



## *Why Women Teachers Say 'Stuff It' to Promotion: a failure of equal opportunities?*

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**ABSTRACT** *The study contributes to our understanding of the less obvious ways in which gender divisions at management level in schools are perpetuated. The authors examine a situation in which a confident, ambitious, well-qualified woman teacher chose not to apply for internal promotion to a management position. The context is a comprehensive school with a proven commitment to issues of equality. Governors and the head of the school were determined to encourage women applicants. Deficit model, 'trait' models, and traditional patterns of gender hostility are all considered yet provide a less than adequate explanation. Instead, complex individual behaviour patterns and external constraints influence events within an apparently positive equal opportunities climate. Analysis of these events and the parts played reveal subtle yet powerful gender dimensions behind a foreground of financial pressures and budget cuts.*

Picture a confident and capable woman (Lesley) who is head of a large faculty in a comprehensive school. She is ambitious and hopes to move into management. Her colleagues regard her highly, and when a post of deputy head becomes vacant in the school she and her colleagues expect that she will apply, and feel that she has a good chance of getting the post. Add to this that the vacancy has meant that there are currently no women on the management team, and it is known that the governors and senior management of the school wish to encourage applications from women. This is a study of the complex factors which contributed to Lesley's decision that she would not apply for the post – indeed, that she would gaze at her unfinished application on the computer screen at home and say 'stuff it'.

Most of the early sociological literature relating to women's careers in teaching has suffered from a number of assumptions, which include a deficit model of women, a persistent tendency to see women in family role terms, and a pervasive ideology of individual choice. In terms of providing explanations for the underrepresentation of women in school management, the deficit model embraces a perceived lack of motivation

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and aspiration, as well as the more obvious deficiencies which emerge from definitions of management skills and qualities as those commonly associated with masculinity. The growing feminist critique of these ideas has been wide-ranging. Works such as that by Sylvia Walby (1986), though not explicitly addressing education, have sought to explain employment patterns as the interrelationship of patriarchal and capitalist relations. Women's roles in organisations have been explored by writers such as Cockburn (1991) and Marshall (1995). Specifically within teaching, stereotypical assumptions about management and management style have been challenged by case studies such as those presented by Ozga (1993), and the notion of women rejecting the current values associated with 'management' and desiring to reconceptualise the term has been highlighted by writers such as Al-Khalifa (1989) and Ball & Goodson (1985). A critique of criteria for promotability has been developed with evidence of how those with power to promote interpret notions such as commitment and acceptance partially and to the disadvantage of women managers (Scase & Goffée, 1989; Goldron & Povey, 1992). Studies of senior women teachers' careers have also revealed the importance of sponsorship (Evetts, 1987) and the need for a supportive ambience and networking as necessary strategies for change (Burton & Weiner, 1993). Gradually the emphasis on individual choice has given way to an examination of constraints (Shakeshaft, 1989; Ozga, 1993; Adler *et al.*, 1993), a debate which in some ways parallels the competing explanatory claims of structure and agency.

It is hoped that an analysis of this woman's experience can illuminate some of these issues and convey the micro-processes which work against women's attainment of management positions. It is not a story of a woman facing barriers and prejudice at interview and appointment stage – for instance, a victim of the trait model described by Morgan *et al.* [1983] – for eventually she did not apply for the available promotion. Neither is it a story of a woman lacking confidence in her abilities to gain promotion and function as a manager, thus encouraging a deficit model of analysis. Nor does it deal with a woman working in a clearly gender-hostile climate such as that described by Mahoney (1985) or Jones (1985) – for the school has a better reputation than most for its concern with equality issues.

The study examines the way in which the actions of a woman within a particular sensitive situation are controlled by gender – what seems like choice being instead about constraint. The study also throws some illumination on the actions of men and women operating within a framework of compliance with some kind of ideological correctness – trying to pursue best equal opportunities practice as they saw it, and at the same time being influenced by complex subjectivities and loyalties. Finally, in structural terms, one of the aspects explored in this study is the influence of the current English context of diminishing resources in schools – a number of key decisions in this case were influenced by budgetary considerations. Thus, we hope to make a contribution to the literature on women's careers and teaching, by telling how sexual divisions are perpetuated, whilst not claiming to be able fully to explain why these divisions occur (Acker, 1994, p. 87).

In this case study a series of post-event interviews as conducted with those closely involved with events. These included members of management, Chair of Governors and a number of other staff. The key players were given more attention in that more than one interview was held with Lesley (the woman who is the focus of the study), the headteacher, and Jeff (the man who was appointed). It is important to note that the data these interviewees provide take the form of recollections and reflections on their own actions and attitudes, and on the actions and attitudes of others. The responses in the interview were made with regard to the self-view of the interviewee, a view mediated

by acknowledgement that the interviewer was committed to principles of social justice and emancipation. Within this context, we noted a genuine desire by participants to explore and explain events and to get at what they felt to be 'the truth', even where this entailed a critical examination of their own attitudes and behaviour. Because the interview data are seen as the major source of our conclusions, and because the key players considered their words carefully and honestly, quotations from them are used extensively throughout.

### **'It Was All Influenced by Money'**

The school in question was enduring a period of annual, almost crippling, budget cuts. With a central government committed to cutting public expenditure, the local education authority (LEA) which was responsible for setting the school's annual budget was not only making cuts overall in its education budget, but was also adjusting the budget to favour primary schools at the expense of secondary. In this context, as in many other English schools, a decision was taken to cut the size of the management team when the opportunity arose. Management contraction as a strategy for cutting costs had been presented to the school governors some considerable time before any resignations were imminent. As soon as was feasible, a team of three deputy heads was to be reduced to two. There were two predicted resignations from deputy heads - one man through retirement and one woman - the only woman on management - through promotion. The predictions proved accurate. As the two vacancies arose, they were to be pruned to one advertised post. Some concerns that the only remaining managers were male were voiced, but they were muted as it was envisaged by those in positions to influence appointments (for example the head and Chair of Governors) that the appointment of a woman was both desirable and possible.

It was at this stage that a series of financially-motivated decisions was made which would adversely affect the chances of a woman being appointed. The first decision was to appoint a temporary *acting* deputy head pending news from the LEA of the next budget round. The second decision was to extend this acting post across two terms as budget decisions were delayed. The final decision, and perhaps the most crucial one, was that an external appointment could not be afforded and the permanent deputy head would therefore be an internal appointment.

Lesley was a member of staff in the school, a faculty head who was viewed by many as a likely candidate for promotion, perhaps the most obvious woman candidate for a deputy head job:

I can't think of someone who is more entitled to expect to move onto senior management than Lesley. (male member of staff)

As the series of decisions described above unfolded, it was confidently expected that she would apply for the post and would stand a strong chance:

It was widely assumed she would apply for the post. (female member of staff)

Lesley was outstanding. (male member of staff)

How did this series of decisions affect her? In terms of the acting appointment there was an urgent need for someone to bolster what was at this point a very small senior management team. The acting post was, with minimum delay, given to a man (Jeff) in a senior position whose current post of sixth form responsibility most obviously approximated to the envisaged deputy head role.

At a governors' meeting concern was expressed that an acting appointment might affect the outcome of any decisions on a permanent post-holder, i.e. that Jeff would be advantaged in terms of the permanent appointment. The issue of the possibility of an all-male management team was raised. The governors therefore decided that the post should be temporary for one term only. The head also tried to make clear that the acting role would not influence the permanent appointment, and stated that every effort would be made to encourage women to apply when the permanent post was advertised:

We have rewritten all the advertising literature deliberately to ... make it appealing to women

But from Lesley's perspective the decision to appoint Jeff, and then to extend the temporary appointment, had a massive influence. Her respect for Jeff was apparent when she described his ensuing work as acting deputy:

Slid into it, did a brilliant job, superb job, I wouldn't want to detract anything from him in what he has achieved.

Allied with this respect was the view that the way he had taken the opportunity afforded by the acting role to demonstrate his ability, would itself create a barrier:

The way I saw it was that I was up against someone who had already proven himself in that role ... had done a brilliant job, there's no issue about it there.

When the financially-driven decision that the post would only be advertised internally emerged, Jeff's effective acting status assumed even more importance, for although Lesley saw herself as possessing the skills and qualities for the job, she saw the situation by this stage as less than 'open':

If I felt it was an open field, an open challenge, open, equal opportunity, I'd go for it like a shot. If I was going for it as an external candidate I wouldn't bat an eyelid, not for one minute.

As she talked it emerged that she identified Jeff's proven ability not as a perceived barrier to her being appointed, but as a major feature of a barrier of opposition to her which might affect her willingness to *apply* for the post. She was asked if the problem was that Jeff was the perfect match for the job:

There's more to it than that - the fact that there was an applicant who had been doing the job and had done it well ... There was the fact that a lot of staff saw it as Jeff's right to have that job because it was the sixth form. And I think that is where, if I was feeling any animosity at the time, or any opposition, it was because of that ... it would probably have manifested itself in people saying things like, well I don't know how Lesley can consider going for that job, what does she know about sixth form!

Her emphasis on the deputy head's responsibility area was important because up to the point when the permanent post was advertised, Lesley was convinced that the new post would be significantly different from the one Jeff was doing. When the advert appeared she saw to her dismay that it was called Head of Sixth Form. Her worries about the attitudes of her colleagues became more apparent:

I could see, if I'd have got that job, I'd have had a big job anyway to learn fast, and I'd have people working with me who felt resentful because they thought somebody else should have had the job. I'd have been under scrutiny because there'd have been somebody already doing it well and I would have been compared to them anyway. You know I just felt I was on a hiding to nothing.

It is clear that for Lesley the period of the acting appointment—its length, and the opportunities it gave to Jeff—seriously affected her motivation to apply for the post. Even more emphatically, the restriction of the post to internal applicants served to compound her fears. The likelihood of rivals for the post from an external field would have, in her perception, lessened the likely resentment of colleagues. Thus, the decisions taken by management and governors surrounding this post were critical in determining Lesley's actions and discouraging her from applying.

So what was the motivation of the decision-makers? As might be expected, the head's judgement was critical in determining events. The vacancy from Christmas posed problems. On the one hand, in any immediate measures the head 'was determined not to incur any more costs'. On the other hand, he was very worried about not having a deputy head around in a term which involved a lot of external marketing of the school, and so he needed the gap to be filled quickly: 'I wanted somebody with clout'. The only way to achieve both objectives was to appoint an acting post-holder without delay. Jeff was both the highest-paid and most obvious candidate for the job.

Subsequent decisions about a permanent post-holder were then dominated by the financial difficulties faced by the school. It was clear that for the head the spectre of compulsory redundancy was a forceful argument which outweighed other concerns. He linked his attitude to the philosophy of the school:

... [name of school] is not the place where you sack people. You work and work to get them to move up—because that's the attitude the staff take with the kids, you never write anybody off anywhere, you work and work to get the best out of them ... I think it is a good philosophy frankly to make sure that nobody is sacked.

This overriding commitment to no redundancy meant that an undertaking to appoint from outside could not be made until the new budget figures were known. As the first 'acting' term went on, it was obvious that the head was not prepared to act until figures were published. By this time the acting appointment had had to be extended for one more term. When the new budgets were finally announced, it was clear that the school could not afford an external appointment at deputy level—the money was not there to pay for the post. This was a blow to all for, as the head said 'we had a perception amongst the management that at any time the clouds would lift and we'd go out to the market'.

The decision to advertise internally only was not debated strongly. No one, as far as is known, suggested that there be a national advert even if the intention would be to appoint an internal candidate. This course of action, although probably practised in other schools, was not likely to receive support as the head and others would certainly see it as ethically unacceptable.

Throughout all of this, the conviction held that the school had a number of promising internal candidates including at least one strong woman. Not one of our interviewees fully understood the pressures that were being created up to the point that the deputy post was advertised internally. The perceptions of all could be summed up in the double negative of the head when discussing Lesley: 'I never thought she'd not apply'.

It was our impression that had the head been aware that management and governor actions were disadvantaging Lesley, he would not have prioritised equal opportunities practice above what he saw as the interests of the school in avoiding redundancies. That hierarchy of values emerged in interview. But neither is there any doubt that he expected

doubt that he expected and wanted her to apply, and that he considered her interests when compiling the job description, the reactions to which are explored fully later.

### **Choice or Constraint?**

The view that the decision made by Lesley was constrained by key budget decisions needs further examination. She was, at all stages, an individual with opportunity to choose her courses of action freely. Yet she felt herself to be constrained. In this next section we try to analyse these constraints, and in particular we attempt to discover how far gender was a component feature of them. We begin with what Lesley identified as the most important issue affecting her decision—lack of support from colleagues.

The group of colleagues with whom Lesley would have to work, whose possible resentment she identified, included a number of influential women in the school. Given this, Lesley was asked if she could disentangle the gender aspects of her perceived lack of support, from difficulties arising for a person of either sex standing against a respected incumbent. It is in her own attitude to the situation that she identified the influence of gender:

I think my anxieties about having to prove myself and face things, difficulties, with people I would have to work with, I think there's a gender issue there in the way that a woman prepares herself to deal with that situation and makes a decision whether or not to go ahead with that situation ... I think another man going for the job against Jeff would have had similar issues surrounding that application—but possibly might not have thought through the consequences and bothered as much about the consequences, as I do.

This was the only explicit attempt by Lesley to articulate the part that gender played in her decisions. We elaborate on that here, but also identify other aspects of gender influence. For instance, it is worth examining an interpretation of Lesley's responses to the situation in terms of a deficit model. She might be seen as a woman lacking the confidence to deal with a difficult situation. Her worries about lack of support were identified by her as a key element of her decision not to apply for the post:

Well, the worst thing about it all was probably the fact that nobody said anything, nothing whatsoever, apart from one female colleague who was fishing ... said are you going for the job? ... It wasn't a friendly enquiry at all.

She referred by name to two women colleagues, one who had spoken to her encouragingly before the advert appeared, the other who might have encouraged her, and was keen to see women in management, but who was absent through illness:

So there was nobody saying oh yes, the college needs a woman up there.  
[Question: You didn't get anybody saying to you—apply for this?] Nobody.

It is interesting that in another part of the interview she describes a telephone call made at the time to the woman ex-deputy whose promotion created the vacancy. Lesley clearly states that this woman encouraged her to apply in spite of her reservations. She also acknowledged that the head wanted and expected her to apply. In the light of this, her use of the word 'nobody' is not so much misleading, as conveying her perception that support had to come from her colleagues—not her manager, or an ex-colleague, but those with whom she was working and would continue to work.

Why was the feeling of lack of support from colleagues so important? Does it represent a female trait, a 'wanting to be liked', which has no place in management? Lesley's concern could be linked to her commitment to a management style which was essentially consultative and collaborative. Marshall (1984) says that managers whose values are defined as more typically female are likely to base management styles on concern for people. Charters & Jovick (1981) showed that female-managed schools had more participatory decision-making. In this context, 'support' from staff assumes greater importance. Lesley's ability to work in the style which most reflected her values might be seriously eroded if close colleagues were reluctant to support her. The definition of the deputy post would mean that she would be working with those very women and men most likely to have loyalty to the acting deputy. The school itself also had commitment to collaborative management styles. In such a context respect and authority are not automatically afforded to status, but are bestowed by colleagues. Thus, an emphasis on the importance of positive relationships may be seen as based on realistic perceptions of effective and appropriate management in this school.

There is little evidence to support a construct of Lesley as a woman whose actions were dominated by a need for support. Colleagues referred to her frequently as confident. She had moved to the school to take over a faculty which was experiencing difficulties and had faced challenges from staff with composure and competence. She enjoyed a challenge, yet this particular situation involved a hostile lack of support which she felt less willing to provoke.

There is much in the literature about hostility to women taking up management posts:

Several studies have explored attitudes towards successful and competent women. The argument is that men who find themselves challenged and beaten by a woman will experience a particular threat to their self-esteem and their belief system. One way of dealing with such threats is to develop hostility towards that which poses the threat – the high-performing woman. Ball, 1987, p. 287

These comments are reinforced by work such as that of Cockburn (1991) and Cumison (1989). However, these analyses refer to the attitudes of men. Lesley felt she would suffer from hostility from some men – but she felt able to cope with this:

Now that was a major issue. I felt there was an almost certain consequence that I would be the subject of comment. If I'd have got it, 'well she's only got it because she's a woman, they want to have a woman on senior management – it wouldn't have mattered who it was'.

However, this attitude was one that she felt able to face:

Actually that wouldn't have bothered me. What bothered me more was coming back to the issue of getting no support from colleagues.

It is interesting that Lesley identified the lack of support from amongst some women and she felt less willing to cope with this. This is a much more subtle manifestation of gender-derived attitudes and one on which there is far less research. Obviously the issue of loyalty to the acting deputy was crucial. Was there also, as at least one member of staff thought, hostility originating from a similar source to that of men:

She is b..... good and some of them don't like that. (A woman member of staff talking of the attitudes of other women)

Whatever the sources of the hostility, its effect on Lesley was strong. She described her feelings immediately after her decision not to apply:

At that point I knew that there really wasn't the support and I'd been right to back out because I'd have had a great deal of aggravation right from the word go ... If I was going as an external candidate and I knew I was going to face a lot of - I wouldn't have batted an eyelid. I'd have just got on with it. *But when you have worked with these people it hurts more.* (our emphasis)

It may also hurt more when the hostility comes from women and cannot be dismissed as easily as sexist-originated opposition from men - opposition which Lesley sees as not legitimate and which she can therefore handle more easily.

One further point worth noting is that the same loyalty to Jeff that she identified in others, she also identified within herself:

One key thing actually is, I mean, Jeff and I always worked really well together and discussed a lot of things including the sort of circumstances surrounding this post ... I can remember saying something like 'Well you know if the job is just a sixth form job I won't tread on your toes'.

It was this that made the issue of the published job description so critical. As soon as it appeared, she went to see the head, feeling that its sixth form emphasis had created insurmountable difficulties for her. She felt misled by the head - that he had failed to fulfil his promises that the permanent post would be distinctly different from the acting post. She was unaware that the head had taken great care over the job description, and had submitted it to governors for careful scrutiny and redrafting so that it would appeal to a woman applicant. The perceptions of the head and Lesley of this interview are different. The head described Lesley as coming to see him at this point for 'reassurance'. He sensed she was wavering in her intention to apply for the post. When talking of the meeting he said that at times she lacked confidence. They both agreed that she questioned the job description and whether it was really much more than the job Jeff was doing. The head was sure that there was plenty in the description to distinguish it from Jeff's job; Lesley disagreed. In Lesley's terms she also perceived that she was looking for reassurance, but not in terms of encouragement to apply because she lacked confidence. She wanted to be assured as to how the job was sufficiently different to enable her to overcome what she saw as the mounting obstacles to her application. Her perception was that she failed to receive this assurance. In the head's terms he saw both the job description and his relationships with the two potential candidates as an attempt to be 'even-handed'. What was not apparent to the head, management team or governors was that in Lesley's eyes, the only way to achieve her 'open field' - to give her a genuine opportunity to go for the job - was to have a job description which could in no way be seen as belonging to Jeff.

The final blow of that meeting was the response when she asked what would happen to Jeff if she got the job. She was told simply that he would have to do *her* job. Again, her feelings of loyalty to Jeff and friendship for him were evoked, and she felt yet another barrier to her application had been created. Through all of this can be traced a commitment to caring and collaboration which resonates with Gilligan's (1982) analysis of an 'ethic of care' which has contributed so strongly to relational feminism. This ethical code, which Gilligan identified as more prevalent in women than men, sees the importance of caring relationships and collaboration in ways of thinking and acting.

Whether or not one accepts these essentialist views, what is perhaps important here is the way in which the emphasis that Lesley afforded relationships went unheeded by others. There is no evidence that the head recognised her feelings at this point. The 'reassurance' she was given was appropriate in the head's eyes - she was encouraged to



apply – but it was certainly not the reassurance that Lesley sought. For Lesley the head did not appreciate, at this crucial meeting, the pressures that were bearing down on her. The head spoke emotively of his awareness later that she felt let down and how he acknowledged her feelings but could not really understand them:

‘Lesley’ actually said to me, ‘I’ll never forgive you for what you did to me about this’ ... I couldn’t see myself in the position of deserving that.

It is interesting that Lesley’s comment was so painfully ‘stored’ by the head. The remark is likely to have been a momentary short-lived response, since it was not remembered by Lesley, and nothing in her subsequent behaviour showed any hint of resentment towards the head.

There is one further aspect to the concept of ‘lack of support’ which is worth exploring. It could also be interpreted as lack of the sponsorship and/or mentorship which has been shown to be so influential in furthering women’s careers:

Career encouragement at critical times was a recurring theme of my interviews ... In other cases the encouragement was a matter of a word from an influential person at the right time. (Grant, 1989, p. 41)

A mentor relationship existed between Lesley and the ex-deputy, and she availed herself of this during the difficult period. However, acquiring this help demanded some effort by Lesley, given the geographical distance between the two women. Had the woman deputy still been in post in the school she may well, on the evidence of her previous behaviour, have also been an energetic sponsor of Lesley’s career. It is likely that she would have been sufficiently sensitive to the situation to ensure that the latent esteem and support for Lesley which existed among staff was made explicit to her. As it was, Lesley had at least one mentor, but undoubtedly lacked sponsorship. Thus, the absence of women in powerful positions in the school was influential. Paradoxically it was because all the managers were male that gender became a feature of the appointment, and it was because gender was a feature of the appointment that the men in power felt unable to step in – an issue explored in the next section.

The barriers to application that Lesley identified went largely unrecognised and unacknowledged by other staff. Among members of the management team there was an awareness of the strong tensions that the impending appointment had caused, but still surprise and disappointment that she did not apply. Within the disappointment it is possible to trace a view that the constraints operating on her were minor and could and should have been overcome. Crucial for Lesley was the lack of explicit vocalised support from staff at any level; the apparent and publicly acknowledged ability of the acting post-holder and loyalty to him; a job description which emphasised the experience and expertise of the acting holder; and the consequences for the acting holder of her being successful in her application. Against this she had ‘balanced’ encouragement from the head; statements from governors and management about a desire for gender balance on the team; and her own self-confidence in her abilities and career ambitions. Unsurprisingly, it was not enough.

### **Ideological Correctness, Subjectivities and Loyalties**

Gaby Weiner (1994, p. 126) uses this phrase in a discussion of feminist pedagogy and the raising of critical consciousness. She stresses that such raising of consciousness runs risks of imposing ideological correctness or clashing with subjectivities and loyalties. For this study we find the terms remarkably apt, for the same themes are manifest in an analysis

of the attitudes and actions of some of the influential players. In particular the head and some of the management team were struggling with their actions and the ideological bases for them, a struggle which at times seemed to demonstrate the straitjacket of 'correctness'. This was further complicated by their own subjectivities. Meanwhile, women on the staff, in different ways and at different times, gave voice to concerns about women's issues both as a group and as individuals. These feminist concerns were then variably mediated by loyalties and personal friendships of different strength and kind.

The phenomenon of male equal opportunities awareness 'serving to paralyse' is strikingly illustrated by the head when in interview he referred to his reactions on hearing the news that Lesley was not going to submit an application. He described his disappointment at her decision. He was asked whether he considered approaching her to change her mind. He answered in the negative and went on to show clearly how his awareness of being a male manager affected his actions:

It happens to me as a man managing women -you want to go back and be supportive but you don't know the definition of being patronising .... I should respect her decision and keep out of it.

He went on to muse about his uncertainty as to appropriate action: 'It's not the only time with women staff that I've stopped myself ... [thinking] - it would look like condescension'. Then he examined how gender-determined his response was by rehearsing his reaction if Lesley had been a man:

I'd have probably gone down and said, 'What the hell is going on here, what are you thinking of - you could do this job standing on your head. Is there something you want to talk through?' But I couldn't say that to a woman - any woman.

At that moment in the interview, it was apparent that the head identified clearly and was almost shaken by the gendered nature of his response: 'Awful isn't it - I haven't quite come face to face with that before'.

This head had continually demonstrated his commitment to the professional development of women. He would use monies to pay for women middle managers to attend management training; he would always encourage women staff to apply for posts that arose internally and externally. His actions would endorse the findings of Acker (1989), when she found in her survey that heads were as likely to encourage women as men. Furthermore, the previous woman deputy had been his closest colleague and confidante. Yet when the sponsorship needed to go further, when the encouragement needed to be greater and more explicit, the gender dimension affected events and fear of seeming patronising was part of a concern with ideological correctness which created a barrier to real and necessary encouragement.

For Jeff the issues were perhaps simpler and based on a liberal stance which equated equal opportunities with a context in which both could go for the job. He spoke at length of the discussion he had with Lesley in which each encouraged the other to apply. He made genuine assurances that he would not have minded if Lesley had got the post - he would have found something else to do. He saw loyalty to himself as 'misplaced' if it served to discourage Lesley from applying for the post. More fundamentally, he would have been angry if the post had been 'fixed' for a woman. All the male managers, including the acting deputy, saw the job description as a balancing act between the roles currently being carried out by Jeff and the roles designed to attract women and distinguish the job sufficiently from Jeff's post. As Jeff saw it, the more it moved away

from his job the more unfair it was to him, and the more it moved towards his job the more unfair it was to Lesley. It had to be something in between.

Key women on the staff also displayed some seemingly contradictory attitudes which merit analysis. Some of the women interviewed by us were those who had worked closely with Jeff and supported him in his application for the post. Others did not commit support to anyone but had hoped that Lesley would apply and had been disappointed when she did not. These differing views were predictable. Less predictable was the fascinating sequel to the appointment of Jeff. The 'Women's Group' of staff convened. This was a group initiated and encouraged by the ex-deputy which had met over a period of years, but not since well before the resignation of the woman deputy. The group loudly and with consensus voiced its concern that the school would have an all-male management team, and demanded measures to mitigate this. Amongst the emerging leaders of this group were some of the staff who had given most support to Jeff, and thus in Lesley's eyes had discouraged her application. In interviews with these staff it was possible for them to reflect their loyalty to Jeff and their view that he was the right appointment, and at the same time demonstrate anger and frustration that there was an all-male management team. Subjectivities and loyalties coexisted with commitment to gender equality – a commitment which resulted in radical management changes in the school see Coldron & Boulton, 1998.

### Conclusions

We have chosen to present this study as a thematic analysis, selecting and focusing upon a small number of themes to provide explanatory frameworks for events. It could also have been presented as a series of narratives from each of the key players within which differing views of events would be clearly emphasised. A chronological analysis is a third plausible method, which would have allowed us to experience and analyse events in a manner closer to that experienced by participants. Each of these methods has the potential to illuminate some, but not all, of the complexities of this study. With this caveat, we have tried to identify what we see as the causal ingredients of events.

Three differing themes have emerged in this case study. Firstly it can be seen as a sequence of events influenced by structural and financial decisions in which individual agency played little part. In this sense budgetary considerations constrained the actions of the school management. The economic survival of the school would take preference over any other consideration. A different theme identifies constraints as they operated upon the woman candidate, and shows her own and our perceptions of how much gender played a part in the construction of those constraints. A further analysis of interviews with other key staff shows ways in which commitment to an ideology of equal opportunities affected the actions of individuals. With some it meant a struggle to decide on a principled route through a gender maze; for others commitment to ideology was refracted by personal loyalties. Most importantly, what is demonstrated is that in an environment where commitment to equal opportunities was genuine and widespread, it was still possible for an able and confident woman to feel isolated and disadvantaged by the actions of her colleagues.

What, then, can we learn from this case study? At a practical level it is possible to identify some lessons that might be valuable for those faced with similar situations.

Women more often than men will be restricted to internal or local promotion opportunities. Given that, it is important to note some of the dynamics of internal appointments. Issues of staff support assume far greater significance, and in schools

where the management style is at least partly collegiate, this is accentuated. Explicit support and encouragement for candidates needs in this context to go beyond assurances of having the right experience and skills to do the job. Lesley herself identified the gender dimension of this when she spoke of being more concerned about lack of support than a man would be. Sponsorship, shown to be important for women particularly when exercised by those of 'gatekeeper' status, can also be even more influential in an internal context. The difficulties that arise when all those of gatekeeper status are male is demonstrated in this study. Research cited earlier has shown that male heads are likely to encourage women, but this study shows how a well-intentioned head striving for a positive action approach remains unaware of the constraints and barriers that he has played a part in erecting. More specifically in this context, decisions about interim acting posts were made with less attention to equal opportunities practice than was the case when the permanent post was offered. The advantages given to the acting man were underestimated and the consequences of the temporary appointment were more far-reaching than supposed. In reality, concerns about an all-male management team began at too late a stage.

Theoretically the learning from this study lies at what Acker (1994) calls the 'implementary' rather than the 'fundamental' level. It shows how rather than why the sexual divisions are perpetuated. Some illuminating features of this study are of how gender relations and subjectivities contribute to the micro-politics of this school with deeply gendered outcomes. No claims of generalisability are made or were intended, but we would claim to provide a contribution to the critique of the ideology of individual choice which has pervaded much of the literature around women and careers. The subtle balance between choice and constraint underpins this study. The constraints that are revealed here are less tangible though perhaps just as widely experienced as the constraints associated with family role or those related to notions of promotability, with which we are more familiar. In this case a major component of the raw materials from which many of the barriers were constructed was the gendered nature of relationships.

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