

Abstract

Purpose – To propose a shift in emphasis from gender differences to gender similarities in the explanations of the findings of future gender in management research. The results from a study in a major Australian bank help build our case. We hope that such a focus on gender similarities (FGS) will bring about positive organizational change that might stimulate an increase in women's representation in senior management in the future.

Design/methodology/ approach – To make a case for the proposed FGS approach we used the results from a survey of 178 senior managers and interviews with 14 executives in one Australian bank. We drew on the masculine culture and organizational silence literatures to explain how women and men in senior management can have similar work experiences and hold similar views of their organizations.

Findings – Male and female respondents held similarly unfavourable views of the organization's culture, but men felt constrained in raising concerns. Most executives would welcome a change of culture.

Research limitations/ implications – The research study in banking is included specifically to show how the proposed FGS approach works in gender in management research. A limitation of the study is the small interview sample. The finding on men's silence is particularly pertinent to the argument for organizational change that benefits the whole organization, not just women.

Practical implications – The FGS approach broadens the appeal of change for organizations. For example, by applying the FGS approach to the study in banking, the principal message for organizations would be that there is widespread dissatisfaction with the outdated command-and-control management style, extremely long hours, and lack of work-life balance. Organizations are

more likely to address findings of “widespread dissatisfaction” than of dissatisfaction in a section of the workforce (e.g., women).

Originality/ value – The recognition that a shift in the approach to the study of gender in management is needed to stimulate organizational change that might increase women’s representation in senior management. The study shows how men will also benefit from this shift in emphasis, because the explanations and recommendations emanating from future research using the FGS approach will give men a much needed voice to raise issues that are similar to those raised by their female colleagues.

Keywords - Gender similarities approach, senior manager, masculine culture, organizational silence

Paper type - Research paper

A Focus on Gender Similarities in Work Experiences at Senior Management Levels: A Study of an Australian Bank Builds the Case

Introduction

The last two decades show a persistent under-representation of women at senior management levels despite the enactment of equal employment and affirmative action legislation, some changes in societal perspectives, and women's increasing levels of education and work force participation (Catalyst, 2002, 2005; Davidson and Burke, 2004; Dubno, 1985; Equal Opportunity for Women in The Workplace Agency [EOWA], 2006; Trudgett, 2000; Wirth, 2001). In an effort to explain, and ultimately address, the gender imbalance at senior management levels in organizations, many gender in management studies have focused on the gender differences in factors that are related to work outcomes such as advancement. For example, Mainiero and Sullivan (2005) used a metaphorical Kaleidoscope to depict the complex nature of women's lives compared to men's. Further, gender differences in leadership style (e.g., Eagly and Karau, 2002), in the utilization of work-family practices (e.g., Wise and Bond, 2003), in ambition (e.g., Fels, 2004; Van Vianen and Fisher, 2002) and work experiences (e.g., Lyness and Thompson, 1997) have been used to explain gender differences in advancement in management and to make recommendations to organizations.

Recommendations based on gender differences have served us reasonably well in increasing women's representation at low and middle levels of management, but possibly not at senior levels as statistics worldwide on women's representation in senior manager and executive levels show. For example, women still represent 12%, 14.4% and 16.4% of the executives in Australia, Canada, and the US, respectively (EOWA, 2006). Women's representation in management in Europe, New Zealand, Asia, South America and Africa is just as disappointing

despite equal employment opportunity legislation and organizational practices in many countries that aim to attract, develop and retain women (Davidson and Burke, 2004). These statistics support recent research findings that many efforts that focus on women as a group (e.g., women only networks and mentoring policies) may perpetuate rather than challenge the status quo in organizations (e.g., Powell, Bagilhole and Dainty, 2006; Wilson-Kovacs, Ryan and Haslam, 2006). This may be more so at senior than at junior and middle management levels.

We draw on Eagly and Karau's (2002) role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders to explain why a gender differences approach may perpetuate rather than challenge the status quo in organizations. According to Eagly and Karau (2002), gender roles ascribe family responsibilities to women and a lower status to women than to men. Further, women are expected to display feminine attributes, such as being considerate and gentle. These attributes contrast with the masculine attributes traditionally ascribed to leaders, such as ambition and aggressiveness. The incongruity between gender roles and leader roles produces a prejudice toward women in the form of negative assessments as potential leaders. Based on Eagly and Karau's (2002) theory, women would generally receive less favorable evaluations as potential members of the senior management team than men, because of the incongruity between the gender role (and feminine attributes) ascribed to them as women and the leader role (and masculine attributes) ascribed to senior management positions. Biased evaluations are more likely to go unchecked when selection and performance criteria are subjective than when criteria are objective. Selection and performance criteria are more subjective at higher than at lower levels of management (Ruderman and Ohlott, 1994). An approach that focuses on women as a group reinforces rather than weakens perceptions that women are different to men and, thus, that women do not fit the role of a leader such as that of a manager at senior level. In particular, organizational practices that focus only on women may create an environment in which daily work practices that

marginalize and alienate women in senior management positions are covert and systemic and, thus, difficult to identify (e.g., Wilson-Kovacs et al., 2006). So, we propose an approach to gender in management research that emphasizes gender similarities rather than gender differences when explaining the under-representation of women at the upper echelons of organizations and when formulating recommendations for change. As the Institute of Physics (2004; cited in Powell et al., 2006, pp. 696-7) concluded, we need to focus on men as well as women if the process of changing the status quo is to be accepted. The suggestion that we need to bring men into the picture is not new (e.g., Beauregard, 2006; Gambles, Lewis and Rapoport, 2006; Powell et al., 2006). Yet, gender differences continue to be widely assumed.

Our proposal is based on the argument that the focus on gender differences implied benefits for one section of the workforce. This may have increased resistance to change and implementation of policies that benefit women on the basis that they discriminated against other groups such as men and possibly even non-mothers. The focus on gender differences may have also been costly or difficult to justify as a business case for change, because it involved investment in one section of the workforce (Zedeck and Mosier, 1990). The similarities approach addresses both of these concerns.

We assert that the emphasis on gender similarities in gender in management research complements rather than replaces the emphasis on gender differences, because gender differences are likely to continue to exist but many gender similarities are surfacing. The proposed shift of emphasis from gender differences to gender similarities is based on work and social trends that show that differences between women and men have decreased over the last two decades in education, field of study, and workforce participation (e.g., Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2005; Brusentsev 2006; French and Strachan 2007; Wirth, 2001), just to mention a few. The proposed emphasis on gender similarities is also prompted by social trends such as the

decrease in family size, the increase in the number of alternative family patterns (such as single parent households) (Schneer and Reitman, 2003), the likelihood that women in senior management have fewer family responsibilities than men (Hewlett, 2002; Lyness and Thompson, 1997), and the increasingly more egalitarian approach to the division of labour in Western societies. Such work and social trends suggest that women and men in high levels of management should be more similar than different in their views of work and in their work experiences, thus supporting a shift of emphasis towards recommendations for organizational change based on gender similarities. We postulate that such a shift is likely to increase the motivation of organizations to change, because change efforts will affect a broader interest group (men and women) than before (women only).

We use the findings of an empirical study that examined the work experiences of men and women in senior management to show how an emphasis on gender similarities can drive recommendations for change in the 21st century that have a broad appeal. “Senior management” encompasses respondents at senior manager level and above (generally referred to as “executive”). For the literary framework of our study, we chose to draw on the masculine culture and organizational silence perspectives to explain how women and men in senior management can have similar work experiences and hold similar views of their organizations, and yet experience different outcomes (advancement and opportunities for advancement). This choice was a difficult one as we contemplated the plethora of personal, social and organizational theories that we had at our disposal to explain women’s under-representation in senior management. In the end, we decided to select organizational phenomena that have undisputedly advantaged men and alienated women (masculine cultures; e.g., Gherardi, 1996; Hopkins, 2000) and hindered change in organizations (organizational silence; e.g., Morrison and Milliken, 2000).

Masculine Cultures and Organizational Silence

One explanation for women's persistent under-representation at executive levels stems from the masculine cultures literature. The concept of organizational culture and its influence on organizational members' behavior is broad and complex (e.g., Smircich, 1983; Wilkins and Ouchi, 1983). For the purposes of this study, organization culture is understood to be "a learned set of assumptions, values and behaviours that have been accepted as successful enough to be passed on to newcomers" (Hitt, Black, Porter and Hanson, 2007, p. 111), as most management textbooks describe it. Specifically, masculine cultures often refer to a culture dominated by traditionally masculine values (e.g., the superiority of the hegemonic men over other men and women) and characteristics (e.g., very long work hours, and shows of power and physical strength) (e.g., Hearn, 1994; Hopkins, 2000; Jones 2000; Kimmel, 2004). Such cultures are strong and have been around for a long time (e.g., Gherardi, 1996), and can be full of "paternalistic masculinities" (Charles and Davies, 2000, p. 544). In these cultures for example, a senior managerial role is incompatible with motherhood. Further, this environment "casts women in supportive and subordinate positions" (2000, p. 564).

Masculine cultures do not only reflect men's values or only exclude women. Male selectors who are free from conflicting loyalties between home and work often select other men like themselves for managerial positions (Kanter, 1977). In doing so, male selectors exclude many men, as well as women, candidates. Further, Morley (2004) found that both men and women at various levels of management, up to senior executive, ranked work - family balance in the top five personal challenges they faced in their organizations, but CEOs did not. Drew and Murtagh's (2005) study of an Irish organization also shows that male and female executives object to the hostile masculine culture of long hours, which prevented them from availing of flexible work. In this environment, both men and women recognized that flexible work options were incompatible with holding senior management positions and with further career advancement opportunities.

Lewis, Rapoport and Gambles (2003, p. 825) have added that “men find that they are increasingly isolated from family and leisure activities in an ever increasing climate of long hours and working intensity.” So, it is possible that men in high levels of management are not only aware of aspects of the culture that hinder women’s advancement, but are themselves disenchanted with the culture in their organizations.

But it is also possible that men are reluctant to raise concerns about the traditional male model of work, which is characterized by full-time (preferably uninterrupted) work and long work hours (Cooper and Lewis, 1999). In a masculine culture, men are expected to ‘conceal anxiety and self-doubt’ (Collinson and Hearn, 1996, p.16) and to work long hours to show their manhood and be ranked above other male managers in the organization (Collinson and Hearn, 1996). Given this backdrop, speaking out against an inhospitable culture would be tantamount to career suicide. For De Maria (2006, p. 231) organizational silence “can also be the result of a campaign of fear” and “the most often named fears are those of authority, loss of career chances and instant career termination” (Flam ,1993, p. 70). Not much has changed some 15 years later, providing further support for our proposed FGS approach to gender in management research. Bowen and Blackmon (2003, p. 1393) also see “fear and threat of isolation” as causing organizational silence, in particular for minority groups such as lesbian and gay employees. Male executives who dislike aspects of masculine cultures, such as the long work hours, may consider themselves to be in the minority in the executive group and, hence, choose to remain silent for fear of being ostracized by their peers and superiors and of becoming isolated. So silence probably emanates from fear and appears to relate to both sexes, but is more pronounced for employees seeking senior positions in an organization. These are more likely to be males from the point of view of demography.

While fear and position level conduce to silence across the sexes (e.g., De Maria , 2006; Morrison and Milliken, 2000), women more often than men denounce and reject characteristics of masculine cultures. For instance, in addition to referring to organizational culture in general as a barrier to advancement (e.g., Catalyst, 2003), women often refer to barriers to advancement linked to masculine cultures and discriminatory treatment as “inhospitable organizational culture”, “exclusion from informal networks”, “stereotypes and attitudes” towards women, and “gender discrimination” (e.g., Catalyst, 2003, 2004; Metz and Tharenou, 2001; Wilson-Kovacs et al., 2006).

The reluctance of men to speak against masculine cultures or against specific aspects of it, such as working long hours and consequently a lack of a supportive “work-family climate” (Beauregard 2006, p. 350), results in what Collinson and Hearn (1996) term a strange kind of silence. Men’s silence perpetuates perceptions and stereotypes that issues such as work life balance are a woman’s concern (e.g., Griffith and MacBride-King, 1998). This phenomenon of withholding potential problems or issues by employees is clearly organizational silence (Morrison and Milliken, 2000) as discussed above and can impact on an organization’s ability to change. In particular, men’s silence in relation to masculine cultures gives implicit legitimacy to an outdated cultural form that clashes with communal values such as concern for the welfare of the employee and the customer as well as of the organization, and a desire for work-life balance.

Hypotheses

Based on the barriers to women’s advancement published in the gender in management literature, and men’s apparent reluctance to voice their concerns we could propose:

Hypothesis 1: Women will be more likely than men to report organizational culture as a barrier to advancement.

Hypothesis 1, however, reflects the traditional focus on gender differences in gender research. We now illustrate the shift towards the complementary focus on gender similarities. Based on the literature that indicates that men dislike some aspects of masculine cultures as much as women do, and on the argument that gender differences found in past studies may be an artifact of organizational silence, a gender similarities approach to gender research would lead to the alternative hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Men and women will hold similar views on the organization's culture.

Background on the study

The study was conducted in one large, multi-national Australian Bank that employs over 40,000 individuals. The organization recognized that it had a problem and wanted to fix it. Their senior women were leaving the organization at higher rates than men, and the organization wanted to know why and what it could do to prevent this situation.

This particular study is used to illustrate the proposed “focus on gender similarities” (FGS) approach for two reasons. First, large Australian banks clearly have strong cultures, because they are big, have been around for a long time and have a relatively low turnover of staff (Wilkins and Ouchi, 1983). Second, the Australian banking industry has a male-dominated managerial hierarchy despite the fact that the majority of employees are female (French and Strachan, 2007; Metz and Tharenou, 1999; Strachan and Burgess, 1998). For example, there were no female CEOs in any of Australia's big four banks at the time the study was conducted (one has since been appointed at Westpac effective from 2008), and one of these banks has no female senior executives (EOWA, 2006; Webster, 2003). While no organizations are gender neutral, and indeed so called progressive policies often contribute to further gender inequality (Bailyn, 1992), banks have very explicit gendered cultures. So, we argue that this is the type of environment that women may find inhospitable, as reflected by women's under-representation at high levels of

management (EOWA, 2006; Metz and Tharenou, 1999). We suggest that many men also find this environment unpleasant, but are likely to remain silent.

The study's method

A questionnaire survey and an interview protocol were used to collect data in one integrated study. This approach, known as triangulation, “involves the use of more than one research approach in a single study to gain a broader or more complete understanding of the issues being investigated” (Veal, 2005, p. 39). In a contemporary triangulated management research design it is customary to use qualitative and quantitative methods, because “... when quantitative and qualitative research are jointly pursued, much more complete accounts of social reality can ensue” (Bryman, 1988, p. 126-7). The study therefore used two different data collection methods: a confidential, voluntary survey and semi-structured interviews. The interview data enriched and complemented the questionnaire survey data to provide “detail, process, richness, and sensitivity to context” (Tharenou, Donohue and Cooper, 2007, p. 17).

The survey was mailed to 1852 employees, randomly selected from all of the Business Units of the organization, and from all levels (from non-management up to senior executive level). The selection procedure was designed to ensure that none of the business units were over- or under-represented in the final sample. We had a 53% response rate, which resulted in a sample of 537 women and 506 men. This data collection was part of a larger research program designed to examine the career aspirations of men and women. We only used data from the 178 respondents who were in senior management positions because the primary aim of this article is to articulate a FGS approach to researching gender at senior levels of management.

The questionnaire comprised structured questions to collect information about the participants' personal (age, sex), family (e.g., dependent responsibilities) and work demographics (e.g., education and the number of hours worked per week). In addition, the survey asked

respondents to indicate their aspirations in three years (short-term aspirations) and at the pinnacle of their careers (long-term aspirations). Table 1 compares the demographic, work and aspirations data for all (full- and part-time) survey respondents by gender; the category “Work hours of full-timer” is the only one that uses only data from survey respondents who work full-time.

Insert Table 1 about here

The survey also included a non-structured component in the form of two open-ended questions. The first open-ended question asked respondents to state five or fewer major obstacles to their career advancement. The second asked respondents what would make them stay in the organization. These questions were used to determine if women and men reported similar barriers to advancement and reasons to stay. It is important to understand what makes women and men want to stay in an organization, so that organizations put in place the right policies to attract, retain and advance the best people regardless of gender.

The survey included measures of position level in the organization (the response categories ranged from 0, Non-management, to 5, Senior management), gender (0 denoted males and 1 denoted females), age, education (1, completed secondary to 6, completed doctorate), the hours worked each week, the number of unpaid career breaks (from 0, none to 5, five or more) and family responsibilities. When asked if, in relation to his/her partner, the respondent had primary responsibility for the care and nurturing of dependents, the response categories were 1, “Yes”, 2, “No”, 3, “Have equal responsibility”, and 4, “Have no dependents”. The second section of the survey was on career aspirations. The respondents were asked to indicate what level did they want to move up to within three years (short-term career aspirations) and what level did they want to achieve at the pinnacle of their careers (long-term career aspirations). Both questions had response categories of 1 “Executive Management”, 2 “Senior Management”, 3 “Management or

roles with Management responsibility”, 4 “Happy not to move up”. These responses were reverse coded so that higher numbers indicated higher levels.

The responses to the two open-ended questions on the barriers to advancement and on what would make respondents stay in their organizations were content coded by two independent raters (the first author and a postgraduate student) following Goodwin and Goodwin’s (1985) procedure. The first author examined the answers to the two open-ended questions for a subsample ($n = 20$) of the questionnaires and grouped them into categories or codes, following a simplified approach of template analysis of qualitative data (Crabtree and Miller, 1992). The first step was to develop a codebook or template. The codebook is “used to organise segments of similar or related text for ease of interpretation and to search for confirming/disconfirming evidence of these interpretations” (Crabtree and Miller, 1992, p. 99). This was an iterative process. The first author started with many codes, which were progressively combined to form broader categories. As shown in Table 2, frequency analyses were performed on the coded responses for men and women. Chi-square (χ^2) tests then assessed if the frequency of the responses were significantly different between men and women.

 Insert Table 2 about here

The organization did not want to survey employees above senior manager positions. Therefore, the second data collection method comprised fourteen semi-structured interviews with eleven executives who worked for the organization and three female executives who had recently left. Four male and seven female executives who worked for the organization were interviewed to supplement the survey data on the gender similarities in perceived barriers to career advancement and reasons to stay in the organization. In addition, the interviewees were asked to offer

explanations for why women were leaving the organization, to understand if male and female executives held similar views. Finally, three women executives who had already left the organization were also interviewed to examine if the perceptions of barriers in general, and of some aspects of the organizational culture in particular, were similar between the executives who stayed and those who had left the organization. The first eleven interviewees are referred to as the “in-house interviewees” from hereon, and the three executives who had left the organization as the “exit interviews”, “exit interviewees” or the “executives who had left”. The interviews were not taped to assuage concerns with confidentiality and security of sensitive information amongst this selective group of executives. Instead, shorthand interview notes were taken during the interview by the first author and written in full immediately after each interview. The responses to the semi-structured interviews were content coded in the same way as the responses to the two open-ended questions in the survey. Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics of the 11 in-house interviewees. The rich detail obtained from the interview data prevents a full report of all the findings, so apposite quotations have been selected as illustrative. A summary of the exit interviews is presented in Table 4.

In the results section we illustrate how a focus on gender similarities, without neglecting the gender differences, leads to recommendations that are relevant to both men and women at high levels of management. The gender similarities are highlighted in the headings used in the results section.

Insert Tables 3 and 4 about here

The study’s results

As can be seen from Table 1, chi-square tests revealed that women were younger, and less likely to live with a partner or to have children than men. Women were more likely to have taken

an unpaid break and to work fewer hours per week than men. However, when only full-time employees (those who reported working 40 hours or more per week) were considered, no gender differences were detected in the number of hours worked per week. There were also no statistically significant gender differences in men's and women's level of education, in short- and long-term career aspirations, and in the belief that they would achieve their aspirations in the organization. Further, there were similarities in how the survey respondents and interviewees viewed family responsibilities. The majority of women and men senior managers did not regard family responsibilities as an obstacle to advancement. Fewer than 4% of the survey respondents, and none of the interviewees, reported family responsibilities as a barrier to advancement. In addition, only seven (or 4%) survey respondents reported "work discontinuity" as a barrier. Finally, as can be seen in Table 2, men were as likely as women to say that being able to balance work and family would motivate them to stay in the organization.

Chi-square tests were also performed to examine possible differences in the work experiences and willingness to speak up between women who worked part-time (the 'part-timers') and women who worked full-time (the 'full-timers'). Women comprised more than 85% of the part-timers in senior management in this study, and 15% of the female senior managers worked part-time or fewer than 40 hours per week (Table 1). Chi-square tests (available from the first author upon request) showed that part- and full-timers did not differ in their work experiences and long-term aspirations; they only differed in their short-term aspirations, with part-timers reporting lower aspirations in the short-term than full-timers ($\chi^2= 8.14$, $df=1$, $p=.007$).

Chi-square tests were also conducted to examine possible generational differences among men in their work experiences and willingness to speak up. We coded all male respondents up to

39 years of age as 0, and those who were 40 years of age or older as 1. The results of the chi-square tests (available from the first author upon request) showed that younger and older men were identical in their work experiences, and in their reports of barriers to advancement and what would make them stay in the organization.

Gender similarities in the perceptions of a masculine culture

Culture per se was not among the most frequently reported barriers to advancement and, therefore, does not appear in Table 2. Only approximately 4% of men and women in this sample reported culture as a barrier to advancement. However, men and women reported barriers to advancement that refer to specific aspects of the culture in the organization. Examples were “stereotypes”, “gender discrimination”, “management”, “HR policies / practices” and “politics”, as shown in Table 2. Almost exclusively women reported stereotypes and gender discrimination to be barriers to their advancement, which supports Eagly and Karau’s (2002) role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders.

“Men ... will stereotype you as a woman and will not even consider you for specific positions” (Interviewee # 1)

But there were no gender differences in the remaining three aspects of culture that hinder advancement. Common perceptions of “management”, various “HR policies / practices” and “politics” as negative aspects of a masculine culture became clearer in the interviews. For instance, obstacles to advancement raised by some men and women were lifestyle concerns, being perceived as different in a culture that is male, emotionally undemonstrative, fearful of change, and very homogeneous. A female interviewee summed it up as:

“the male managers and senior managers who have been here 20 or more years, and who fit-in with the classical work model.” (Interviewee #7)

Men and women described the organization's work model as comprising a focus on short-term benefits and cost cutting, with little regard for people (employees and customers), 80 hour work weeks with no weekends off, and the expectation that the individual would be able to travel at very short notice.

Although both women and men described the prevailing work model similarly, perceptions and stereotypes of women meant that the work model was only used against women. As one female executive explained:

"[the position at higher level] is viewed as a 7 day/ 24 hour/ day job, and perceptions that women cannot sustain that lifestyle and that women are not tough enough or they cannot handle all the maneuverings at that level" (Interviewee #2).

Moreover, in line with the exclusive nature of masculine cultures, the majority of the interviewees (six women and two men) remarked on the fact that the organization was *"less prepared ... to take risks on women"* (Interviewee #6). Most of the women strongly believed that *"some positions are not available to women"* (Interviewee #2). Women executives were more likely than men to say that lack of career opportunities hindered their advancement to date or were expected to hinder it in the future, as quotes from two female executives illustrate:

"they [the CEO and his leadership team] are more comfortable with men than with women" (Interviewee #4)

and, if they select a woman for an executive position

"they [the CEO and his leadership team] feel more comfortable with taking a woman from outside, who had proved herself in a similar role and thus is a lower risk than choosing a woman [from inside the organization] who has not proven herself yet" (Interviewee #2).

The belief that Australian banks prefer to increase the representation of women in management by recruiting externally rather than by promoting and developing from within is supported by

past studies (e.g., Beck and Davis, 2005). Yet, this aversion to risk in the selection of women was not displayed in the selection of men, as a male executive explained:

“A defining moment was when someone ... gave me an opportunity to work in a Finance role (which I asked for) for which I had no qualifications” and “I was a male in a male dominated structure. I played golf and I was in the cricket team. I had no management experience, but I was ‘normal’ [meaning white male]” (Interviewee #8).

The importance of being male and part of the dominant male network is consistent with Wilson-Kovacs et al’s (2006, p. 683) research in the UK private IT sector, which found that “informal networks of influence outside women’s reach are at the core of their struggle to be acknowledged and treated on an equal footing.” Approximately a third of the women interviewed in our study reported being excluded from informal networks.

In addition, the female respondents’ aspirations to reach higher managerial positions are comparable to or exceed those of their male counterparts. Table 1 shows that women and men in the senior manager cohort held similar career aspirations and beliefs of achieving their aspirations in their current organizations. In contrast, Table 3 indicates that gender differences in aspirations and beliefs of achieving those aspirations in the current organization might exist above senior manager level. Although the interview sample of executives is small, the interviewees’ responses indicate that a higher proportion of senior women than men “want(ed) to move up”, yet men appeared more likely to think that they would achieve their career aspirations in their current organizations than women. Almost three quarters of the women executives in this study did not think that they would achieve their aspirations in the organization (see Table 3), possibly because of the masculine culture. The three women executives who had left the organization pointed to the masculine culture, or aspects of it, as a primary reason for their departure. Two of the four male executives interviewed also mentioned the culture, which they described as being male

oriented or a male environment, as a reason for women's departure. In particular, the executive men interviewed thought that women executives left the organization partly because the culture was not family friendly. As one male executive explained:

“there is a lack of empathy and compassion from men regarding women's dual responsibilities” (Interviewee #8).

One female executive went further by saying:

“People have found it difficult to have children here. The CEO does not think it can be done” (Interviewee #7).

Going back to our proposed approach to gender studies, we would start our analyses by acknowledging that gender differences (at $p < .05$) exist in the report of gender discrimination and of stereotypes as barriers to advancement, but not in the report of other aspects of organizational culture. The survey findings thus partly support Hypothesis 1, which proposed that women would be more likely than men to report organizational culture as a barrier to advancement.

Nevertheless, the survey findings alone would likely lead to recommendations aimed at getting organizations to combat gender discrimination and stereotyping. These recommendations would be primarily viewed by organizations as benefiting one section of their workforce: women.

Under the proposed “Focus on Gender Similarities” (FGS) approach, we go further. This study's interview results suggest that a lot of the gender discrimination and stereotyping stemmed from the organization's masculine culture. In addition, the interview results showed that both male and female interviewees held similarly unfavourable views of the organization's culture, and that men were fully aware that women were treated differently. In fact, we would contend that the interview data indicated that women and men similarly viewed this differential treatment as amounting to gender discrimination, supporting women's reports of gender discrimination and, as is discussed in more detail shortly, explaining why *only women report stereotypes and gender*

discrimination as barriers to advancement. So, we would conclude that Hypothesis 2 was supported, because the qualitative data showed that there were important gender similarities in how men and women view the dominant “masculine” culture and its consequences for men’s and women’s careers.

Similarities in women’s and men’s views of the culture, and the exigency of organizational silence

Men and women executives mentioned in the interviews cultural aspects that they disliked and felt were out of date. For example, they felt that the organization culture encouraged compliance and was short-term, profit oriented. Almost three quarters of the female and half of the male executives also mentioned the organization’s command and control style culture and lack of work-life balance. As a result, the organization’s culture conduced people to become mean-spirited, as one interviewee explained:

“... we were not managed through trust and collaborative work. ... Overall, the system made people ‘mean’ at the [organization]” (Interviewee #4).

Men, however, felt pressured to remain silent rather than publicly voice their views. For example, one male executive lamented the lack of flexibility and commitment to work-life balance, but felt that he could not approach his immediate superior or the CEO on this subject without being typecast as a non-team player. This clearly aligns with Morrison and Milliken’s (2000, p. 721) argument “that there are powerful forces operating in organizations that can make employees feel that speaking up about issues and problems is futile or, worse yet, dangerous. We see the silence that results as a critical barrier to organizational change and development, as well as a significant demoralizing force.” This study demonstrates that men will break their silence and “speak up about issues and problems” in a non-threatening forum, such as in a confidential interview.

It is interesting that some men in senior management in this study feel the same as their female colleagues about a culture that many believe has been built by men for men (e.g., Collinson and Hearn, 1996). Despite the organizational silence and compliance, almost three quarters of the men and women interviewed said that only evidence of a commitment to cultural change by the CEO and his leadership team would make them stay. Examples of cultural change advocated included:

“Consideration for people, not just financial results”

“Work-life balance” or “flexibility”

“Empower executives” or “decentralize decision making.”

Again, based on our proposed approach of gender similarities, we would focus on the fact that this study’s survey and interview results showed that men and women similarly regard culture as being masculine, outdated, and particularly women unfriendly, and would welcome a change of culture. We would emphasize that the interview results indicated that although most executives would welcome a change of culture, men felt constrained in their ability to raise concerns. The findings on men’s dislike for the culture and their silence are particularly pertinent to building the argument for organizational change that benefits the whole organization, not just women or employees with family responsibilities.

Gender similarities in what would make respondents stay in the organization

The question “What can the organization do to make you stay?” was asked to understand what employees in positions of influence thought the organization needed to do to retain employees in general, and women in particular. As can be seen from Table 2, there were no statistically significant gender differences in many of the top five or six reported reasons to stay in the organizations, such as a change of senior management behavior (which is a manifestation

of the organization's culture) and ability to balance work and family responsibilities. Women, unlike men, still mention "practices to help parents" ahead of "financial benefits."

Further, three quarters of the in-house executives, and all three exit interviewees, claimed that only evidence of a commitment to culture change would make them stay. This was followed by "given challenges and opportunities to advance" and "have open career planning discussion", which were mentioned by one quarter of the interviewees. Specifically with regard to cultural change, the following are some of the suggestions offered by the interviewees:

"Need to change from command and control to empowerment organization that trusts the executives to make decisions" (Interviewee #8), and

"... women in general, and I in particular, will seek a more supportive culture. I believe that this is not a woman's issue. Some men at executive level have left recently. I believe that it is an issue of tolerance of anyone with different styles, culture, personalities, of anyone who does not fit the current male norms that are so ingrained" (Interviewee #3), and

"Change the culture. There are some quick wins to do this. First, stop meetings being scheduled for 7am and 7pm. This is not just a gender issue. Go home at 6pm at night if you really believe in leadership and balance. Model some simple behaviors. Second, put foot down when one hears some bad language. There is stuff that can be done around language and behavior. For instance, I received emails addressed to 'Gentlemen and [my name]'. This used to annoy me. Why not address emails to 'Colleagues'? Third, there needs to be significant evidence of CEO and executive team living by the new values. Fourth, I believe that if we get the customer part right, then everything would fall into place." (Interviewee #14)

Again using the FGS approach, we would emphasize the gender similarities in the findings; that is, we would report that most men and women at senior manager level and above in this study held similar views with regard to what would make them stay in the bank. We now show how this similarity in men and women's perceptions of the culture and of what would make them stay drives the discussion of the study's results and the conclusions drawn.

Discussion

This study was conducted because the organization (a large Australian bank) wanted to find out why their senior women left. Overall, the results of the survey and interviews indicate that both men and women at senior manager and executive levels feel that the organizational culture needs to change to stem the departures of female executives and, hence, increase their representation at high levels. Amongst the suggested changes is a strong preference for a flexible, work-family culture instead of the current masculine culture of long work hours. Further, the interview findings indicate that male executives are very aware of the fact that the organization culture is inhospitable to women and that it favors men.

Organizational culture, work-life or work-family balance, and family responsibility issues are intertwined. The study's findings indicate that at senior manager and executive level, men are just as likely as women to point to culture as a barrier to advancement. Some aspects of masculine cultures might hold different significance for men and women but many others do not. For example, female senior managers and executives were more likely than their male counterparts to report that stereotypes (of women and leaders) held them back. But executives of both genders similarly disliked the organization's focus on financial objectives ahead of people concerns, lack of work-life balance, and pressure to comply with the organization's "values" and compromise one's own. For women, the negative aspects of culture were compounded by the fact

that the organization culture did not value diversity (e.g., of personal values, work behavior, and personal characteristics such as gender).

Further, using the FGS approach to studying gender in senior management, this study's main message for organizations with masculine cultures and low representation of women in high levels of management is that there is wide spread dissatisfaction with the outdated command-and-control management style, extremely long-hours, and lack of work-life balance. Although Burke, Burgess and Fallon (2006, p. 210) have written that "workaholism may be a factor in women opting out of corporate life if the costs they must pay become too high", the findings from our study show that these concerns are not specifically female issues; they are actually people issues. Men might not publicly voice these concerns for fear of exclusion from the dominant group, but they do so in the privacy of a confidential interview or survey.

As a result of the aforementioned wide spread dissatisfaction with aspects of masculine cultures, the principal practical implication of this study for organizations is the need to change from a masculine to an inclusive culture. Masculine cultures serve some of the interests of the organization and of the "masculine" men, but they also involve organizational and social costs. For example, masculine cultures under-develop and under-utilize a growing section of their workforce: women and men who value inclusiveness, shared decision making, and a balanced lifestyle, including the capability to balance work and family responsibilities. Such cultural change may engage men and women at senior management levels, thus, improving the retention rate of valued employees. In particular, cultural change may address this (and other) organization's challenge in retaining senior women. Our recommendation is supported by Koyuncu, Burke and Fiksenbaum's (2006) study of 286 women in a Turkish bank, which found that work experiences were strong predictors of engagement, and that engagement predicted work outcomes such as job satisfaction and intent to quit. Koyuncu and colleagues suggested,

therefore, that organizations need to improve retention rates of talented male and female employees by engaging them. Similarly, Tombari and Spinks (1999) have posited that solid support for a healthy work life balance may possibly lead to increased commitment.

The engagement and retention of valued employees can be achieved by HR and managerial practices that match rhetoric of a more work-family friendly culture. The in-house and exit interviewees in this study were almost unanimous in their affirmation that only *evidence* of true commitment to cultural change would make or would have made them stay, respectively.

“Nothing will make me stay other than a feeling that there is a commitment to change, because I am here for the long-term not for the short-term.” (Interviewee # 3)

Such evidence can be obtained from HR and managerial practices. Many of these practices are deceptively simple to implement, such as use of language that does not highlight gender differences (e.g., address emails to “Colleagues” rather than “Gentlemen and [woman’s name]”) or reflects disregard for the human side of the business (e.g., reference to human resources earmarked for retrenchment as “dead bodies”, “fingers’ and “toes”). Further, explicit and clear guidelines of work boundaries (e.g., meetings are not to commence before 8am or after 6pm) should be issued and role modeled. These practices are deceptively simple to implement because they involve real change in values and behaviors, not only in rhetoric. They also entail a change of the current work model of what one needs to do to be successful, such as work extremely long hours, travel at very short notice and exclusively focus on financial outcomes.

In addition, organizations can improve the retention of their senior men and women by understanding what they value and what will make them stay. But to truly understand senior employees, organizations need to combat organizational silence or people’s “fear of speaking up about issues and problems” in the workplace (Morrison and Milliken, 2000, p. 721). One way in which organizations can do this is by using communication mechanisms that stimulate honest

feedback, such as anonymous employee surveys and confidential interviews. Another is by encouraging senior men and women to “speak up” and then reinforcing such behavior with positive rather than negative consequences. For example, if a male executive with a young family requests to work a four day week, he should be given a fair chance to use the company’s family friendly policies without feeling ostracized by or isolated from his usual work network. Men’s silence can also be broken by role modeling. For example, masculine cultures might expect senior employees (who are usually men) to put the organization’s interests ahead of those of their families (e.g., Harvey, 1997). So, one way to break men’s silence about their feelings towards this cultural characteristic is to have a leader/CEO who goes public when s/he puts her/his family interests ahead of the organization’s. Role modeling can thus be used to communicate what the leadership values, which in the above example might be “to put the family’s interests ahead of the organization’s, at least some of the time.” Another way to break organizational silence is by providing forums where people feel safe to discuss issues with colleagues and share experiences. Forums might be run by a facilitator from outside the organization (who is unencumbered by organizational pressures and who safeguards the employees’ identities) or by an HR manager (who has the employees’ trust and respect). Such forums can, thus, be used to monitor the depth of the feelings of men and women in the organization. Forums can be more effective than climate surveys in breaking organization silence in that they foster relationships and support networks, thus reducing people’s sense of isolation and fear to speak up.

In sum, using the FGS approach, the recommendation to change a masculine culture to an inclusive one reflects the views and wants of many women and men in senior management. In particular, cultural change is a prerequisite for many male and female senior employees to stay in the organization. Organizations are more likely to heed a recommendation to change to retain valued employees than one couched in terms of increasing the retention and representation of

women in senior management. Organizations are aware that retention of valued employees is beneficial in terms of, for example, lower recruitment and hiring costs. As retention of valued employees includes retention of some women, the representation of women in senior management should increase over time partly as a consequence of this recommendation.

Limitations of the study and implications for future research

The study was used to show how the proposed FGS approach can be applied to gender in management research. A limitation of the study is its small number of interviews. However, we complemented the interview data with survey data from 178 respondents in the quantitative dimension of our research. We found that common themes emerged after the completion of the fourteen interviews and after the analyses of the 178 open-ended responses in the questionnaire survey. In addition, it is normally difficult to gain access to large samples of executives for interviews, both due to their lack of time to be interviewed and the scarcity of women at high levels of management. Nevertheless, future studies can benefit from having a greater representation of men and women executives than the current one, as well as respondents from more than one case in more than one industry, to increase the generalizability of the findings and to understand if some of the culture issues are industry specific. Still on the topic of cultures, future research could use the FGS approach to explore further the extent to which male and female executives view culture as hostile; if they would or would not do something about it and why. In particular, recent literature suggests that younger men are more willing to speak up than older men against pervasive norms of long work hours (e.g., Lewis, 2007). It is not possible to determine from this study's small interview sample if age is a determining factor in one's willingness to speak up, but no age differences were found in this study's sample of male survey respondents. Further research is necessary to clarify generational differences in perceptions of

aspects of organizational cultures, such as long work hours, that may impact on men's willingness to speak up.

Conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to propose a shift in emphasis from gender differences to gender similarities in the explanations of the findings of gender in management research and in the recommendations we make to organizations. The implicit goal of the paper was to clearly illustrate the proposed approach, so that gender in management researchers can apply it in future studies. We believe that a shift in emphasis will broaden the appeal of the recommendations for change emanating from future gender in management research and, thus, result in change in organizations that might enable women to advance to senior management positions. We acknowledge that power issues and imbalances are still rife in many organizations. Nevertheless, we *hope* that a focus on gender similarities (FGS) will stimulate an increase in women's representation in senior management in due course.

This approach to the study of gender in management has at least two significant implications. The first is that it will potentially break barriers to women's advancement such as organizational silence, thus stimulating change that may increase women's representation at high levels of management. We envisage that men will also benefit from this shift in emphasis. For example, the explanations and recommendations that will emerge from the gender in management studies on organizational silence will give men a much needed voice to raise problems or issues that are similar to those raised by their female colleagues. As Wood and Newton (2006) point out, the culture of working long hours restricts the choices of both male and female managers. Surely many fathers prefer not to have a meeting at 7.00am or 7.00pm, but do so partly because they are afraid of the consequences of speaking up against this practice. So,

removing the climate of fear will empower men to challenge (Gambles, Lewis and Rapoport, 2006) aspects of the culture that they dislike. The second significant potential implication of the FGS approach is that it will generate recommendations that appeal to organizations looking for change that benefit the greatest proportion of stakeholders.

Women's representation in management has improved in recent decades possibly as a result of the recommendations made by the gender differences approach to gender in management research. But this improvement has often been frustratingly slow. The limitations of the gender differences approach have motivated feminists to look “at the gendering of organizations and organizational practices to comprehend how inequalities between women and men continue in the face of numerous attempts to erase such inequalities” (Acker, 2006, p. 441-2). Writing specifically apropos of the Australian finance and insurance industry, French and Strahan (2007, p. 317) state that “...There has been negligible change, even though the industry has become increasingly feminised, moving from 46% of the finance workforce in 1983 to 78% two decades later. The percentage of women in leadership positions (<20%) throughout the industry means that this industry should be viewed as low rather than high performing.” The recommendations to organizations that have stemmed from the gender differences approach have simply not made a big enough dent.

Therefore, we believe that we need a logical extension to the gender differences approach to smash the glass ceiling at senior levels of management. We consider the new approach that leverages off similarities as a logical extension. The message from the study's findings is clearly that many male senior managers are on the same side as their female colleagues on a number of organizational issues, such as their dislike of an inhospitable masculine culture that breeds organizational silence. The traditional dualism of men as breadwinners and women as carers is inappropriate these days because both sexes are constrained by “lack of childcare, family leaves

that may be available to women rather than men *and* women; pay gaps between men and women; particular notions of ‘ideal’ workers and ‘ideal’ carers; and assumptions about men and women’s ‘appropriate’ or ‘natural’ roles” (Gambles et. al., 2006, p. 88). So we echo other scholars’ views that men must be brought into the discussion to move things forward (e.g., Beauregard, 2006; Gambles et al., 2006) and create frame breaking change (French, 2005).

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Table 1

Percentage Frequencies on Demographic, Work and Aspirations Items

Item	Women (N=100)	Men (N=78)	Chi-square (χ^2, df, p)
Age			
Under 29	7.0%	0.0%	(28.81, 3, .00)
29-39	63.0%	32.1%	
40-49	25.0%	48.7%	
50 or over	5.0%	19.2%	
Education			
Up to undergraduate	54.0%	65.4%	(2.35, 1, .13)
Postgraduate	46.0%	34.6%	
Live with partner	78.0%	91.0%	(5.45, 1, .02)
Primary responsibility for dependents			(32.60, 3, .00)
Yes	28.9%	18.2	
No	7.2%	29.9	
Equal	16.5%	35.1	
Have no children	47.4%	16.9	
Unpaid breaks			(24.12, 1, .00)
None	43.0%	79.5%	
One or more	57.0%	20.5%	
Work hours			(13.04, 4, .01)
Fewer than 40 hours	15.0%	2.6%	
40-49 hours	51.0%	44.8%	
50-59 hours	27.0%	42.3%	
More than 60 hours	7.0%	10.3%	
Work hours of full-timers	(N=85)	(N=76)	(5.13, 3, .16)
40-49 hours	60.0%	46.1%	
50-59 hours	31.8%	43.4%	
More than 60 hours	8.2%	10.5%	
Aspirations in 3 years			(1.79, 3, .62)
Executive	27.3%	21.8%	
Senior management	50.5%	53.8%	
Management	5.1%	2.6%	
Happy not to move up	17.2%	21.8%	
Long term aspirations			(3.56, 3, .31)
Executive (Grades A-C)	55.0%	55.1%	
Senior mgt (Grade D)	32.0%	23.1%	
Management (Grades E-H)	2.0%	5.1%	
Happy not to move up	11.0%	16.7%	
Will you achieve aspirations in your organization?			(1.73, 2, .42)
Don't know	41.0%	32.1%	
Yes	33.0%	41.0%	
No	26.0%	26.9%	

Note: Some of the response categories within items have been collapsed from the original survey measures in order to facilitate hypotheses testing using chi-squares.

Table 2

The Most Frequent Responses to Each of Two Open-ended Questions, by Gender

Item	Women (N=100)	Men (N=78)	Chi-square (χ^2 , df, p)
Barriers to Advancement in Management			
Stereotypes	21.0% (1)	1.3% (-)	(15.73, 1, .00)
Gender discrimination	20.0% (2)	0.0% (-)	(17.58, 1, .00)
Management	17.0% (3)	19.2% (2, 3)	(.15, 1, .70)
No opportunities / Career paths	16.0% (4)	17.9% (4)	(.12, 1, .73)
No support / mentor	15.0% (5)	19.2% (2, 3)	(.56, 1, .45)
Age discrimination	13.0% (6,7)	5.1% (-)	(3.14, 1, .08)
Politics	11.0% (8)	6.4% (-)	(1.13, 1, .29)
HR Policies / Practices	13.0% (6,7)	10.1% (7)	(.71, 1, .40)
Personality traits	8.0% (-)	14.1% (5)	(1.71, 1, .19)
Lack of skills	10.0% (9)	23.1% (1)	(5.65, 1, .02)
Lack of training	6.0% (-)	12.8% (6)	(2.49, 1, .11)
Reasons that Will Make Respondents Stay in Current Organization			
Interesting job	24.0% (1)	15.4% (2)	(2.02, 1, .163)
Recognition	15.0% (2)	9.0% (6)	(1.47, 1, .23)
Able to balance work family	14.0% (3)	12.8% (3,4)	(.05, 1, .82)
Promotion	13.0% (4,5)	12.8% (3,4)	(.00, 1, .97)
Practices to help parents	13.0% (4,5)	3.8% (-)	(4.49, 1, .03)
Financial benefits	8.0% (-)	32.1% (1)	(16.79, 1, .00)
Change Senior Mgt Behaviour	7.0% (-)	10.3% (5)	(.60, 1, .44)

Note: The ranking in brackets represent the most frequently reported category (1) to the least frequent (6 to 10), for each of the two open-ended questions. Only categories mentioned by 10% or more of female or male respondents are reported in the above Table.

Table 3Description of the Interviewees on Demographic and Work Items, and on Aspirations

Question	Women (N=7)	Men (N=4)
Current position/level in the organization	All executives	2 Executives; 1 Senior Mgr .
Length of time in the organization	More than half: 1-5 years One: 10 years or more	Half: 1-5 years Half: 20 years or more
Age range	36-40 (71%); 41-50 (29%)	36-40 (25%); 41-50 (75%)
Percentage in a dual-career relationships	57%	0%
Number of children:		
➤ No children	43%	0%
➤ Two or more children	57%	100%
Level of education:		
➤ Undergraduate Degree	14%	50%
➤ Postgraduate: Honours/Diploma (4th year)	14%	0%
➤ Masters Degree	71%	50%
Breadth of work experience:		
➤ Primarily in one business area (eg, HR, IT, or Sales)	71%	75%
➤ Wide range of experience, covering several areas	29%	25%
Aspirations:		
➤ Want to move up	71%	25%
➤ Do not want to move up	0%	75%
➤ Want to broaden experience or do something different	29%	0%
Will you achieve aspirations in your organization?		
➤ Don't know /Yes	29%	50%
➤ No	71%	50%

Table 4Summary of the Interviews with Three Executives Who Have Left the Organization

Biographic Items	Findings
Length of time in the last position at the bank	Ranged from 12 months to 2 years
Length of time at the bank	Ranged from 12 months to 6 years
Age range	Between 36-50 years of age
Level of education	All had at least undergraduate degrees
Breadth of work experience	Spread across functional areas and/or industries. One exit interviewee had experience in roles with P&L responsibility

REASON/S FOR LEAVING THE BANK

All reported leaving the bank for **work related reasons**.

Specifically, all three exit interviewees mentioned:

- **A clash of personal and organisational values.** The interviewees mentioned a clash between a focus on financial outcomes and their view that people should be first or an equal first to financial success. They believed that staff and customers came a distant second to shareholders.
- **No real commitment to people and to change.** The interviewees felt that the organisation was inconsistent in its messages about people, customers, and change and its behaviour (more specifically, they were referring to the behaviour of the executive team).
- **A strong, tough culture, that does not show any signs of changing** to accommodate a diversified workforce. Specifically, the culture is tough in terms of the work commitment expected and its values. It only values financial achievement. The performance management system rewards financial achievement only. It does not value honesty, team work, and staff and customer satisfaction. It is strong, because it is very resilient to change and because it is “a culture that forces you to comply and it vilifies you for doing the right thing” (Interviewee # 14).
- **Disappointment that the changes at the bank were only superficial,** that the messages contradicted behaviour, and that (in their opinion) real change was not going to happen.

WHAT COULD THE BANK HAVE DONE FOR YOU TO STAY?

All interviewees felt that the bank needed to change. They all mentioned a **demonstrated, genuine commitment to cultural change** as the chief reason that would have made them stay. This was expressed in different ways, as the need:

- To put **people** issues higher in the (executive team’s) agenda.
- For **fundamental cultural change** rather than the superficial changes (eg, t-shirts to identify teams introduced by the “revitalisation” project). Change the culture of long hours, sexist language, contradictory messages and behaviour, lack of customer focus, etc.
- To **accept and embrace change**, and support people who can introduce and implement change (rather than beating them to a pulp to conform). The respondents were unanimous in their view that for change to happen the CEO and the executive team had to live and model the change.