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# Leaders of men: women ‘managing’ in construction

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## Abstract

Although women’s experience of working in management has been studied extensively, the particular challenges they face in this role within male-dominated professions merits further attention. This article draws on research into the career experiences of women civil engineers in the UK to critically discuss the possibilities for women to pursue a management pathway within construction. A feminist theoretical framework has been used to analyse data from thirty-one in depth interviews with women working in both the consulting and contracting parts of the industry. The study highlights cultural issues of visibility and the presenteeism ethos of the sector as well as the material constraints of construction sites. Women are taking up senior management posts but only in very few numbers. Their success depends on assuming ‘male’ norms and in these roles they straddle a marginal territory that is bordered by exclusion and resistance.

**Keywords:** *construction; feminist; male-dominated; management; professions; women*

## Introduction

Despite the large increase in the numbers of women entering the labour market in recent years (Burke and Nelson, 2002), they remain under-represented in corporate leadership roles (Vinnicombe and Singh, 2002). A wide literature on the gendered relations of management has developed (Smith, 2000; Davidson and Burke, 2000; Wajcman, 1998) that suggests that, although equal opportunity and affirmative action are now embedded within corporate recruitment strategy, women are still unable to rise to top management posts in significant numbers. Collinson and Collinson (2004: 240) critique the power of ‘organisational time discipline’ which they argue has contributed to a ‘remasculinization’ of management in which women managers at all levels will only survive if they follow the example of their male counterparts to subordinate home and family to company and career. Powell (1999) adds the dimension of demography, arguing that with falling birth rates, there are fewer candidates for managerial jobs with the balance shifting towards more women who want to work and fewer men available for work. Accordingly we are left with the question of why there are still so few women in executive management posts that carry ‘clout’ (defined by Burke and Nelson, 2002 as policy-making power).

Whilst these concerns have exercised researchers and commentators across a broad range of industries and occupations for some time, there has in more recent years (mainly as part of an expanding feminist scholarship) been increased research attention on the fate of the aspiring female manager in male-dominated occupations. McDowell (1997), for example, has offered a critique of women’s ‘battle’ in the city’s financial institutions to establish a place both on the trading floors and in the boardroom. Exploring the alleged feminsation of law and management, Muzio and

Bolton (2006: 82) were led to conclude that ‘professionalism remains a male occupational project’. Ashburner (1994) draws these themes together arguing that women are most likely to be managers in those occupations that are still traditionally female such as catering and retail.

Extending this critique to construction, Evetts (1993, 1996), Greed (2000) and Powell et al (2006) are pessimistic about the opportunities for women to attain management roles in the industry where ninety-nine per cent of those employed are male (Michielsens et al, 2001). They draw attention to a number of barriers to women’s progress highlighting harassment, inflexible working structures and a routine reliance on long working hours to complete projects on time. The issue of managing on construction sites has been taken up by Druker and White (1996) who paint a picture of a potentially disaffected and unruly male workforce that presents itself as resistant to being managed at all. This is due to the particularly complex economic and social relations of the sector that is characterised by a culture of mobility and self-employment which has become embedded in the industry over a long period (in the UK almost one fifth of all self-employed people work in the construction industry – Social Trends, 2007). Other distinctive features include the prevalence of sub-contracting to specialist service suppliers, often as part of consultancy or consortia arrangements on a project-by-project basis (Paap, 2006). Additionally, the seasonal and fluctuating nature of construction make both unskilled and trade work in the sector insecure and competitive with hierarchies (for example, journeymen outrank apprentices and foremen outrank labourers) strongly reinforced. The drive for productivity, profit, speed and lower costs shapes economic competitiveness (in much the same way it does in other industries) whilst competitive displays of loyalty and commitment to the job are common worker behaviours that contribute to being a ‘preferred worker’ in respect of the next contract. These structural and social factors combine to create a fragmented and unstable ‘dog-eat-dog’ environment where external controls, whether by employment law, unionisation, health and safety regulation or by managerial authority, are difficult to implement.

This article builds on earlier writing about the sector (see Watts, 2007a and Watts, 2007b) and directs attention to the issue of management, specifically the experiences of female managers in the industry. Although there now exists extensive critical commentary on women’s experience of working as managers in a variety of industries, very little has been written about female managers in construction and this article, by exploring the views of female civil engineers, adds to knowledge about the ways in which women negotiate roles as construction managers. It also highlights more generally some of the implications of the findings for women pursuing management careers against a background of cultural resistance to women holding positions of organisational authority. Drawing on qualitative data, the article adopts a broadly feminist perspective in discussing participants’ concerns about management styles, insufficient remuneration for management work and what some saw as management burnout within the industry.

The discussion begins with a critical review of the ideas of Kanter (1993) and Cohn (2000), focusing on the issue of visibility to develop understanding of the ways in which corporate actors achieve high status positions. A brief conceptual critique of different management styles, drawn from the work of Carli and Eagly (2007), contributes to this discussion. The theme of embodied performance comprises the next section that explores the ways in which workplace identity is inscribed and

maintained by embodied norms within specific contexts. Discussion of modern UK construction follows outlining how the industry has adopted a stronger managerial focus within a changed global market, with professional progression increasingly viewed in terms of high status management roles. The section entitled 'To manage or not to manage' is the first of three that discuss the findings; it considers the extent to which women want to assume greater levels of responsibility at the executive level, and are prepared to do this on the terms already in place. The issue of management styles and the setting of construction sites comprise the next two discussion themes. These three discussion themes are connected by the issue of visibility, specifically women's high visibility as 'tokens' and physical spectacle contrasted with their cultural invisibility as legitimate authority figures. The article closes with discussion of the data that is conceptualised as a series of paradoxes demonstrating the dilemmas and complexities of corporeality, visibility and temporality that place women on the periphery of the construction managerial class.

### **Gendered visibility and management styles**

Kanter's (1993) seminal work on the sociology of gender explores the mechanics of corporate behaviour as well as the particular problems minorities face in achieving workplace advancement. The term 'minority' refers to any cohort that represents less than fifty per cent of the total and, to which the feature of standing out as different attaches. Kanter argues that minority status always involves the attribute of visibility that can have both positive and negative effects. Central to this ambivalence is the issue of risk; high visibility is positive when things are going well and targets are achieved but, in the face of poor performance or costly errors, visibility becomes problematic under the watchful gaze of critical colleagues and superiors. When newcomers who are different (for example, in terms of culture, gender or ethnicity) join an established homogeneous group they can represent a potential challenge to the majority. One response to reinforce the dominant culture of the majority is what Kanter terms boundary heightening that can be understood as actions by the majority to emphasise their group characteristics to make the newcomer feel as different and 'outside' as possible. Thus, for example, when a woman enters a male-dominated workplace sexual jokes and crude language may become overt rather than repressed. In some settings, the physicality of the workplace can border on sexual harassment – this holds particular resonance for women working on construction sites where women and other highly visible minorities are the butt of lewd jokes and comic innuendo (Watts, 2007a). Similarly, in the setting of the boardroom where a woman finds herself in the minority of one within an otherwise all male team, talk before the main business begins may be centred on male sport interests leaving her outside this social discourse (Cohn, 2000).

Cohn (2000) develops Kanter's (1993) critique to argue that boundary heightening behaviour on the part of the majority is intended to test the newcomer, to gauge their resilience, their willingness to conform and fit in. Such behaviour has as its primary effect the isolation of the entrant. If the newcomer is defiant or non-compliant this isolation is increased with their being further deprived of social support from colleagues. In these circumstances the likelihood that the newcomer will fail is increased. Within the business context being without friends is professionally dangerous (Cohn, 2000: 100) and can soon escalate into a profound handicap that cumulatively may result in a damaged reputation, a position from which it is difficult to recover. The consequences for women in a workplace where men define

themselves as the norm are varied and contextual, but these can be usefully summarised as the necessity to overcome their 'otherness' (Davies, 2003).

An extreme form of 'otherness' is where women have the 'only woman' status becoming tokens, accruing on the one hand, the advantage of being different and visible but, on the other hand, having to face the loneliness of outsider estrangement from male peers. The potential for outsider estrangement, however, is not solely determined by gender demarcations and the work of Kerfoot and Knights (2004) and Connell (1995; 2002) has contributed to understandings of the ways in which 'male' and 'masculinity' are socially constructed. Developing the theme of male heterogeneity, Connell (1995; 2002) argues, for example, that whilst the top corporate management roles are populated by men, these are not just any men but those who come from the middle- and upper-classes who have been educated at the best universities with access to those holding organisational power (Ravlin and Thomas, 2005).

Discussion in the literature about male and female management styles has not demonstrated that men and women use power differently. Nevertheless, it is the case that gender informs male and female leaders' values and priorities. Traditional gender stereotypes may both distort as well as confine expectations in this area raising the question 'should women manage differently?' In considering what constitutes leadership, Carli and Eagly (2007: 133) argue that styles are 'consistent patterns of interaction that typify leaders as individuals'. Although these styles are not a fixed set of behaviours and will contextually vary, they will be consistent with the demands of a particular role. Some writers (for example, Bales, 1950) draw a distinction between task-oriented and interpersonally oriented styles with the former being directive in accomplishing assigned tasks and the latter aimed at fostering good interpersonal relationships. These two styles have been refined within the development of further style categories; for example, the democratic style allows the participation of subordinates in decision-making whilst the autocratic model discourages participation. In a survey of comparative studies of male and female leaders conducted between 1961 and 2000, Carli and Eagly (2007) found that women were more likely to adopt a democratic or participative style. Later themes in the management literature refer to transformational leadership whereby a leader is a role model for subordinates whose loyalty is gained through possibilities for them to fulfil their potential within the organisation. Whilst these typologies offer insight into different approaches to management, their usefulness in respect of construction is mediated by the conditions of contemporary organisations that operate in a climate of fast technological change with the forces of globalisation giving rise to more complex relationships of interdependency.

### **The body as performance**

The literature on the embodiedness of roles, particularly the work of Butler (1993), has also provided additional theoretical insight and connects well with Connell's (1995) attempt to bring male bodies under the gaze of the organisational lens as a feature of studies of masculinities. Bodies are status carriers and key contributors to social hierarchies with contemporary idealised models (slim, fully able, fair skinned) dominating the social landscape. Such stereotypes can be seen as gender neutral but where there is a gender imbalance in a cohort these norms attach to a gendered normativity to produce a set of attributes that defines the ideal cohort member. Those deviating from this ideal are required to compensate for their 'outsiderness' by stronger role identification practices. A focus on the body as

culturally inscribed relates directly to the theorising of work as an embodied performance and is pertinent to this study in a number of ways.

Bodies are signifiers of meaning and can be understood as social process in material ways. Bodies labour (Connell, 2002), they are both active and passive and are subject to changing representation through choice (transformation resulting from cosmetic surgery is one example), age (though the effects of this can be marshalled/delayed), illness and role (requiring bodies to 'settle' according to particular codes of dress, uniform and discipline). Connell (2002) argues that bodies are inevitably patterned but this does not necessarily make them disciplined. In the workplace, however, bodies are disciplined to the extent that they are required to give an appropriate outward performance or masquerade (Butler, 1993) and thus conform to the display rules of a particular context/situation (Bolton, 2005). Goffman (1967) casts the outward performance of actors as central to social acceptance. His role theory also embraces the concept of role distance and offers a theoretical space for role dissonance suggesting that bodies in their materiality may play a role but also play *at* a role. This suggests some measure of resistance and provides for the possibility that workers may move in and out of role to varying degrees, borrowing attributes, as a way of reconciling conflict produced by discomfort at having to present themselves in a particular way to meet the needs of a given circumstance.

These ways of conceptualising both institutional behaviour and social practices produce subject positions that are imbued with taken-for-granted assumptions. These assumptions are reproduced within recruitment, training and appraisal (McDowell, 1997) and may be instrumental in persuading workers to manipulate their embodied behaviour to conform to particular codes and standards. Such expectations may include a gendered dimension that moves bodies along a continuum of visibility/invisibility (Sinclair, 2005) to produce appropriate masculine and feminine displays. In some work contexts (fashion modelling and policing, for example) it is visibility that is the embodied goal, in others such as call centre work the body is rendered invisible with only the voice as a tangible artefact. For women in male-dominated work environments, particularly for those who aspire to become managers, I argue that achieving invisible (wholly assimilated) bodily status forms one of the criteria necessary for advancement and functions almost as a 'status passage' (Bolton, 2005). This requires careful body management in a number of applied ways (physique, dress, adornment). 'Body work' can be understood as a form of impression management (Watts, 2008) that functions as continual bodily renewal on a daily basis. Such labour, however, is contradictory and paradoxical, particularly in its impacts on the visibility continuum. Advancement and opportunity may accrue from being noticed or marked out though Ravlin and Thomas (2005) note that, although such efforts by employees are of benefit to employers, rewards to employees are always determined by their place in the hierarchy. Where employees (often women) are involved in 'body work' connected to caring responsibilities in the private realm, the material reality of their lives serves to undermine impression management efforts directed at assimilated bodily status (Bolton and Muzio, 2007; Watts, 2008). This can be understood as negative visibility that ensures women remain at the margins of the professions (Bolton and Muzio, 2007: 53).

## **Context**

Civil engineering is one of several built environment professions serving the UK construction industry, operating as part of a huge sector that employs well over a million people (Social Trends, 2007). Although the multi-disciplinary and social nature of the industry has received limited attention in the literature, its products and cultural stereotypes have been well documented (Watts, 2007b; Greed, 2000; Paap, 2006), highlighting its strongly competitive and unequivocally male-dominated features. Women are poorly represented, particularly at senior levels (NCE, 22 May 2008) and currently comprise only five per cent of the total (ICE, 2007). A recent industry salary survey also reveals that women earn 32% less than their male colleagues (NCE, 15 May 2008). The UK profession has experienced great structural change over the past twenty years in response to the shrinking size of its localised traditional market and the commercial realities of globalisation. The need to adapt to a new business climate has coincided with a shortage of entrants to the profession and has resulted in an associated drive to encourage greater numbers of men and women to join this and other construction professions. Some of these measures have been directed particularly at women (Powell et al, 2006) but have failed to attract them in significant numbers.

The activities involved in constructing the built environment comprise the two core functions of design and building that take place in the settings of the office and the construction site. In these different worksites men conduct their own social negotiation of their masculine identities, often against a background of competing hierarchical tensions. Issues of communication, vested interest and deeply embedded authority structures frame the engineering solution that now also involves complicating factors such as public consultation and litigation. Whilst male workers in the sector are privileged and protected, they are not monolithic in their interests. The men of construction are starkly divided along the social lines of class, skill, age and race with these inequalities largely unrecognised in the literature. Paap's (2006) ethnography addresses these divisions describing how worker behaviours are driven by an overarching 'class consciousness' with labour processes acting as a vehicle for men to prove themselves as 'strong men', skilled artisans and as authority figures. She argues that 'sexuality, race and social class are things that are "done" and "accomplished" during the 7.00am to 3.30pm day' (Paap, 2006: 9).

The development of an international market for construction services has led to the rise of the non-technical corporate manager whose expertise has been 'grown' on MBA programmes and other management training courses making them a highly marketable cross-industry functionary. A new breed of highly skilled manager is not 'company-bound', often moving from one organisation to another, adopting the role of trouble-shooter. The proliferation of business advisers and marketing gurus are now an established feature of construction specifically to promote greater efficiency and sharper project management. How in the longer term, the advent of the 'super manager', who comes without engineering training, will be received by the wider industry is uncertain but Evetts (1996) notes that, increasingly, engineers and scientists find themselves in competition with management specialists (often accountants) for some of the most senior posts.

The term 'manager' within the wider construction sector is multi-faceted denoting a broad range of roles and levels of responsibility together with a taxonomy of leadership styles. Management may mean the management of others involving line-management responsibility or it may mean the supervision of a team as part of a project, or it may be a descriptive term for a hierarchical position denoting a

level of responsibility rather than a direct supervisory role (Ashburner, 1994:190). Site management is especially hierarchical resulting in clear vertical segregation of the workforce to maintain professional and social boundaries. Management in this setting is enacted by a 'command and control' model characterised by Greed (2000) as the "John Wayne approach to site management". She argues that the management of complex projects involving multidisciplinary and cross-organisational teams requires a directive style if deadlines and budgets are to be met.

At the most senior levels, companies now operate a mix of management formations, some with a more traditional partnership model and others with a board of directors headed by a CEO, many having been 'floated' on the stock market. The annual reports of UK consulting engineers show that boards are comprised almost exclusively of male members, despite the recurring rhetoric within the industry of promoting diversity and equal opportunity (NCE, 3 February, 2000; NCE, 17 July, 2003; James, 2008). Diversity, however, is not solely concerned with numerical recruitment targets, and the challenge of developing workplace climates that will enhance minority employee retention is proving to be significant (McKay and Avery, 2005; Mattei and Jennings, 2008). Discussion of gender, as one feature of diversity likely to influence the management profile of the sector, continues to be a topic of current debate (NCE, 3 July 2008).

### **Methodology and participant profile**

The qualitative research discussed in this article adopted an ethnographic approach to data collection, with semi-structured interviews as the principal method. My work in the sector as an independent training and technology consultant over a seventeen-year period involved visiting projects and construction sites as well as bringing me into contact with senior industry figures. The aim of the research was to explore women's professional experience of working in construction. A range of subjects was covered and management and leadership were discussed under the umbrella topic of career advancement. Discussion of the study's methodology has been outlined in earlier work (see Watts, 2006) but is briefly revisited below, highlighting the participant profile and the procedural and ethical conduct of the research.

The thirty-one participants ranged in age from twenty three to fifty six years and were employed in both the design and building sides of the business. As shown in other research (Peel and Boxall, 2005, for example), becoming self-employed can increase work autonomy and three participants had left senior employed posts to set up their own consultancies for this reason. The group included three women in main board director posts and a further two in associate director positions. A majority of the rest were in junior/middle management roles and only five participants indicated that they were not attracted to the management side of the business. Of the thirty-one respondents, sixteen were married, five were living with a partner, eight were single, one was separated and one divorced; thirteen participants had school age children.

A series of semi-structured interviews with participants in their workplaces formed the main data-gathering tool. Interviews were audio taped, manually transcribed and then coded yielding the categories for analysis. My knowledge of the operational structures within the profession underpinned my research credibility (see Watts, 2006) suggesting to interviewees that I had a legitimate reason to be interested in them and what they do. Another factor contributing to the success of the interviews was the camouflage strategy I adopted to ensure that my feminist standpoint was not identified. My experience of construction made me aware that women working in the

industry would be unlikely to support feminist objectives and this assumption was corroborated by the data as demonstrated in the discussion below. Interest in the female experience of the sector went undisguised though I was careful to frame questions in straightforward material terms without ‘political’ inference. In addition, “feminism’s negative reputation” (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002: 157) might well have placed the whole study in jeopardy. The extent to which a lack of full transparency can be perceived as an ethical shortcoming is a matter of judgement. My openness about the specific focus on women’s views, that did not include disclosing the use of a feminist theoretical lens with which to interpret the data, is a context-specific ethical approach, without which it might have been impossible to conduct the research. This strategy, both as ethical compromise and methodological pragmatism, avoided what Wiles et al (2006: 284) term as ‘spoiling the field’. The study’s findings are now discussed below developing the themes of uncertainty about the sufficiency of management rewards, ineffective leadership, time constraints and contested management styles.

### **To manage or not to manage?**

With management as a key signifier of success, a majority of participants had chosen a career management pathway. This choice, in many cases, was an ambivalent one despite the significantly higher financial rewards of management work (Langford et al, 1995). Doubts about the benefits of becoming a manager centred on two key issues: insufficient remuneration given the high pressure and stress levels associated with construction management roles and the expectations of employers that managers would be constantly available as a function of the dominant presenteeism culture of the building industry (Watts, 2007b). The following comments from two participants illustrate these concerns:

*I just don't think it's worth it for the sort of money you're paid. Working seventy hours a week with all the travelling and hassle plus all the aggravation on site. I've seen so many colleagues driven into the ground and I don't want that to be me.*  
(Naomi, aged 26, single, early career graduate engineer)

*I think that there is a choice to be made about quality of life. If I went into a senior management job I'd never see my kids and I don't want that. What's the point of having them? In this job you are expected to stay late, stay as late as it takes to get the job done. It's bad enough at my level (middle management) but when I leave at six all the partners are still here and most of them are still at it at nine and ten at night. Civils work is just not nine to five and it never will be.* (Gillian, aged 32, married with three children, project manager)

Working part-time in a management function was regarded as problematic and virtually impossible to sustain. Where such arrangements are connected to other non-work roles such as parenting they invoke negative visibility and are viewed with suspicion (Cohn, 2000). Cockburn (1991) found that working motherhood is punished in the workplace with women unable to gain acceptance as serious professionals because juggling the demands of paid and unpaid work compromises what Davies (1996: 669) terms the ‘masculinist vision’ of professions. Two participants in middle-management positions described their experience of trying to combine a management role on a part-time basis with caring responsibilities following the birth of their children. One of these women, after a year, was persuaded by her employer that engineering management and motherhood do not mix and left the company. The other

woman found herself gradually removed from the decision-making arena and was told by a company director “*her career was going nowhere*”. As might be expected these women spoke with disillusion about the construction industry that one described as “*just swallowing you up*”, driven by organisational expectations that hard-working means long-working and that the ‘personal’ takes place outside the process of labour exchange. For a majority of participants in management roles the demands of the job appeared overwhelming forcing some to choose between being an engineering manager and having a family. Other research has shown that women managers are far more likely to be single and/or childless than their male colleagues (Wajcman, 1998).

Family issues and insufficient remuneration were not the only factors influencing participants’ choices. One interviewee described the culture of senior management as ‘bleeding people dry’ and her discomfort with the person she might become if she advanced her management career further. A further factor affecting the choice of career path was the extent to which a move into management involved separation from science and engineering practice. This was of concern to some of the newer recruits who had chosen engineering to practise and develop their technical and scientific skills rather than manage others to do this. Kanter (1993:301) found in her research into corporate organisational life in the USA that some companies have established formal career paths for professionals to enable them to concentrate on their specialism without moving into management. Kanter notes, however, that for engineers and scientists these dual ladders carry a suspicion that they are second-rate and are often seen as a compromise.

### **Management styles**

Participants saw the phenomena of leadership and management as related but serving different functions. Leadership within the industry was seen predominantly as a transformational visionary endeavour falling within the domain of the professional construction bodies (The Institution of Civil Engineers, for example). It was suggested that leadership might involve setting/maintaining standards of professional conduct, protecting engineers from an increasingly litigious society and promoting the work of the construction sector as high status and critical to social cohesion. Reference to leadership in the organisational context was limited and concentrated almost exclusively on negative representations such as ‘not enough of it’, ‘confused leadership’ and ‘hopeless leadership’. On the other hand, there was extensive comment about management quality and styles within the sector.

Whilst a majority of participants reported high levels of satisfaction with the way they had been managed (mainly by men) since entering the profession, there was widespread agreement that management generally in construction could be done a lot better with some regarding this as the main incentive to become a manager. Some put this down to ‘home grown’ managers who had received little or no formal training. Others cited promotion into management posts as a function of ‘who you know’ and, therefore, unmeritocratic. One interviewee commented that ‘the whole construction business is virtually unmanageable’, due, she claimed, to the project-dominated and conflict ridden nature of the industry with its entrenched blame culture. The following comment from one interviewee working as a senior manager for a contracting firm is apposite:

*So much of what we do, as managers, is fire fighting to cover our backs.* (Linda, aged 39, married with one child, senior manager)

One participant with more than twenty-five years experience characterised the pervasive authoritarian management style as rooted in a military command and control model, resonating with Bales' (1950) task-oriented approach discussed above. Despite her attainment of an executive management position before moving into self-employed practice, she spoke in critical terms of what she saw as the prevailing management ethos in construction clearly perceiving this as a gender issue:

*Make no mistake about it the industry is managed by ambitious men working on the basis of self-interest first and the common good second.* (Susan Hamilton, aged 49, divorced, no children, self-employed in private practice)

This perception was shared by a majority of respondents with its key feature identified as exercising power *over* others in the pursuit of existing vested interest with this approach characterised by an autocratic style (see above). Two participants proposed an alternative more inclusive management style predicated on *sharing* power with others in a participative approach though, as the following comment from one participant illustrates, this was generally thought to be unrealistic:

*There is no way it is going to change within twenty years as the dinosaurs are still there; they are controlling everything.* (Penny, aged 39, married with no children, commercial director)

More inclusive styles of management were associated with what one participant described as 'feminised ways of working'. Although the literature discusses 'female' management styles, there are no studies to verify that men and women use power differently despite their differing socialisation. Some writers (see Brush and Bird, 1996), however, argue that women are less reliant on formalised long-term strategies and are more likely to be innovative and flexible, whilst the work of Carli and Eagly (2007), discussed above, points to women being more likely to adopt a participatory mode. Associated with this was the need for more consultation and better communication (Dainty et al, 2006), with women cited as being better at both. Challenging unsatisfactory styles as a way of promoting a case for more women in positions of power was universally rejected, not least because women, still a small minority in construction, do not identify as having common interests. The few to whom this did occur were clear that any such 'separatist' initiative would worsen women's already low status in the industry and aggravate their existing negative visibility. This appeared to stem from a negative and radical image of feminism as expressed by one respondent holding a very high profile industry role:

*To be thought of as a feminist in the construction industry would mean that you wouldn't be able to have any influence at all.* (Penny, aged 39, married with no children, commercial director)

### **The problem of construction sites**

The particular power relations that operate in the setting of the construction site continue to provide the arena for macho gender display that has significant impacts on women. Working on site appeared to require regimented visibility criteria

with all grades of worker knowing their place and having discrete but clear levels of incorporation. Roles on site for civil engineers revolve mainly around the position of resident engineer who has the responsibility for directing the actual building process (laying out of site plans, checking measurements and overseeing the delivery and installation of materials) that always retains an element of experimentation (Schinzinger and Martin, 2000). The words of one respondent sum up the difficulty “*I think this thing about managing manual labour, that is the big one*”. (Pauline, aged 45, single with no children, senior manager)

Most participants had valued their experience of being a manager on site, particularly contributing to the live building process. For most, however, this came at a price with the often-harsh physical conditions preferable to the abrasive social environment (Watts, 2007a). The main problems appeared to stem from the site subculture that was imbued with the use of crude language, displays of pornographic imagery in site offices and the resistance to any kind of managerial control (Watts, 2007b). The different types of embodiedness also presented difficulties with women feeling the need to cloak their femininity to promote only appropriate visibility and the manual workforce using their size, strength and general physicality as a way of asserting their identity and obstructing white-collar authority. The acute nature of some of these problems for women is explored more fully below through the voices of the participants themselves.

Women talked about the intimidation they felt particularly connected to rectifying problems on site. The following two extracts illustrate this:

*I used to worry very much about talking to steel fixers who were twice the size of me and telling them that this steel isn't fixed right and they were quite intimidating. They would use their height and their size and say what are you talking about and I would say actually I don't think that this is right.* (Geena, aged 36, married with two children, group manager)

*I had awful trouble with one site foreman. He wanted me to sign off the setting out but I couldn't. It didn't meet the spec and I told him it would all have to be done again. He got so angry and said he wouldn't let me forget it. And he didn't. He was awkward about everything and made my life hell.* (Mary, aged 28, married with no children, resident engineer)

Disputes of the kind described above, where site staff openly challenge decisions of managers, can seriously undermine the latter's credibility. Where managers are women there is a heightened visibility creating an overwhelming pressure to perform successfully (Cohn, 2000). Other aspects of performance were also raised with mode of dress, make-up and language all cited as relevant.

*You soon learned to tone it down, only the plainest of clothes to make sure you blend in; otherwise you'd never survive.* (Wendy, aged 56, separated, no children, chief engineer)

*You know some women I have seen on site, REs (resident engineers) really make things worse for themselves. They come on site with loads of make-up and the boys give them hell. It's hard enough without drawing more attention to yourself.* (Helen, aged 37, single, project manager)

*There were good times and bad on site but my general approach was to give as good as I got so I ended up swearing with the best of them. In one way I think it raised my standing with the lads. (Pauline, aged 45, single, senior manager)*

Being one of the lads, however, was not a survival strategy adopted by all as the comment below demonstrates:

*If you rose above it and kept saying I am not going to lower myself to their level, you know be distant, you were OK but if you thought about it or were a sensitive person you couldn't cope with it. It would just destroy you. (Susan Leyton, aged 47, married with two children, chartered principal engineer)*

Not all participants spoke negatively of their managerial site experience but they were a minority. For most, their daily endeavours seemed to involve varying degrees of confrontation, close surveillance due to heightened visibility, sexual harassment, intimidation and wider safety issues, all experienced as emotionally draining and, for one participant, was the reason for deciding to leave the profession.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

A recurring theme of the narratives was that of inconsistency and dilemma making it appropriate to conceptualise discussion of the findings as a series of paradoxes. The first of these is the diversity paradox. There is increasing discussion within the sector about embracing diversity in employment practices (NCE, 5 July 2007; NCE, 22 May 2008, NCE, 3 July 2008) but this has limited application at senior levels. The high profile launch in 2000 of the UK Institution of Civil Engineers' diversity forum may have legitimised the rhetoric of diversity and equal opportunity but it has not resulted in companies implementing and monitoring diversity measures. Those who want to take up management positions taking advantage of part-time or flexible working are viewed with suspicion and are made highly visible by what is seen as their less than full commitment to the job. Despite the current debate in the sector about the legitimacy and potential benefits of more flexible work practices (NCE, 22 May 2008), the assumption that senior management can only be a full-time undertaking usually involving very long hours, prevails. There was agreement that, as managers, attempts to create a positive work/life balance would cast them as 'slackers', making them readily visible targets for criticism from colleagues. Resisting the heroic narrative of staying late is incompatible with management in construction because a culture of 'competitive presenteeism' (Simpson, 1998) has developed leaving the existing power relations largely unchallenged.

The second paradox can best be termed as the time paradox. The expectation that non-work time is for leisure and relaxation whilst working time is framed by tasks, goals, deadlines and output circumscribed by time constraint seemed to act in reverse. Time away from work for participants was discussed in terms of duties and responsibilities, cramming everything in. The assumption that managers in construction should spend more time at work led some interviewees to 'park' their careers despite their being attracted to the opportunities and financial rewards offered by senior management.

The inconsistency of the micro versus macro view of management within the industry frames the satisfaction paradox. Participants' high levels of satisfaction with their individual line-management were juxtaposed with perceptions of very poor strategic management across the sector, with participants referring to particular project failures and contractual disputes attracting prominent visibility in the industry press. Accounts of incompetence at the most senior levels were numerous, this often leading to 'dumping' (as one interviewee described it) serious project failures on more junior staff to resolve. This was thought to stem from a culture of defensive practice in the sector that manifested itself as a form of 'macho competitiveness' in the boardroom. The further issue of leadership within the sector drew comments of disappointment and cynicism about the lack lustre performance of The Institution of Civil Engineers that was held in very negative regard.

The issue of varying management approaches and models was addressed by most participants and, in relation to gendered expectations, was often contradictory. The style paradox referring to women managing differently, with differently equating to better, was disrupted by the reality that women managers (particularly senior managers) in the sector are fitting in and colluding with male styles because they have no choice. Where, for example, women managers feel uneasy about theirs and their staff's workloads and voice their concerns, they are seen as less committed and are unlikely to rise further in their careers (Blair-Loy, 2004). Debates about management styles in the sector suggest a critical need to move beyond what have been typified as masculinised approaches of efficiency to embrace an ethics of care approach. This might involve the stewardship of employees within the profession reducing the deeply entrenched utilitarian emphasis on them simply as 'charge out' units. This raises the broader issue of ethical practice. Construction is big business and, increasingly, engineers are being forced to confront the tensions between business and professional interests (with meeting the deadline often the dominant factor) in a climate in which ethical decision-making has begun to be seen as part of the construction industry's wider social responsibility.

The issue of visibility, as an underpinning theme of much of the data, constitutes the final paradox. Women within construction, particularly those in supervisory/management roles, are highly visible. On building sites this takes the form of embodied spectacle and appears difficult to negotiate. Embodied visibility contrasts with women's continuing cultural invisibility adding to their frustration with an industry that is notionally modernising but in reality is very resistant to change. The discourses of construction are shaped by a masculine hegemonic view that reinforces and supports the invisibility of women with all grades of management heavily controlled by men (Fielden et al, 2000). The discursive power of male primacy is reinforced by management practices and women have to adjust their work styles to accommodate the challenges they face arising from the visibility continuum (Cohn, 2000). Women can resist these dominant discourses only by leaving the industry, by voicing opposition or by remaining compliant. In 2008 the UK Institution of Civil Engineers will appoint its first female President. Whether this will signal a revitalised attempt to develop diversity and equal opportunity practices in the profession is a subject for future scrutiny. Other research, however, has found that women's presence in organisational leadership roles does not necessarily lead to gender policy development (Hearn and Piekkari, 2005).

Existing literature offers insight into the experiences of women in management roles across a broad range of male-dominated occupations and

professions. There is, however, a gap in respect of the built environment sector, and this article, having identified a number of cultural barriers to women establishing and sustaining management careers in construction, goes some way towards filling that gap. Like all ethnographic research, the data, observations and interpretations presented are bounded by the context from which they are drawn and thus are specifically located. Because of the particular structural and social relations that underpin construction, the analysis herein will have limited direct application to other sectors. Nevertheless, although the barriers faced by female construction managers may occur more overtly, they are not exclusive to this male-dominated industry and have relevance and implications for women more widely beyond the built environment sector.

Women managers experience challenges not faced by their male counterparts because of the dominant masculinist ethos of corporate management culture that privileges men, ranks some men above others and places women on the periphery of the managerial class. The pressures placed on female managers are complex and derive in part from the relation between stereotypes about managers and stereotypes about women and men. They also stem from the case that men are the more common occupants of management roles across all sectors, not only construction. This places women managers at a disadvantage because associations about women are typically and stereotypically inconsistent with those about managers as a function of the male-as-manager bias. As a consequence, female managers may both see themselves and be seen as 'outsiders' within the corporate environment (see Kerfoot and Knights, 2004 above), having greater difficulty exerting influence within gender-laden organisational power dynamics. Furthermore whilst men need not attend to their management style to be accorded legitimacy, women do not have the same freedom and find themselves under scrutiny particularly, as shown by this research, in respect of demonstrating their credentials for the job and the balancing of work and non-work roles. Female managers, especially in male-dominated workplaces, are highly visible and this can make them vulnerable as targets of prejudice and hostile responses in facing the competing demands of their roles as women and as managers.

*Participants' names have been changed*

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