women aspiring to become a chartered accountant (AICPA, 2008; ICAO, 2008); (c) changes in recruitment practices in the public accounting firms (Anderson-Gough, Grey, & Robson, 2005); or (d) a decline in the number of men aspiring to become a chartered accountant (Marriott & Marriot, 2003). Different reasons for pursuing a CA can result in quite different reasons for leaving the firms.

The extensive body of research concerned with women's departure from public accounting firms often couches the decision to leave in terms of *personal choice*. Personal choice covers a broad spectrum of factors such as (a) lack of promotional opportunities (Barcelona et al., 1975; Cheramy & Hooks, 1988; McKeen & Bujaki, 1994; Pillsbury et al., 1989); (b) conflicts between work and nonwork obligations (Barcelona et al.; Cheramy & Hooks; Dalton, Hill, & Ramsay, 1997; Dwyer and Roberts, 2004; Greenhaus et al., 1997; Kinard et al.,

1998); (c) compensation issues (Barcelona et al.; Cheramy & Hooks; McKeen & Bujaki); (d) and offers of new career opportunities outside of public accounting (Barcelona et al.; Cheramy & Hooks; McKeen & Bujaki; Pillsbury et al.). These broad categories provide us with limited insights into the women's decision processes and the timing of their decisions.

Research on women-in-accounting rarely addresses linkages between reasons for joining public accounting firms and later decisions to leave the firms. Anderson-Gough, Grey, & Robson (2002) reported that female and male trainees pursued an accounting designation because it allowed them to "defer *difficult choices* [italics added] concerning future careers" (p. 48) and provided the potential to progress to "lucrative job opportunities" outside of public accounting (p. 48). It is not known, however, what role these reasons play in subsequent decisions to remain with or leave a public accounting firm.

#### *Public Accounting Firms*

Some studies noted that the firms' structure, culture, policies, and processes (*organizational arrangements*, Benschop and Doorewaard, 1998b) may contribute to the high turnover of women CAs (see, for example Anderson-Gough et al., 2005; Kinard et al., 1998; Maupin, 1993a, 1993b; Maupin & Lehman, 1994). With few exceptions (see Maupin, 1993a, 1993b; Anderson-Gough et al., 2001, 2005), however, researchers have left unchallenged the firms' and profession's organizational arrangements and the assumptions underpinning those arrangements.

Dalton et al. (1997) provide some insights to organizational arrangements in their study of context specific predictors of turnover. They measured four latent variables—Competitive Environment, Internal/External Control and Supervision, Litigation, and Work/non work obligations—and the importance of the variables on decisions to leave public accounting firms. The data analysis found a significant gender difference in the work/nonwork obligations variable. Female respondents at both manager and partner levels reported this variable was of greater importance to their decisions than that reported by the male respondents. There were no significant gender differences reported for the other three variables.

#### *Work-Family Issues*

Non-work obligations (often referred to as work-family conflicts) are frequently cited as a key factor contributing to the departure of women accountants from public accounting firms (Barcelona et al., 1975; Barker

and Monks, 1998; Cheramy and Hooks, 1988; Dalton, Hill and Ramsay, 1997; Dwyer and Roberts, 2004; Greenhaus et al., 1997; Kinard et al., 1998, Padgett, Paulson, Hughes, Hughes & Born, 2005; Whiting and Wright, 2001).

Wooten (2002) argued that public accounting firms adopted women-friendly policies due to institutional pressures (including pressure exerted by AICPA) and the firms' motivation to optimize available economic resources. Women-friendliness, which refers to the presence of organizational policies designed to assist women in successfully integrating their personal, work, marital, and family roles (Wooten) is believed to contribute to higher retention rates for women CAs (AICPA, 2000, 2004, 2005, Christie, 1997; Flynn, 1996; Kinard et al., 1998; McCracken, 2000; Toner, 1996). Wooten concluded her study with a call for further exploration of possible "differences between formal women-friendly policies and actual practices" (p. 294) in the public accounting firms as the next step in determining whether or not the introduction of formal policies worked as intended. That is, did they result in increased retention that would lead to the admission of more women to partnerships?

Greenhaus et al. (1997) reported that their research results were consistent with their hypothesis that "women at the pre-partner" level are more likely to leave" public accounting firms than men. What was unexpected in the survey results was the reason for the difference. Women were more likely to leave because they had less desire to be promoted to partner, not because "they have more difficulty managing work and family responsibilities" (Greenhaus et al., p. 264). The departure [from a firm] was "primarily related to work experiences, not family life" (Greenhaus et al., p. 264) and a strong relationship between work-home conflicts and departure from a firm was not supported by the data. Further analysis of their study results found a stronger relationship between work-home conflict and intention to leave for those individuals reporting they did not want to become a partner. In other words, individuals who do not aspire to partnership are more likely to leave a firm due to work-home conflicts than are those aspiring to partnership. Given limitations to their research design, the authors were unable to ascertain the directionality of these relationships.

Padgett et al. (2005) noted that there is little empirical research to demonstrate that a lack of work-family balance is a significant contributor to the high turnover of women accountants. In a recent study examining the demise of the glass ceiling for Scottish women accountants Gammie, Gammie, Matson & Duncan (2008) reported findings that support Padgett et al. Specifically, their participants reported that it was possible to balance

marriage, family and a career while holding senior positions in public accounting firms.

The ongoing debate concerning the value of these programs, particularly flexible work arrangements, to employees and the firms takes place at the same time that the firms devote more resources to their development and implementation (Kossek and Ozeki, 1999). The programs do not necessarily help individuals who are in dual-career relationships, have many dependents or *who work long hours* any more than they help individuals without these characteristics (italics, added, Clark, 2001). As long hours are part of the socialization of professional accountants (Anderson-Gough, Grey, & Robson, 2001; Coffey, 1994) these programs may have little effect on a woman CA's decision to remain with or leave a firm.

The presence of family-friendly policies does not ensure that they will be used (Howell et al., 2002) because job pressures (Hewlett, 2002) and the firm's culture do not support their usage (Hewlett; Padgett et al., 2005). Women (and men) who take advantage of family-friendly benefits offered to them are often viewed as having lower commitment to the organization by supervisors and management; therefore they suffer in terms of career progress (Anderson-Gough et al., 2005; Gammie et al., 2008; Gersick and Kram, 2002; Johnson et al., 2008; Kossek, Barber and Winters, 1999; Perlow, 1998) undermining the very intentions of such programs.

While the gender-initiative programs developed by public accounting firms "may be having an impact on perceptions" (Lowe et al., 2001, p. 54) the researchers found that existing programs were inconsistently implemented across offices of the same public accounting firm. Gammie et al. (2008) reported that there appeared to be a lack of awareness on the part of professional staff as to the existence of programs such as flexible working practices, which they attributed to the absence of active promotion by the firms.

Dwyer and Roberts (2004) advanced the debate at the same time that they identified a significant gap between the perceptions of value of the programs and the actual benefits accruing to women accountants and public accounting firms. Specifically, the authors noted that while the "tone of their [public accounting firms] promotional material suggests that firms consider these programs a success we believe the conclusions about the success of these programs is premature" (Dwyer and Roberts, p.168). In support of their argument they note that there are little data available on which to judge success where success is measured by: (a) how widely used the programs are; (b) improved retention rates directly attributable to the programs; or (c) economic benefits derived by the firms. Therefore "it is debatable as to whether or not the programs ever had any hope of

improving the real lot of women in accounting" (Dwyer and Roberts). Both Lowe et al. (2001) and Gammie et al. (2008) provide empirical support for part (a)—the lack of data on the prevalence such programs.

In what appears to be a contradiction to points (b) and (c) above, John Ferraro, the Americas vice-chair, client services at Ernst & Young LLP commented that retaining and developing women "just makes great business sense" (Ferraro, 2005, p. 89). At Ernst & Young "it has paid significant, measurable dividends" in that we found "our efforts translated into savings of about \$10 million US a year—money that otherwise would have been spent recruiting, training and developing new talent" (Ferraro, p. 89). What Mr. Ferraro does not say, however, is whether there were other factors at play during the same period that contributed to the improved retention rates (e.g. economic, reduced hiring of accountants in industry, introduction of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, 2002, etc.).

Anderson-Gough et al. (2005) also questioned the actual benefits derived from women-friendly policies and programs; in particular flexible working arrangements. They noted that while it was not possible to label these programs as "unambiguous failures" (Anderson-Gough et al., 2005, p. 487), the presence of these work arrangements did not influence or overcome "the embedded practices and beliefs operating in the areas of norms of conduct and professional identity" within the firms (Anderson-Gough et al., 2005, p. 487). In other words, the culture and work processes in public accounting firms prevented or precluded the wide-spread use of the programs thus negating the intended outcomes i.e. improved retention of women accountants.

### Gathering the Stories

The overall objective motivating this study was to advance our understanding of the careers of women CAs, what their careers look like and how women in the accounting profession make sense of their careers. "Individual stories" provided directly from women CAs are missing from the more traditional research conducted in this arena, but have much to offer in enhancing our understanding of their lack of retention and ascension to partnership positions within the profession.

Narrative inquiry, a subtype of qualitative inquiry with a rich but diffuse tradition, is characterized by "an amalgam of interdisciplinary analytic lenses and diverse disciplinary approaches" (Chase, 2005, p. 651) used to study the lives of the research participants. Feminists have used personal narratives (oral and written) to "critique the androcentric assumptions of social science" (Chase, p. 654) in their examination of women as social actors, including the subjective meanings assigned to

events and conditions in their lives and the presence or absence of voice, authenticity, and authority. Human agency is prominent in storytelling (Riessman, 1993), suggesting that there is no such thing as raw experience (Maynard, 1994). The selected methodological approach recognizes that the stories told by the participants are reflexive—the result of interpretation and reinterpretation of their experiences (Bruner, 2004). "A life [or career] is not 'how it was' but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold" (Bruner, p. 708). It is the reflexivity of the participants when telling their stories that provides a greater understanding of career choices made (and not made).

Thirteen women were interviewed for this study between January and March 2006. Twelve of the participants were personally known to me. They all held a CA designation, which requires, among other things, 24–36 months of work experience in a public accounting firm. Each participant was asked the following open-ended question, designed to provide the participants with the opportunity to tell their own story about their career choice(s) "on their own terms" (McCracken, 1988, p. 34). "What I would like you to do is tell me the story of your career, what you've done, where you've worked, if you've taken time off from paid work..." This question was supplemented with four secondary questions, designed as prompts, to gather additional information and to encourage the participants to reflect on their respective careers. The taped interviews, ranging in length from one to two and a half hours, resulted in 21 hours of interview materials and 310 pages of transcription.

The transcripts were read from a holistic perspective in which I listened to the each story, looking for connections among the narratives told over the course of each interview (Chase, 2005). This allowed me to identify the themes both within each story and across stories.

### Participants' Profile

Participants represented a range of demographics. Two were under the age of 30, two were in their 30s, seven in their 40s, and two were 50 years of age or older. They held undergraduate university degrees in commerce, math, economics, and engineering. Two participants also had an MBA. At the time of the interviews, seven participants worked in some capacity in public accounting firms<sup>2</sup> (Amy, Ashley, Danielle, Ellen, Lindsay, Ruth, and Sheila), four worked in industry (Beth, Cheryl, Kathy, and Thera), one was self-employed (Jean), and one (Sue) was involved in volunteer work. Three of the seven women working in public accounting firms were partners. Two of the partners also had industry experience, returning to a firm after working in

management positions in the private sector. All of the participants had worked at one of the Big 4 or predecessor public accounting firms in Canada at some point in their careers. In addition, seven had worked in small or mid-sized public accounting firms. Nine of the participants were married, three were single and one was divorced. Collectively they had 13 children and two elderly dependents among them.

### The Stories...

The stories presented here reflect the uniqueness of the individual story-tellers, something that is often absent from or obscured in the extant literature. At the same time, the stories reflect the ambiguities present in career choices experienced in different ways and with different outcomes by all participants.

#### *Become a CA, Become a Partner?*

Participants pursued the CA designation in the absence of specific, explicitly articulated goals. Many of them had no idea what a CA did until they actually worked for a public accounting firm. Their stories included the presence of several factors that influenced their decisions to pursue the designation, including university curriculum, the participant's proficiency in mathematics, and parents and other individuals. A close examination of these stories surfaced a possible link between the reasons for pursuing a CA designation and subsequent decisions to leave a public accounting firm before attaining partnership.

#### *University Curriculum*

The required program curriculum in the areas of commerce and mathematics at many Canadian universities had the effect of narrowing a student's options as she progressed through the undergraduate degree program. For example, in the 1980s, the University of Waterloo's co-op program in mathematics offered public accounting firms as a work-term option. Once a decision was made to participate in the accounting option, individuals noted that they found themselves on a path that would ultimately lead them to writing the Uniform Final accountancy exams (UFEs).

Other universities offered non co-op undergraduate commerce and business programs that required students to make curriculum choices early on in the program. Ashley described how the Bachelor of Commerce curriculum at a large Canadian university had the effect of streaming her towards attaining a CA designation.

Ashley: And the way the university is set up you have to declare your major in your second year and you have to declare your specialization early on. So [by] the time I was in third year I was taking all the accounting courses. And you know in the CA program [that] they pretty much dictate what hours, and how you allocate your university study hours. So... there wasn't much opportunity to pursue other options. So basically, by the time I finished it was pretty much determined that I would do my CA.

At the time of the interview, Ashley noted that she had just started to think about possible career moves.

Ashley: I think I'm at that five year crux where I'm a little frustrated at not having options at this point. At the same point I'm starting to realize that I need to decide whether I'm going to be an associate partner<sup>3</sup> or full partner at the firm. If I'm not there's no reason for me to stick around. The hardest part is the longer you stay the harder it is to find something else outside.

Ashley expressed a great deal of frustration and ambiguity in her story when discussing what she would do next. She perceived that a move to industry at this point in her career would not necessarily be easy as she would be competing with individuals who had a CA designation and industry-specific experience. In contrast to the promotion materials emanating from the professional accounting websites about the multitude of job opportunities available to CAs, Ashley indicated:

I have five years of pretty general audit, have seen it but 'haven't done it' type experience. So it's been a challenge to pursue other options. At the same time staying around at the firm isn't all that bad. It's still fun, it's still fun to the extent that I'm always learning something. I am working with smart people. So my number one biggest fear about going to industry is that it's boring, it's stale and people aren't as lively or energetic as they are at the firm. But on the other hand staying at the firm has its cons in the sense that I'm beginning to feel that there's a lot of politics to get ahead. You have to be politically astute and you have to be people savvy. I guess knowing who you need to network with, aligning yourself with the right group, right types of people. I guess I would say that 20 percent is hard work and 80 percent is being people smart.

Nowhere in her narrative did Ashley speak about the role of partner, what it entailed, and whether or not she aspired to that role. She appeared solely focused on what she perceived was required to move ahead on the partnership track at the firm and contrasted that with her perceptions concerning the difficulties in entering industry at this point in her career.

At one point Ashley noted that she might have made a mistake in becoming a CA as she believed her skill sets and interests were more aligned with a role in finance and not accounting. When questioned, Ashley indicated that she had identified a possible disconnect between her interests and what accounting entailed while at university but that she was too far along in the commerce program to switch. She expressed her reluctance to spend additional time in order to complete the first- and second-year courses required for a finance option. Consequently she finished the commerce program, obtained her CA designation, and was now questioning career options available to her.<sup>4</sup>

Ashley's narrative provides us with insights as to the role played by personal choice and structural constraints in career decisions. She chose not to spend more time at university to complete the additional courses required to pursue another career direction. At the same time, the university's curriculum requirements left her and other students with limited options regarding program changes. The role of university curricula on students' career choices requires further investigation.

### *Mathematics*

Seven participants identified their strength in mathematics as a major contributor in their respective decisions to become a CA, although they didn't all pursue an undergraduate degree in mathematics. Sheila explained why she pursued the CA designation:

I was sort of a very practical person so I went into math only because I was actually very good at it in high school. I liked the idea of the Co-op program because I needed to pay my way through school. In Co-op you have to pick something and [I] picked CA. What I was really thinking was I could be an accountant or I could major in statistics or something and I would have options. I was looking for what is going to get me a job when I finish because that is the practical me as opposed to just the educational piece. [But] there was really no real forethought. It was just pick an option and [I] liked the idea of coming out with something. I had never taken any accounting or anything before. I was your classic three maths, three sciences kind of person.

Sheila's story is representative of other participants who went into accounting because of their strengths in, and enjoyment of, mathematics. She eventually was admitted to the partnership of a large public accounting firm but not before she had worked in industry at progressively senior positions.

Jean's story begins in a similar way to Sheila's but diverges when she reaches the manager level at a public accounting firm.

Jean: I was going to do languages actually when I first went to University. I took first year French and I said forget this I'm not doing it. I was good in math... but I had never even seen accounting or knew what accounting was but because I had good grades in math I thought maybe I could do ok in math, in accounting since I sucked in French [laugh].

I was there [worked at a public accounting firm] till [sic] [I was] a manager. I realized early in my career that I did not want to make partner and probably not so much that I didn't want to make partner but I couldn't make partner because I couldn't sell the services. I knew I was not capable of selling the kind of services that a large accounting firm was delivering especially to entrepreneurial type clients because in all honesty I didn't think half the clients needed those services [laugh]. And I'm not a sales person, never was, never will be and to make partner you had to be able to have a good client base...you needed to have that ability to bring in clients and I knew I didn't have that. I realized that very quickly. So I decided to start looking elsewhere.

Jean later described her career after leaving a public accounting firm:

I really had no idea where I was going. I think all along I sort of expected to stay in some sort of organization and go up [progress]. Then I finally went out on my own [became self-employed] and I sort of let things fly in the wind and where they land, they land.

She believed she could not become a partner because of her perceived inability to sell services, yet she eventually left paid employment to start her own accounting practice. When questioned about this contradiction Jean commented that much of her practice was built on relationships, individuals, and organizations that she had previously worked with or for and who knew her work. It is possible, therefore, that it was not Jean's inability to sell that was at issue, rather it was her perception that she could/would not sell services to clients if she thought they did not add value. The value of work was a major theme that emerged in the stories and is discussed in detail later in this paper.

### *Parents and Other Individuals*

Participants identified specific individuals who influenced or affected their respective decisions to pursue a CA designation. Lindsay described in some detail the process she followed to arrive at her decision to become a CA:

... [My] parents have always told me that you need a designation; you need an education so I [knew] I



would get some sort of designation but no other designation [other than CA] appealed to me.

When I was about 16 years old I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life. My Dad works for a multinational company so he organized some meetings with some of the women professionals at some of the companies. So Marketing, HR, and Finance were the three groups that I went to visit and I just sort of sat down with each woman and talked about what her job was, what her educational background was, what requirement [was needed] or what they suggested in terms of getting an education. The one I was most interested in was the one woman working in finance and she had originally told me to get an engineering degree and then to get an MBA so you would have an understanding of the process and then also the financial side.... So that's [why] when I applied for university I applied to Business and Science so I could kill two birds with one stone. So and then I guess my Dad's a CA.

What Lindsay indicated later in the interview is that she wasn't sure she would stay in the public accounting sector and saw herself as spending no more than 30 months in the sector and then finding something else.<sup>5</sup> What Lindsay thought "something else" would be however is rather nebulous as she did not articulate possible destinations. At the time of the interview, she had passed the 30 month timeframe and was still working in a public accounting firm. She noted that "...[so] I don't think I'll become a partner just because I can't handle the risk side. But I have no intention of leaving the firm any time soon." Lindsay may find herself in a situation similar to that experienced by Ashley at some point in her career in that she will have to decide whether to change her views on partnership or leave the firm.

While Lindsay was the only participant who expressed concern about the risks associated with partnership, Dalton et al. (1997) found litigation risk to be a significant contributor to departure from a firm (for both women and men). Litigation risk has increased since the time of their study, with the collapse of Enron, the demise of Arthur Andersen, and the introduction of legislation in Canada and the USA. The possibility that litigation risk contributes to a decision to leave a public accounting firm requires further exploration.

Amy's mother recommended that Amy become a CA on the basis of a discussion with a woman CA whom she met on a plane. This input from her mother, combined with Amy's strengths in math and English directed her towards the CA profession. "...[S]he [her mother] came home and said Amy, think about doing this you know [it's] really interesting and glamorous [laugh]. Little did she know." Amy admitted that during her first

three years in a public accounting firm she cursed her mother

... for getting me into this mess and writing the exams and auditing. I wasn't that excited about what I was doing. But I found myself years later, that woman on the plane talking to some poor kid's dad [laugh]. You know how interesting it [CA profession] could be. So some kid's cursing me [laugh].

Despite her initial concerns, Amy remained in a public accounting firm for several years post-qualification. She did, however, make it known that she did not enjoy auditing work and would welcome special projects and assignments. As a result, Amy worked on special projects in North America, the Caribbean, and Asia, and did a secondment with a firm in the United Kingdom. She noted that the nature of the work on many of these assignments was not particularly challenging but the experience she gained in working in different cultures and supervising staff in other countries was very rewarding.

Amy's narrative discussing the pursuit of partnership was quite lengthy. It exemplifies, more so than any of the other narratives on this subject, the internal tension experienced because of her indecisiveness about becoming a partner and her frustrations with the partnership process.

Amy: [T]hen there was all of that stuff about partner versus associate partner thing at Firm A and I just found it so sexist it was unbelievable. To be fair, on one hand I never made it very clear that I wanted to be a partner. I never pushed for it but at the same time I felt that they [partners at Firm A] didn't nurture people to do that. I don't know whether it's a woman thing or a man thing. Or [whether] you need to be aggressive about it or what but it [partnership process] wasn't raised to you even though you were a talented senior manager.

You know 'wouldn't you rather be an associate partner?' When I realized OK if you want to be partner you have to make your intentions known I need to talk with Matt [senior partner] and see what I have to do. He [Matt] talked about the treadmill and do you really want to get on that and I [was] like well, what treadmill? The partner treadmill? I sort of thought like if I was a man would you be asking me if I wanted to get on this partner treadmill? [laugh] I mean it's a fair question but I'm on a partner or associate partner treadmill, so what's the difference except you get paid [laugh] a lot more on the partner treadmill.

Amy was not admitted to the partnership at Firm A so she accepted a position at another public accounting

firm. In response to the question regarding her intention to pursue partnership at Firm B, she laughed.

Amy: It's unbelievable isn't it? I've been in this group for a long time now [laugh]. I go back and forth on it. I mean it's complicated by what I want personally... do I really want to work that hard? So part of it is like I am working that hard anyway why not get compensated for it? I don't know that I would work harder if I was a partner but I feel like you need to commit to getting it. And I haven't committed to getting it. You know I think you need to sort of push and do the networking and the politicking, not in a gross way but just in a natural way. People need to know who you are and I don't mean that in any kind of negative way, no negative connotation implied but it takes effort and I haven't committed to putting in that effort to do that. Uh so I don't know.

Danielle was also quite ambivalent about pursuing partnership. She decided to pursue a CA on the basis that several students in the year ahead of her in her engineering program had gone on to do the CA. "I thought of it as an option so in my last year I had already chosen certain electives that would give me credit in the CA stream if that was what I was planning to do." Upon graduation Danielle accepted employment with a public accounting firm because she "liked the people." When she started at the firm:

[i]t was kind of like still going to school because I had half my credits that I needed to get but I [was] still kind of working so it seemed to me I wasn't really committing to doing anything [laugh]. And no one told me that working and taking courses was the worst of all worlds and not the best of all worlds.

Danielle noted that she did not really make a decision about partnership until specifically asked by a senior partner after eight years at a firm. "He [the senior partner] asked do you want to be a partner and I said I don't know, which pretty much means I am not going to be because you don't become a partner unless you want to." Later in the interview Danielle described a change in her decision to pursue partnership:

There had always been, for some reason, a real perception that I wanted to be a partner even though it wasn't something I thought about. And while I was on the international assignment I had decided, in my own mind, that it would be something that I would like to do. So I crossed from that kind of 'don't know' to um... to I'll think about it.

Like other participants in this study, Danielle sought out special assignments and secondments to other offices. The moves had the effect of allowing her to defer

decisions about partnership. Her thinking on the subject changed over time and she was admitted to the partnership in her 13th year with a firm.

### Summary

Participants chose to pursue a CA designation in the absence of specific identified career goals. They took advice and input from other individuals or allowed a particular skill (mathematics) or institution (university) to direct them towards becoming a CA. Their stories contain many narratives concerned with finding themselves in positions of limbo or a vacuum in which they were unwilling or unable to decide what their next career steps should be. Danielle was much more explicit, noting that her career consisted of inertia.

The narratives concerned with pursuing a CA designation, when explored in conjunction with narratives concerned with decisions to pursue (or not to pursue) partnership, provide new answers to the question asked in this paper. In the absence of identified career goals to become a CA or to become a partner and the uncertainties surrounding the nature of work performed by a CA, women CAs leave a firm prior to partnership.

### Value—Existence and Importance

It is frequently reported that women CAs leave public accounting firms because of a lack of or limited promotional or advancement opportunities within the firms as well as offers of new career opportunities outside of public accounting. What is often missing from the discussion is what is meant by *opportunity*. An analysis of the participants' stories found that narratives of career were far more complex than what can be adequately captured in a broad category. Participants did leave public accounting firms to pursue other opportunities or as Ashley most insightfully described—other options (i.e., the action or instance of choosing or deciding, Collins, 1993). Participants also changed positions within a public accounting firm, moved between public accounting firms, and returned to public accounting firms from positions in industry for reasons that can be succinctly described as *offers of new career opportunities*. An in-depth discussion and analysis of moves between and back to public accounting firms is often absent from the Women-in-Accounting turnover/retention literature although the examination of this movement could advance our understanding of why women CAs leave public accounting firms.

Participants expressed a need for continuous learning and exposure to new challenges, which led them to seek or accept job offers that they perceived would

satisfy this need. They also were quite emphatic in expressing their need to be involved in work that they perceived provided value to clients and to themselves. While the word *value* is often used in the context of money, it can also refer to “the assessment or estimate of worth, merit or desirability” (Collins, 1993, p.1287). It is the latter meaning that frequently emerged in the stories discussed below. The value of work, particularly in its nonmonetary context, is an area that has been previously under-explored in relation to the departure of women CAs from public accounting firms. In this study, two themes have emerged with respect to the value of work and its impact on decisions to remain with or leave a public accounting firm. The first involved the value of audit work provided to clients in terms of intrinsic and monetary value. The second involved the participants’ perceived value to themselves, specifically as it related to providing opportunities to learn.

*The value of audit work.* The value of the services provided to clients by public accounting firms was challenged in terms of the usefulness and the cost of the service as represented by the fees charged by the firms. Audit, a primary service line and *raison d’être* for many public accounting firms, is usually the first service line that entry-level people are exposed to when joining a firm (Cooper, Rose, Greenwood, & Hinings, 2000). All of the participants had performed audit work although only two worked in the audit function at the time of this study. The overarching message that emerged from the stories was that the participants did not like or enjoy auditing; they could not see that it provided any value to their clients; and for some, the work was boring and repetitive, causing them to question the sense of it.

de Beauvoir (1976) has provided us with insights into the noneconomic context of value that can contribute to understanding the narratives. She has explained that “there is no more obnoxious way to punish a man [sic] than to force him to perform acts which make no sense to him, as when one empties and fills the same ditch indefinitely” (p. 30). “This mystification of useless effort is more intolerable than fatigue.” (p. 31).

Ruth’s view of the value of audit services appeared in the following two narratives.

Ruth: ... [like] you were just auditing for completeness, accuracy, authorization, there was *no value added* and the *disruption to the clients* and the time was significant and the *fees were ridiculous* and *I just couldn’t do it.* [italics added].

[And] I was not interested in SOX work.<sup>6</sup> I don’t believe in it. I don’t believe it focuses on the real risk areas. I don’t believe there is sufficient attention to tone at the top. I think it is overkill; it is *a waste of money.* [italics added]

Sue was particularly emphatic in describing her feelings about audit and auditing.

Sue: I really did not like audit. I am not a strong supporter of audit. I don’t think an audit is that much use. I just remember the partner relying on me in a bank [audit] to document the foreign exchange system. So here I was at 20 [years of age] trying to understand a foreign exchange system and I still to this day do not think my explanation was totally right yet this person [the partner] relied on me. So I just don’t put much comfort in an audit.

Sue described herself as a problem-solver. Her narratives speak of a woman who gives her full commitment to any project, event, or activity that she takes on. Perhaps this particular experience is still with her because she is concerned that (a) she did not arrive at the right explanation or description of the system and (b) someone made decisions on the basis of her work. In her view, a different explanation of the system might have resulted in a different audit decision.

The perceptions and attitudes towards auditing that emerged in these stories says as much about the nature of audit work and the audit profession as they do about the individual women and their respective careers. The participants entered the profession with no real understanding of or knowledge about the nature of work performed by CAs in public accounting firms. Yet as they progressed through the firm, they increasingly questioned the value of the audit work to the clients and to themselves. In the latter case, the questioning appeared in the form of stories about seeking challenging work and their frustrations in the absence of challenging work. There was a continual focus on new learning—an identified need to add to their knowledge and expertise. Perhaps then it is the nature of the work, that is, the repetitiveness and the perceived lack of value of the work to the clients against the significant fees charged for these services that contribute to the turnover of women CAs in public accounting firms. It has less to do with long hours, travel, and family conflicts and more to do with the absence of challenging and meaningful work. Amy noted that:

I think if I had stuck it [audit] out through to senior manager or partner maybe I would have changed my mind because I think partners do add more value. They do have a bigger business perspective [and play] that consultative role.

Amy’s perception is supported by Cooper et al. (2000), who note that partners in public accounting firms are required to work interactively with multiple clients in order to identify client needs and devise solutions. However, Danielle noted that “once you become a partner you sit there. For a lot of partners that is what they are going to do for the rest of their careers”.

*Seeking new challenges.* This was a major theme that emerged from the narratives, particularly as it concerned a decision to leave a public accounting firm. Sheila left public accounting to accept a position with a client after approximately four years with a firm.

Sheila: So, once again, it was one of those things where I really wasn't looking to move on but I was approached by the client...and the job I took on was quite a senior job for a pretty young person. I was supervising a group of 14 people and every single one of them was older than me. I traveled [sic] non-stop, it was a *challenging job for me managerially* [italics added] because literally a lot of the people I was supervising had been with the organization for 10 years or more but they weren't qualified accountants.

Several participants remained in public accounting firms for some time post-qualification before leaving for positions in industry, while others continued to work in firms. This appears to contradict the proposition that the perceived lack of value attributed to audit services is primarily responsible for women's withdrawal from public accounting firms. There is, however, another situational factor at play here.

Beginning in 1977, the public accounting firms embarked on an institutional change that saw them move from being organizations "primarily meant to provide audit and accounting, tax and insolvency services" (Greenwood et al., 2002, p. 64) to organizations promoting "accountants as business advisers in the broadest sense with diverse skills and services to offer their clients and employers" (Greenwood et al., p. 64). This change provided professional staff with additional career options. They could move from audit to more consulting type roles, where the work was more diverse. Eight participants in this study worked in the nonaudit client service delivery side of public accounting at some point in their respective careers.

Amy enjoyed participating in special projects and assignments because she liked to travel and the client engagements frequently took her outside of North America. She noted that "I was doing everything I could to avoid audit [laugh]... People knew that I was looking to do different things so when something new came up [they contacted me]." When Amy moved to a consulting area within a firm she initially enjoyed the new challenges. Over time she changed her position, noting:

...[and] I think I was frustrated in particular that it [the service] wasn't evolving, we were doing the same things over and over again and even though it

wasn't working perfectly it wasn't evolving any. And the other thing that frustrated me was *the benefits to the client*. Like it seemed like a good idea, it seemed like it should be really helpful for them but we hadn't sort of nailed *how to give real value to the client*" (italics added).

The participants in this study told of their continuous quest to seek out work that was challenging or different and that allowed them to learn and develop. Auditing didn't fulfill these needs so they looked to the consulting services areas of public accounting firms. A move to the delivery of the consulting services appears to have deferred the withdrawal from the firms for some participants, but ultimately most of them left. The ability to pursue a career outside of audit in a public accounting firm has been significantly restricted post-Enron. Thus, the firms may consider the development of alternative career paths as a means of reversing turnover statistics and retaining more women at senior levels.

When Danielle was an audit manager she was assigned to big clients, which provided her with access to the "C-suite" and senior people [in an organization] in a way that you wouldn't if you actually worked in those organizations." Danielle noted that the partner she worked for

[W]as really really good at understanding what motivated me. Even though I was a junior staff member on [sic] the client [a large multi-national organization], he would identify opportunities and see that I was included. I was always taken to audit committee meetings, which at that time a lot of partners didn't do with their managers. My perception of [it] was [that] he [the partner she worked for] did it for me. There was probably a lot in it for him [as well].

Danielle was able to participate in all aspects of client engagements. "I became the only Canadian manager who had attended the New York closing meeting [for a particular client]. It was really quite a unique experience. I was the only woman the first year." In her third year on the client engagement "I got to go to the closing meeting and the planning meeting. My seat at the table was now getting closer and closer [to the middle]." Danielle enjoyed what she was doing, in part because of the partner's support that made it possible for Danielle to participate in client meetings and other activities while she was still a relatively junior member on the engagement.

AICPA (2000) reported that women accountants who leave and subsequently return to a public accounting firm at a later date tend to return to the small and mid-sized firms and not the Big 4. AICPA researchers attributed this phenomenon to the greater flexibility to manage

work-family matters and lower levels of stress present in the smaller firms. The stories in this study suggest another explanation that has nothing to do with work-family matters or high levels of stress. Ruth explained her move from one of the Big 4 to a smaller firm this way:

So I left the Big 4 firm voluntarily because I was on relatively large audits. I joined a small CA partnership—three partners and I really loved it because I was doing everything from taxes to management consulting. At the Big 4 it was very level oriented so you know at a certain level you would only do confirmations and certain sections of the file but within the smaller firm I was responsible for my own clients and therefore I got a lot more challenge, a lot more exposure, and a lot more learning out of it.

During her first co-op work-term Kathy stated that she:

[L]anded with a sort of mid-size firm in Toronto. My last choice. It's ok I was their last choice too [laugh]. But you know I began to quickly realize I actually enjoyed it because I began to realize [after] talking to my friends that I was given a lot more to do being in a smaller firm than they were in a big firm. They got tiny little slivers of cheques to vouch and stuff. I was doing everything from scratch. Yeah, little businesses, shoe-box type stuff but I got to see everything including the tax returns. So I found I actually really quite enjoyed it.

In a subsequent work-term, Kathy considered moving to one of the Big 4 accounting firms because they offered in-house preparatory courses for people writing the UFEs. She thought she might be at a disadvantage if she stayed with a small firm.

Kathy: And the more I talked to my friends the more I did not like what they did day to day [laugh] and I thought you know what, I don't care. I'm taking my chances and stayed with the mid-size firm.

Participants in this study appeared to have limited patience when it came to working through the mundane aspects of one position in order to advance to the next level within an organization. They moved when a more challenging opportunity (as they perceived it) was presented. They spoke of a need to participate in work that engages them, challenges them, and provides the space for them to learn. They, following from de Beauvoir (1976), could not perceive any value in what was to them *useless effort*. The current nature of the work performed in public accounting firms eventually ceased to satisfy their need for continuous learning so they sought out alternatives in other organizations.

## Discussion

### Summary

Participants chose to pursue an accounting designation in the absence of information on or an understanding of the nature of work performed by public accounting firms and the role of accountants within those firms. They offered many reasons for pursuing a CA designation, often influenced by institutions such as universities and individuals such as parents. They did not enter the profession with any explicit goal of becoming a partner in a public accounting firm. This, in itself, is not new as Anderson-Gough et al. (2005) found that both male and female trainees entered the profession in the absence of stated goals. When we look, however, at what the participants did after obtaining the CA designation and the reasons offered for not pursuing partnership, we see a connection with the articulated reasons for becoming a CA. In the absence of specific goals to pursue admission to the partnership either when first entering the profession or during tenure at a firm, many women CAs leave the public accounting sector.

Participants placed a particular emphasis on a need for continuous learning and exposure to new challenges. This led them to question the *value* of the work performed in public accounting firms, particularly in the area of audit services. They did not appear willing to remain in an area or position in which they perceived there was limited or no value to their clients and to themselves. Consequently, they moved when opportunities for new learning and new challenges presented themselves. This included returning to public accounting firms after working in industry or attending to family matters, which suggests that changes in the profession and/or public accounting firms at particular points in time offered new learning and potential new challenges.

### Contributions to Scholarship

The findings advance our knowledge of the reasons contributing to decisions to leave a public accounting firm. Examining narrative stories provides context within which to analyze the decisions made to enter and leave public accounting firms. Each story was unique, allowing us to peel back the layers of previously reported categories for leaving a firm, such as *personal choice* or *better opportunities elsewhere* to reveal the existence of multiple meanings. As Kathy explained in the quote at the beginning of this paper, she left a public accounting firm and other positions because she had an expressed need to try something new. Jean, on the other hand, left because of her belief that she could not sell services,

which is a key evaluative criterion for admission to partnership. The identification and analysis of multiple meanings for the reported categories have been missing from the more traditional extant literature.

A contribution (and extension of the current Women-in-Accounting literature) of the current study is the insights provided with respect to the reasons given for pursuing a CA designation and the reasons for decisions to pursue partnership. Both of these areas have been previously neglected despite calls for research. The focus on individual stories of career contributes to a more in-depth understanding of the reasons why individual women pursue a CA designation and, following from that, why many of them left a public accounting firm before partnership. Some participants believed they lacked the skills necessary to be partner and thus sought positions in industry. Participants expressed their lack of interest in or commitment to becoming a partner leading them to leave a firm. In an environment that has, until very recently, promoted an "up or out" advancement philosophy, it should not be surprising that women CAs leave public accounting firms prior to partnership when they have no interest or aspiration to become a partner. Finally, many found an absence of challenge and value in the performance of audit work. Thus they sought out positions either in other areas of a firm or in industry that would provide the challenge and learning opportunities they were looking for.

#### *Applied Implications*

While there is a significant body of research on work-family conflicts, the eight mothers participating in this study often gave only passing mention to their children and did not describe the presence of work-family conflicts as a reason for leaving a firm. This suggests that the presence of work-family conflicts may not be as prevalent as the research and public accounting firms would have us believe. Alternatively, professional women may not see such conflicts, if they exist, as important to the story of their careers. Public accounting firms may want to expand their focus on retention and advancement of women accountants to incorporate the nature of the work, alternative career paths, and the presence of structural constraints, all of which may play a role in the turnover of women CAs.

Rarely does research examine the nature of the work performed in public accounting firms. The stories contain narratives that express the participants' frustrations with the absence of challenging work, particularly in the audit function, and concerns about the intrinsic and monetary value of the work delivered to clients. These feelings of frustration led them to leave a firm in search of more

challenging work elsewhere. There was a suggestion, however, that if the firms permitted individuals to be more actively engaged in audit engagements earlier in their tenure with their firms, women CAs might remain with a firm. For example, Danielle's narrative informs us that she remained in audit in part because a partner actively involved her in the client engagement early in her career. Public accounting firms should re-examine their client service delivery models with a view to involving professional staff in all aspects of an engagement at an earlier point in the professional staff's tenure.

A key challenge faced by accounting firms and the profession is the identification of the *real* reasons why a woman CA leaves a firm. Although many firms conduct exit interviews and accounting associations such as AICPA conduct focus groups and other forms of research, perhaps the responses provided represent a form of impression management or front-stage performance (Goffman, 1959). The women either tell the firms what they think the firms want to hear or decide, for whatever reason, to provide a standard response. The profession may want to seek alternative methods for examining the departure of women CAs from firms.

#### *Limitations and Directions for Future Research*

The research approach employed (interpretative study utilizing narrative inquiry), while appropriate for this type of study, does pose limitations. Firstly, the approach is not amenable to large data sets, thus limiting the generalizability of the research findings to the broader population of women CAs. Notwithstanding this limitation, the findings reported here cannot be dismissed and deemed not generalizable per se because generalized findings from the published literature were used as a starting point and appeared in various manifestations throughout the stories told by the participants. Moreover, the objective of the study was not to surface findings that could be viewed as universal. Rather the goal was to generate insight concerning the careers of individual women CAs, which may well capture the experiences of other women CAs.

A concern of any research involved with human subjects telling their respective stories is the possibility that the participants tell the researcher what they think she wants to hear, leading to a front stage performance (Goffman, 1959). Bruner (2004) explained that life (or in this study, career) is not how it was but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold. It is possible, therefore, that re-interviewing the same participants at a different time or in a different place could lead to different conclusions. This is a limitation of any

research working with participants in the interpretative paradigm.

An analysis of the stories gathered for this study suggests, however, that participants opened up the *backstage area*, which is typically off-limits to the audience (Goffman, 1959) and found story-telling to be a positive experience. Ashley thanked the researcher for providing her with an opportunity to reflect on her career and Amy noted that she felt like she had “just had a therapy session” and one that she viewed in a positive light.

Amy: I don't know [laugh]. It's so funny though. It does, it feels, I know you too, right? It's different than talking to someone who is who's [long pause] who is neutral or sort of objective or whatever. I feel like you already know part of the story and I also know you know people that I know so it probably has a slightly different flavour for me then if I was talking to someone completely objective. Although, I mean I have been completely honest. You know that's one of my faults [laugh].

Rather than posing a limitation, the interpretative approach opens up the richness of the empirical materials, providing us with insights that might not otherwise surface in a positivist research design.

The participants in this study were a diverse group in terms of positions held, length of tenure in public accounting firms, age, and marital status. The diversity of demographic factors may mask or, alternatively, unduly highlight a decision to remain with or leave a public accounting firm. Going forward, consideration should be given to interviewing women CAs when they first enter the profession and at specific points subsequent to the entry as this could provide insights as to the timing of the decisions concerned with partnership and leaving a firm.

One of the areas that has received limited attention in the literature is the movement of women CAs between public accounting firms and industry. The AICPA (2000) has endeavoured to explore this movement, but only with respect to women who have left a firm, primarily for family reasons and then returned to a smaller firm at a later date. Participants in the current study told stories of movement that occurred in many directions. The movement did not appear to be influenced by the perceived flexibility of smaller firms regarding work and family, or the absence of an “up or out” advancement philosophy. This is a subject area where both academic researchers and public accounting firms should focus their attention. What is it that attracts women CAs back to public accounting firms (regardless of size) after working in other fields or taking time off for family reasons? Answers could make a significant contribution to answering the

primary question on why they initially leave firms. Perhaps the movement of women CAs between firms or from and to firms is a means for them to avoid what they perceive to be the *uselessness* of some of the work performed, particularly in the audit function. Moving provides them with the option of taking on new challenges not afforded by their current employer.

The multidirectional movement among firms of different sizes and from firms to industry also has implications for the public accounting firms and the structure of the partnership process. If a significant number of the women CAs who left a firm subsequently returned at a future date, then we might expect to see more women at the partnership level. This suggests that the firms' partnership processes need to be examined as it might be the process that is limiting or constraining the number of women admitted to the partnership. For example, does the process give recognition to and value experience gained in industry as criteria for admission to partnership or does it only measure time spent in public accounting firms? Is industry experience given the same weight in the process as networking relationships within the firm? Further research of the partnership criteria vis à vis the number of women CAs returning to the public accounting firms could prove insightful.

During the course of the interview phase, participants expressed an interest in knowing what stories of career told by men CAs would sound like; that is, would they be similar to or quite different from their own stories. Marshall (1995) indicated that she was questioned and even challenged about the “inappropriateness” of only studying women when men who became managers were also leaving organizations. In response to this question and because the career stories of men CAs is an under-explored area in the accounting literature this is a research path I intend to pursue—comparing and contrasting stories from male and female CAs.

### Conclusion

The stories reported in this paper highlight the existence of multiple interpretations underlying the previously reported broad categories concerned with women's departure from public accounting firms. The articulated reasons for pursuing a chartered accountant designation and subsequent decisions to leave a firm suggests the presence of links that have not received much attention in either the research literature or the policies and practices in public accounting firms. Taken together this study advances our understanding of this phenomenon and provides us with new directions for future research in this area.

## Notes

- 1 In contrast to AICPA neither the Canadian Institute of Chartered Accountants nor the ICAO publish comprehensive statistics concerning the gender or ethnic profiles of their respective memberships.
- 2 Two participants subsequently left public accounting firms for positions in industry.
- 3 Firms have recently introduced a nonequity partner position in an effort to retain senior staff that might otherwise leave the firm (AICPA, 2004). The name of the position varies among the firms. For consistency the term *associate partner* is used to describe this type of position.
- 4 Ashley left the public accounting firm several months after the interview.
- 5 The current requirements for obtaining a CA designation include successful completion of the UFEs and 24–36 months of work experience in a public accounting firm.
- 6 SOX refers to The Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002 passed in the USA in response to the failure of several large corporations e.g. Enron, WorldCom. The passing of the Act has generated considerably more audit-type work for public accounting firms.
- 7 Business slang for the Chief Executive Officer, Chief Financial Officer, Chief Operations Officer and any other executive positions in an organization.

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