Leading Ladies: the Power of Passion

A study into women’s career development in corporate organisations in the Australian Financial Services Industry

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to a woman who lived passionately, courageously and lovingly.

Jenny Margaret Craig 1965 - 2010
This has been a long journey, and there are a number of people who have never left my side. Individually and collectively they have inspired, motivated and supported my vision to write this woman’s story and each one has played an integral part in whom I have become as a result of the journey.

Firstly, to Neville Sandon who challenged and inspired me to embark on the journey.

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Lastly, to the courageous and passionate women who generously gave their time and shared their personal stories to make this thesis possible. I am humbled and grateful for all the trust and support you have given me. Thank you.
Statement of authentication

The following thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma, and that, to the best of the candidates knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except when due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Kerry A Baxter
March 2011
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Abstract

Women in executive positions in the Australian corporate organisation appear to be a novelty. There is however a small number of women, who, against the odds, do take up the challenge to lead and hold executive positions in corporate organisations. What can be learned from these women? This reflective inquiry begins by exploring an indicative and eclectic array of historical events, and critically reviews the pertinent literature, to see what significant influences have contributed to and shaped the overall emergence of women’s participation and taking of executive positions. The inquiry contributes by bringing together a diverse range of theoretical perspectives on women’s involvement in organisations with empirically rich examples, drawn from a Complexity informed qualitative interpretative project gathering women’s own stories, women who hold and have held executive positions within the financial services industry. My experiential reflection permeates and directs the overall approach as well as the way in which I made sense of and interpreted the inquiry. The result is the construction of a rich picture that informs current practice and experience while illuminating emergent implications for the broader corporate system.

Focusing on the organisation and the factors that shape women’s career development I determine that institutional changes aimed at improving women’s representation in executive positions have not led to significant change and suggest that Complexity provides a new understanding that goes beyond the prevailing views of stereotypical and cultural barriers obstructing women’s career advancement. In the empirical work, I present a Complexity informed inquiry with Complexity providing the overarching logic, methodological approach, technique, and primary metaphors through which the findings are articulated and elaborated. Coherent conversations exploring how twelve women in executive positions make sense of and construct their every day experience in corporate organisations were used to generate narratives that were analysed and synthesised (through fractal and attractor analysis) to identify patterns of similarity. I have identified major themes and four attractor
sets from which I make inference about what has guided and shaped these women’s behaviours and attitudes towards their corporate career and experience within the corporate organisation.

The inquiry provides a new analysis represented by key themes, which are shown to have driven the actions of the women as they self-organised their corporate careers. Firstly, initial conditions influenced and shaped how these women constructed and thought about their career. Secondly, it was found that their career narratives were strongly entwined with other contexts (society, family and the personal domain). Thirdly, the findings indicate that as these women shift seamlessly from one role to another they constructed temporary identities (professional, mother, wife) as they followed their life cycle passions. Fourthly the career journeys of the women were shown to be non-linear and characterised as unpredictable and almost serendipitous as they changed course to make what I have termed ‘passion leaps’, at various times in their career. These leaps required risk-taking and foresight and an unbridled enthusiasm for an uncertain future and a not-so-certain landing. What emerged were women who were passionate about their positions and comfortable with leadership and taking executive positions: they just did it differently to men. I propose that the underrepresentation of women in leadership will only change when women’s difference is fully supported and the corporate career model changes in a way that supports a critical mass of women to take executive positions within the organisation.
Chapter 1 - Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Women in executive positions in the Australian corporate organisation appear to be a novelty. There is however a small number of women, who, against the odds, do take up the challenge to lead and hold executive positions in corporate organisations. What can be learned from these women? This inquiry reflectively traces the problematic historical issues around women and career development in corporate organisations. In this thesis I bring together a diverse array of theoretical perspectives on women’s involvement in organisations with empirically rich examples of lived experiences from women who hold or have held executive positions within the financial services industry. In so doing, I construct a rich picture that informs current practice and experience while illuminating emergent implications for the broader corporate system.

Women's workforce participation rates, status and higher educational attainment have improved dramatically over the last fifty years. However, despite these improvements, women's advancement to executive positions is slow and it could be argued that professional women’s potential appears to be under utilized in our corporate world. There is a strong business case for enhancing and optimizing the contribution of women in executive leadership and as I and others suggest, a parallel public good case (Pande (2003); Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004); Piterman (2008)) for the participation of women in executive leadership.

If we accept that women’s contribution to executive leadership is valuable then the question that arises is; what, if anything, can organisations do to support the emergence of a corporate environment that will attract and retain professional women so as to optimise the contribution of talented women in executive leadership? While many studies are concerned with the barriers to women’s professional advancement this thesis is primarily concerned with exploring what is possible for professional women. The central question guiding this
research is:
What can be learned from those women who do hold executive positions?
The related sub questions are:
- What are the organisational factors and experiences that shape these women’s corporate careers?
- Why are so few women being designated executive leadership positions?
- Are women’s organisational careers being constrained by unconscious prejudices around capabilities and social expectations?
- What are these women’s success factors?

Social and economic change transformed Australian society over the latter half of the 20th century and it is undeniable that women have made a significant contribution to every aspect of Australia’s transformation: societal, political, cultural and economical. Social changes, which included significant shifts in the patterns of family life, birth rates, changing patterns in family formation and shifts in the gender division of labour, occurred against a background of globalisation, competitive labour markets, increased significance of the service sector (see ABS Australian Social Trends 1997, Changing industries, changing jobs) and a major transformation in people’s participation and experience in the labour market and the nature of work itself. Changes in attitudes to the role of women and paid work are reflected in the steady increase of women’s labour force participation rates (for example 37% in 1971, 43.5 % in 1978, 55% in 2001(ABS) and 58.6 % in June 2010 (FaHCSIA, 2010)). The presence of women in paid employment has improved significantly since the 1970’s, however the progression of women into senior executive positions has not improved along with the increased participation in the labour market, with women holding just 8.0% of ASX200 Executive Key Management Personnel positions (EOWA 2010). It is difficult to compare today’s data with exact data from the 1970’s, because there were no systematic Australian surveys measuring the proportion of women in executive positions conducted at that time, however it is helpful to note, that in the late 1960’s and 1970’s there were so few female executives, that in the USA a study attempted by the Harvard Business School was abandoned due to lack of significant subjects (Epstein, 1975). Australia was not alone with its dismal underrepresentation statistics!
Australian data from the 1996 Affirmative Action Agency report shows that by 1995 across all private sector industries, women only represented 11% of the most senior managers compared with 8% for the preceding year (1996:19). A review of other historical data (for example the Review of the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act 1999 Consultation Report (FaHCSIA) and the 2010 Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) report) demonstrates that the proportion of women in executive positions has held constant for over forty years. This (disappointingly) suggests there has been little significant change in women’s appointment rates; women are still largely missing from executive positions in Australian corporate organisations, despite the increase in women’s workforce participation rate, increased educational attainment, government anti-discrimination legislation, and years of corporate policy focusing on Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) and diversity policies. So why have so few women progressed through the corporate organisation to take up executive positions?

Fortunately we do not have to start from scratch, there are a few women who do hold executive positions in corporate organisations: What can we learn from these women that will help us understand what is going on in corporate organisations in relation to women’s career development? As a woman who holds an executive position in a corporate organisation I have a personal belief, based on many years of leadership experience that mixed leadership teams create workplaces that encourage and support more equitable decision making for all stakeholders. Males and females construct and experience the world differently, and in balance, these differences complement and strengthen one another (Broomfield, 1997). Gender is a form of diversity and diversity is a stimulus for new ways of understanding and challenging taken for granted world-views. The importance of diversity has been noted by others; see for example Broomfield (1997):

We must cherish and nurture variety in landforms, life forms, cultures, ways of knowing, and styles of expression. As Charles Darwin revealed long ago, organic diversity protects life by providing flexibility for evolutionary adaption in perpetually changing environments. Cultural variety is equally indispensible as a pool of alternative codes of human existence (Broomfield, 1997:57).
I believe we must encourage diversity of thought and being in organisations so that multiple perspectives are held without judgement. When I speak of human diversity, I mean to emphasize that we are a mixture of individuals who are sometimes different and in some ways the same. As Porter-O’Grady and Malloch state: *Diversity is a total collective mixture. It is not a function of race or gender or any other us-versus-them dyad but a complex and ever changing blend of attributes, behaviours and talents* (Porter-O’Grady and Malloch, 2007:105) The underrepresentation of women at this highest level concerns me because the authority inherent in senior executive positions enables the bearer of those roles to influence and create decisions that affect us all, and … *women’s absence from executive positions renders them almost invisible* (Adler, 1993:4) from that decision making process.

This chapter presents an overview of the research landscape and summarises the current patterns and views about women’s career development experience in the 21st century corporate organisation. Focusing on the organisation, I look at the factors that appear to shape women’s career development and describe my journey to the research topic through personal reflection. I then outline the purpose of the research along with the methodological approach which introduces Complexity as a useful conceptual framework for providing new understanding and building a ‘rich picture’ of women’s experiences and career development within the corporate organisation. The chapter concludes with a summary of the chapter and a road map for the research chapters that follow.

1.2 Research landscape

This section presents an overview of the patterns and themes of women’s career development within the 21st century corporate organisation. It provides a brief background to the latest research findings elucidating that women are not in executive positions. This provides a snapshot of the patterns and themes that currently exist around women’s career development within the corporate organisation.
1.2.1 Overview of patterns in women’s career development within the 20th and 21st century organisation

An extraordinary revolution has occurred in the last fifty years. In this section quantitative literature is cited to effectively depict through statistical evidence the situation both historical and current regarding the presence of women on boards and in executive positions. Women are underrepresented in executive positions and the numbers tell the story quite clearly. Women now make up 58.6% of the paid workforce (ABS, (2010) Labour Statistics in Brief Australia 2010. Cat. 6104.0, p.3) as opposed to 1973 when women accounted for 41%. Today it is taken for granted that women will earn their own income in paid employment outside the home; it is easy to forget that in the 1960’s, the decade of liberation and change, most middle class women married, and stayed at home to raise a family. Two generations ago there was no corporate career path for women. Women rarely worked outside the home unless they had to for economic reasons. When they did, the majority of jobs offered were badly paid, domestic services or clerical work (Bradley, 1989).

Today women enter the workforce with higher levels of education, experience, career expectations and a commitment to the labour force (Catalyst, 2006). Similar to other OECD countries, in the last two decades, women have been the driving force behind Australia’s increased labour force participation rates. In 1973 the female labour force participation rate was 41%. In 1986, 48% of Australian women aged 15 years and over were in the labour force with the participation rate increasing to 68% by 2005 (ABS, Australiансocialtrends, Cat No. 4102.0, 2007:1). Furthermore, 71% of women in the prime child bearing years (25-34) are now in paid work. This represents a 31% increase over the last 20 years (ABS, 2005).

It is interesting to note that over the 30 years to 2001 most of the growth in women’s participation in the labour force reflects their take-up of part-time work. As a result, while overall numbers of employed women increased over this period, the proportion of employed women working full-time declined across almost all age groups. In 2006, Australia had a higher rate of part-time employment for women aged
15 years and over (41%) than the other OECD countries examined. The rate was well above the OECD average (26%) and more than double the rate of part-time employment in the USA of (17%) (ABS, Cat No 4102.0, 2007).

Women in Australia substantially curtail their labour force participation whilst they have young children, as is evident in many other developed countries. However, the dip between the ages 25–39 years is more pronounced for Australia than it is for New Zealand, the UK, and the USA (Labour Force Participation – An International Comparison Cat No. 4102.0 - Australian Social Trends, 2007).

Clearly there have been some significant societal changes over the last forty years. In just a few decades Western society’s expectation of women’s work has changed. Today there are some very powerful and influential role models for women: these are courageous women, who followed their passion and took up the challenge to lead. In 2008, Hillary Rodham Clinton became the first woman to run credibly for nomination to the White House and the US Presidency. Along the way she inspired millions with her strength and commitment, shattering many of the perceived gender barriers to reaching the top of the career ladder and perhaps most importantly, demonstrated ‘what is possible ‘and ‘how it is done’ for many women all over the world. Hillary lost her race to a man who made history himself by becoming the first African American to win the US presidency, Barack Obama. Both these extraordinary people demonstrated the collective power of inclusion and valuing difference: they live and breathe what I posit could be this century’s motto ‘anything is possible and nothing stays the same’. We could even dare to think that ‘diversity’ is finally happening and not just talked about.

Closer to home, precedents have been set with a number of women taking powerful and influential executive positions. Quentin Bryce made a quantum step for women in leadership when she was appointed the first Australian female Governor-General; Julia Gillard became Australia’s first female Prime Minister; Kristina Keneally became Premier of NSW; and within the Corporate landscape Gail Kelly was appointed Chief Executive Officer and Managing Director of Westpac Bank one of Australia’s major financial corporations. Ann Sherry was appointed as Chief Executive Officer of Carnival Australia, having moved from the role of Chief
Executive Officer at Westpac New Zealand and Group Executive, Westpac New Zealand and the Pacific. Margaret Jackson became the first woman to Chair a top-50 publicly listed company (Qantas) and Virginia Bell was sworn in as a Justice of the High Court of Australia, to name a few examples. However despite the achievements of these high profile women, being female and holding an executive position in an Australian corporation is somewhat unusual.

Along with globalisation, the rise of numbers of women in the workforce is one of the major benefits and challenges faced by the 21st century corporate organisation. The era of ‘choice’ has provided greater flexibility at work. Technology has enabled us to work remotely, we can attend global virtual team meetings in and out of the office, at any time of the day or night via web-based conferencing, and any questions raised in the meeting can be responded to over the web while we sleep. We converse in a common language, English, to a diverse group of people in hundreds of offices and countries around the globe. We are told that those organisations that effectively manage the diversity of race, culture and gender potentially have a competitive advantage. For example the study, ‘The Bottom Line: Connecting Corporate Performance and Gender Diversity’, released in January 2004 by the research firm Catalyst, found a strong correlation between Fortune 500 Companies that have diversified their senior management and companies that performed well financially.

The ‘Bottom Line’ study used two measures, return on equity (ROE) and total return to shareholders (TRS) to compare companies with higher levels of diversity to others. They found that the ROE was on average 35.1% higher and TRS 34% higher in companies with more women in their top management teams. Whilst the study data verified that the companies with the highest representation of women in top management positions had better financial performance, the report did not draw a causal link, nor did it suggest that just adding women to the ‘top team’ would make the bottom line healthier.

The findings did however strongly suggest that the companies with the highest representation of women on their top management teams experienced on average better financial performance than companies with the lowest women’s
representation. This finding is consistent with other major studies (See Desvaux, Devillard-Hoellinger, Meaney, *A Business Case for Women*, McKinsey Quarterly- September 2008).

The Catalyst (2004a) report highlighted many aspects to good financial performance and suggested that a leadership team that is:

…knowledgeable enough to leverage diversity is likely to be creating effective policies, programs and systems, as well as a work culture, that maximises a variety of its assets and creates new ones (p.12).

And the report goes on to conclude that:

What ever compels corporate financial performance we now know that it is linked to gender diversity (p.12).

In an increasingly competitive and complex global world few organisations would argue against increased financial performance, yet despite the heightened awareness of the benefits and value of gender diversity, developing women and leveraging that development by giving them a seat at the decision making table is rarely happening. A gender gap is evident not only in relation to job opportunities, but more specifically in relation to salary difference.

According to the National Centre of Social and Economic Modelling’s (NATSEM) report *The impact of a sustained gender wage gap on the economy* (2010) the gender wage gap costs Australia $93 billion a year in productivity, and 60% of the disparity comes down simply to ‘being a woman’. The report shows the gap between men and women's pay remains at 17%, and the total dollar figure is the equivalent of 8.5% of gross domestic product (GDP). The report suggests the reason for the wage gap is because of career choices, industry segregation, work-hours and poor bargaining power. The report did give some encouragement that inroads in the gender divide are being made, with the wage gap results showing that Gen Y women are almost on par with Gen Y men. But the concern is that this closing of the gender divide could be lost when women enter their child rearing years.
Gender-based inequality is not an Australian phenomenon: it affects the majority of the world’s cultures, religions, nations and income groups. Gender-based inequality manifests itself in different ways. Following the corporate philosophy, ‘what get measured gets done’, statistical platforms are seen by many as a useful way of monitoring and tracking what is going on. This supports the view that a challenge, which can be measured, can be addressed.

A key global measure, being used today, is The Global Gender Gap Index. The World Economic Forum introduced this index in 2006. The aim of the index is to use it as a tool for benchmarking and tracking global gender-based inequalities on economic, political, education and health-based criteria. The country rankings are meant to serve a dual purpose at a global level. Firstly, they are designed to create greater awareness of the challenges posed by gender gaps, and the opportunities that could be created by reducing those gaps. It is also hoped that the rankings, will serve as a catalyst for change by providing policy-makers with a snapshot of their country’s relative strengths and weaknesses, compared to other nations.

According to the index, Australia ranked 17, shows a well-rounded performance, ranking well on all four subindexes and, over the last year, further improving its scores on economic participation, driven by advances in labour force participation and a narrowing wage gap. Considering that Australian women led the world in obtaining the vote during the nineteenth century (women first voted in South Australia on 23 March 1896), I would have expected our progression to be further ahead, not merely ranking well as indicated in the report.

Despite the above studies demonstrating that gender diversity has a positive effect on the bottom line, no country in the world no matter how advanced, has managed to achieve true gender equality, as measured by:

…comparable decision-making power, equal opportunity for education and advancement, and equal participation and status in all walks of human endeavour (Lopez-Claros, A. and Zahidi, S. 2005:2)
The above finding is not new. Despite all the attention and push over the last forty years for organisations to represent the broader community of women and make tangible, measurable efforts to improve the equality of opportunity for women, little has changed. The Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workforce Agency’s (EOWA) 2010 Australian Census of Women in Leadership research reveals that their trend data shows there has been no significant change since 2002 further indicating that talking about the issues and their place on the corporate agenda have not moved women forward in any real way, reporting that:

- 61.9% of Australia’s top 200 companies still have no women in executive key management positions (a rise from 65.1% in 2008).
- Women only occupy 8.4% of Australian board directorships compared with 8.2% reported in 2004.
- There is 1 female for every 32 males at the highest executive management level (CEO) of ASX200 companies.
- Women hold 8.0% of Executive Key Manager positions (small rise from 7.0% in 2008).
- 10.7% of ASX200 companies have 25% or more women on the executive key management team (this compares with 8.7% in 2008) (see note 7).
- Women hold 4.1% of executive line positions (same as in 2008).
- 38.1% of ASX200 companies have at least one woman in an executive key management personnel position. This compares with the 34.9% in 2008.
- The majority of women executives are employed in the Retailing, Telecommunication Services, and Pharmaceuticals (Australian Census of Women in Leadership EWOA report 2010:8).

Despite there being almost equal numbers of men and women in the workforce (45.3%) and among managers and professionals (44.6%) the EOWA census highlights the obvious diminishing representation of women the higher you go up the corporate leadership ladder, as shown in the Women in Leadership 2010 - Census Pyramid (see Figure 1 below).
Figure 1: Women in Leadership 2010 - Census Pyramid

1 Australian vice-chancellors council (Universities Australia Website 2010) University Profiles 2010
2 Commonwealth Department of Families, Housing, Community Services & Indigenous Affairs, Women in Australia 2009
3 People in Executive Government (Parliamentary Education Office Website 2010)
4 Australian Public Service Commission, State of the Service Report 2008-09
5 ABS Category 6105.0, Australian Labour Market Statistics (April 2010), Industry, Employed Persons, Occupation, Original-February 2010, Table 2.3
6 ibid, April 2010

Note: The average number of Key Management Personnel reported by a company is 6.6, the same as in 2008.
Disappointingly, the 2010 census reveals that for Australia, women remain underrepresented in the most senior corporate positions in ASX 200 organisations. Nothing significant has occurred. In 2008, the EOWA report showed that women held 7% of Executive Key positions and in 2010 they held 8%. What is of greater concern is that in 2010 when EOWA measured the line manager roles largely considered to be the pipeline positions into Executive Key Management positions and CEO roles, women held only 4.1% of these positions. There has been no change in this indicator from 2008 (EOWA, 2010:4). In 2007 author Dr Lois Frankel described women’s workplace shifts as ‘glacial’ (Financial Review, 26 June, 2007, p.59). The latest EOWA research supports this view, suggesting that we are not even moving glacially, we appear to be shrinking. Australia has now fallen behind New Zealand, the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and South Africa (2010). The census found that when it comes to the percentage of women with board member positions, women chair five boards and hold just 8.4% of board directorships in the ASX200 companies. This is down 0.3 % from the 8.7% held in 2006 and slightly above the 8.2% held in 2004. Women hold six Chief Executive Officer positions and 8.0% of Executive Key Management positions, this compares with 12% in 2006 and 11.4% in 2004. Add to this picture, the observation that almost 40 years after it became unlawful to pay women less than men for equal work of equal value women are still earning on average 17% less a week than men for the same work. The results are extremely disappointing and raise once again the debate about what is going on and how work is organised in the corporate organisation.

Women have gained ground in the areas of education, employment, income and wealth, despite these gains the April 2009 AMP.NATSEM, Income and Wealth Report shows, …there is strong evidence that a gender gap still exists and there is still a lot of ground to be made up. Large gaps exist between women and men in both paid and unpaid work, and areas of wealth, income and superannuation (Issue 22, p.35). Further, given the rise in the proportion of women who are earning their own incomes, and that levels of economic autonomy have increased, you would expect that women's relative economic position, as measured by their share of total gross personal income, would have increased also. However, in Australia over the last decade women’s position has remained largely unchanged. Analysis of Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) earnings data confirms that Australia has a persistent
gender wage gap. Data from the Average Weekly Earnings Survey demonstrate that between 1990 and 2009, the gender wage gap remained within a narrow range of between 15 and 17% (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2008), Employee Earnings and Hours, August, ABS Cat No. 6306).

Whilst there have been some positive trends towards gender equality in Australia, as discussed above, progress has been slow, and some assert that progress has actually stalled (Probert, 2001). Probert strongly believes that, for any significant change in gender equality to occur in Australia, we need to focus our attention on the ‘gender culture’ we have created over the years. Probert defines gender culture as:

[T]he norms and values that underpin what comes to be defined as the desirable forms of gender relations in a particular society, and the accepted ideas about division of labour between men and women (Probert, 2001:1).

Probert, 2001 further states that good workplace policy development appears to be undermined by other changes such as longer working hours, increased child care costs and those invisible barriers that are part of the culture of organisations which do not disappear without intervention.

So what gets in the way of women advancing in corporate organisations? Could it be the gendered culture or is it, as Guy Russo, CEO of Kmart Australia Ltd believes:

It’s men – and to be more specific, it’s men who run Australian companies … men hold about 97 per cent of the highest positions across the ASX 200 companies. So it is clear who is making the decisions in those organisations, including deciding who joins the senior management team (Brouard, Annese and Krautil, 2004:51).

In his interview Mr Russo acknowledged that his view that men were getting in the way of women’s advancement in corporations would not be popular with his peers. However he felt he had seen, and been involved in, enough discussions within his own organisation to have an informed opinion about what prevents the advancement of women in organisations. He personally believed that despite the historical factor
of women still bearing the brunt of child raising responsibilities whether they are in paid work or not, the real key to change was the awareness and preparedness of the CEO to address the issue directly.

Six years on from the above interview, it seems that Mr Russo’s peers may now concur with his insightful comment that men make the rules in the workplace and that therefore they are the ones who need to change the way the workplace is organised. Australia’s top businessmen are now vowing to fight for women’s rights, because, according to the CEO of Citigroup, Stephen Roberts, *it is a man’s problem* (Sunday Telegraph 4 April, 2010, p.4). So in what has been called ‘a job for the boys’, Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Elizabeth Broderick has formed The Male Champions of Change Advisory Group. This powerful male group consists of ten top business leaders from major companies: Woolworths, Telstra, Origin, Energy, IBM, Deloitte, Citigroup, Goldman Sachs and Westpac.

The agenda of the advisory group is to improve pay and conditions for female workers with each leader committing to push through a ‘gender equity’ mandate within their own companies, while pressuring others to also follow suit. Equal pay, more female board members, flexible work arrangements and senior female managers are reported to be the focus of their attention.

So do men hold the key to improving Australia’s gender equity issue? According to Commissioner Elizabeth Broderick *If we don’t see strong male leadership on this, men talking to men, we are never going to change the picture* (Sunday Telegraph 4 April, 2010, p. 4). Given men hold 92.0% of ASX200 Executive Key Manager positions (EOWA, 2010) and those positions make the decisions in corporations, I believe this initiative appears to be heading in the right direction. However, after all the years of women fighting for a place at the leadership table, the idea that only male CEOs can deliver gender equity may appear counter-intuitive to the modern woman who believes that women are responsible for making their own way. Further, I believe that there may be some sceptics who would question whether men talking about gender equity in an all-male boardroom would make a sustainable difference to corporate women’s careers. There are many who believe we live in a gendered society that makes it impossible for women to achieve their potential in the
corporate world because of the subtle, yet pervasive, barriers that will always exist in the male orientated corporate culture. There is a lot of other speculation as to why women are underrepresented in executive positions; this research challenges this debate and moves beyond it to a more complex, holistic and context dependant framework.

1.2.2 Focus on the organisation: factors that shape women’s career development

The 21st century corporate organisation is full of contradictory and complex messages around women and their careers. The ground-breaking report, ‘Women and Men in U.S. Corporate Leadership – Same Workplace, Different Realities?’ (Catalyst, 2004b) provides new understanding about senior executive women’s perceptions and experiences of the corporate organisation. Interestingly, the study found that women and men in the workplace generally have the same goals, for example, women and men have equal desire to have the CEO job (p.1). They use the same career advancement strategies: Women and men report similar levels of work satisfaction; reasons they would potentially leave their companies; and strategies for advancing (p.1). Catalyst also found differences between men and women for example; women report facing a host of stereotypes and environmental challenges that their male colleagues did not and women have made more tradeoffs and adopted more strategies to achieve balance than their male colleagues (p.1). Why then, if women want the same things as men, are they not getting them? Why do the numbers in executive leadership remain low? The report made a number of recommendations to support women’s leadership advancement in the corporate world, which included, creating more inclusive environments, implementing more open career development and advancement processes; and reinforcing communication mechanisms across gender and functional areas to facilitate increased understanding (p.2). Essentially these change recommendations are behaviourally based initiatives and fall into the category of the way things get done. So just how do ‘things get done’ in the corporate world today?
The corporate organisation can be seen as a complex adaptive system. It is complex because it is dynamic and made up of many interconnected sub-systems and adaptive in that organisations have the capacity to change and learn from experience (Holland, 1992; Gell-Mann, 1994). Stacey, Griffin and Shaw (2000) provide an alternative way of thinking about the organisation, which moves us away from looking at organisations merely from a viewpoint that is an extension of systems thinking. They advocate that organisations are complex unpredictable responsive processes of relating; arguing that rules, procedures and systems on their own are not what makes an organisation function. They state:

Systems in organisations can only function if the members of the organisation weave their day-to-day interactions with each other through and around the rules of the systems they have designed. Systems work, to the extent they do, because of the informal, freely chosen, ordinary, day-to-day cooperative interactions of an organisations members, and this can not be controlled (p. 60).

The writers (Stacey, Griffin and Shaw) are suggesting that rules and systems cannot deal with the spontaneous, unpredictable novelty of ordinary human freedom; it is important to note they are not suggesting that managers abandon all workplace rules and systems (as these may be useful for understanding and managing behaviour of a repetitive kind). They are however, focusing on the need for managers to pay more careful attention to their own participation in what is happening on a day-to-day basis, and to make more careful observation of the ordinary choices people make to ‘get things done’. That is they advocate the need for people to be involved, to notice how they communicate and interact on a day-to-day basis (Stacey, Griffin and Shaw, 2000).

To ‘get things done’ in an organisation requires coherent action from many people interacting on a day-to-day basis. Kauffman (1993, 1995) suggests that the capacity to produce coherence in behaviour is intrinsic to the interaction itself. He proposes that change in organisational behaviour is not caused by the choices of the managers or by chance events, but rather by the nature of the self-organising interaction, cooperation or relationship between people in the organisation. Human behaviour thus can be conceptualized as not merely complicated but as being a complex
system. According to this approach individual behaviour is the final result of simpler elements interacting through defined rules, leading to the emergence of new and unexpected states. This notion suggests that to understand the dynamics of social behaviour in organisations we need to focus on the products of interdependent interaction rather than on the products of direct leadership, which has dramatic implications for the way managers lead and for the experience of those being led.

What this notion highlights is that building relationships, cooperation and productive interaction will yield coherent patterns of behaviour that will produce organisations’ economic value, knowledge and power. In light of this understanding we can understand the notion of leadership as an emergent property and it is important to look briefly at the implications of this view for organisational leadership.

The increasing complexity and unpredictability of today’s business environment has seen a new emphasis on leadership. In the past leaders were expected to direct from above, accurately predicting solutions to problems and directing strategies for performance. Subordinates followed plans and strategies that sought stability and control. As discussed previously this style of leadership emerged out of the Newtonian, mechanistic way of thinking, which dominated modern science. Out of this paradigm came the importation of engineering notions of causality into organisational leadership. This way of thinking encouraged leaders to be ‘in control’ and look for causes that would produce the outcomes they needed in order to succeed.

However being ‘in control’ is a paradox for leaders. Stacey, Griffin, and Shaw (2000) put this problem into perspective when they sketch the paradox in administration. Managers assume they should be in control, and when difficulties arise (like mixed deadlines, quality issues, poor communication or budget overruns), they analyze more data, standardise products, design more systems, and install further procedures in order to stay in control. Notwithstanding their best efforts, the problems keep arising and they go through the same process repeatedly. Stacey, Griffin, and Shaw (2000) posit that this is because managers typically use linear, mechanistic thinking and need to use alternative ways of thinking, especially when
trying to deal with complex problems. They suggest, furthermore, that one of the requisite shifts is to relax the assumption that leaders can control change.

Advances in the new sciences have drawn attention to phenomena that do not fit the Newtonian perspective – phenomena that deny the mechanistic predictability attributed to humankind and nature. In the quantum age we realize that all things are interdependent that is, all things are tied together in a wide variety of refined and sometimes inexplicable ways, some obvious and some all but invisible at any level of observation (Porter- O’Grady and Malloch, 2007). Leaders must now carry out their tasks with an awareness of the relatedness of processes, actions, behaviours and functions. Every element interacts and affects the other in a complex web of movement.

According to Porter-O'Grady and Malloch, (2007), quantum leadership theory shows us, that organisational leadership emerges from the combined active engagement of all the members of the organisation:

*Thus as the engagement of individuals in the work of the organisation increases, the leadership also increases. In this view, leadership is not attached to individuals but rather occurs in the space between individuals. It is not something done by one person (the leader) to others (the followers), and it is not a role reserved for the people at the top of the organisation (p.261)*

The emergent leadership model differs dramatically from the dyadic Newtonian model of superior-subordinate relationship leadership. Today’s leader needs to be alert to the serendipitous and unplanned occurrences that are reflected in the fast paced and highly interactive environments in which they work. Leadership in the 21st century is a process of interaction and influence that enlists and mobilises the involvement of others in the attainment of collective goals; it is not a coercive process in which power is exercised over others (Porter- O’Grady and Malloch, 2007).
Leaders who are comfortable with the new way of thinking about leadership will need to understand and appreciate the ambiguity and paradox of situations in a dynamic world, where nothing stays static. Ideas and activities are forever ending and emerging, presenting novel possibilities for success. However, before I move on I would like to add that I am not suggesting that there is no place for some of the Newtonian models, such as, for example in some short term planning or repetitive every day tasks. The two models are not mutually exclusive; they can occur side-by-side in different times. The Newtonian lens is appropriate for understanding some aspects of organisations while the quantum lens provides insights into other aspects.

What is common in both these models of leadership is the connection and interaction. Kauffman (1993, 1995) suggests that internal patterns of connection (the self organising interaction), and relationships between people, immediately have the effect of enabling cooperation and of creating conflicting constraint. Power relations create constraint: constraint, which creates the paradoxical dynamic of cooperation and competition. Connection comes through relationship and relationship immediately constrains those in relationship (Stacey, Griffin and Shaw, 2000). Therefore, contrary to current management thinking, which attempts to downplay power relations and conflict situations, Kauffman is saying that we acknowledge the implications of power and conflict. He states they are inevitably intertwined with cooperation, which is fundamental to the emergence of coherence in organisations. Therefore understanding and illuminating the centrality of power relations in our interactions may lead to a new understanding of organisational interactions (dynamics) and how ‘things get done’.

If we accept Kauffman’s notion of power relations as fundamental to connection and relationships, then power relations can be seen as an integral link to our understanding of social relationships, and to the capacity they have to produce the truths we live by within (and out of) organisations. Foucault (2000) similarly asserts that power shapes all our relationships and identities; it is intensely interactive and relational. From the women’s stories which emerged in this research, there is a familiar pattern around the presence of power relations as having a strong influencing factor on their career development and working experience. The appearance of this pattern would be understandable in Foucault’s (2000) concept
of power, because in his view ‘power’ is not only unavoidable in social relationships, it is the common lynchpin to understanding the relationships between gender and organisations. Understanding the relationship between gender and organisation appears important to this inquiry. Therefore I will explore the concept of power relations further in Chapter 2, in order to facilitate clarity and understanding about what we are seeing and talking about when we talk of power showing itself in the day-to-day interactions of people at work.

I have a concern with the underrepresentation of women in executive positions. It is not the lack of positional power that concerns me. Rather, my concern is the lack of opportunity to influence and make decisions, and the lack of access to the inherent authority in those positions. More often than not organisational decision-making involves a group of men who base their decisions on their preferred male working styles; women are excluded from the decision making table and their voices are not heard. This then reinforces organisational cultures based on male working styles and affirms the perceived importance of ‘male’ leadership styles. Kanter (1977) describes this as a destructive loop; men being appointed leader and making decisions in their preferred male working style, which then affirms their male leadership, which continues the problematic loop that has been bestowed upon the modern organisation due to history. Utilising the Complexity metaphor of sensitive dependence on initial conditions, we can see the significant influence of initial conditions, and the importance of considering the history of the presenting problem, as it is there we may find the clue as to why things have emerged in organisations the way that they have (Kuhn, 2009).

Kanter (1977) further argues that the only way to disrupt the masculine character of leadership is to increase the number of women in leadership. Increasing the critical mass of women through forced quotas is a strategy adopted by a number of European countries (for example, The Norwegian Experience of Gender Quotas, Matland (2004)). However, would more women at senior decision-making levels in organisations change the masculine character of leadership? According to Anne Summers most women at senior levels quickly learn that if they want to protect their own positions, they had best forget about trying to improve other women’s position. She says that if men tap one another on the shoulder for a role or development
it is okay, however when women tap one another on the shoulder for a role or development it is seen as special pleading [it] seems to me to be a case of ‘damned if you do’ and ‘damned if you don’t’ and perhaps yet another example of the superficial things we get caught up in trying to understand what is going on with men and women in organisations (Summers, 2003:185).

Simply put there are not enough women in executive leadership positions within corporate organisations. It is my view that women’s numbers will not increase until attitudes change, and attitudes will not change until the core values and assumptions, upon which these attitudes are based, change. Cultures do not stand still for their portraits; culture cannot be translated into something new, it emerges out of behaviour and interaction. For new corporate cultures to emerge within organisations will require action. Developing a critical mass of women in leadership positions to interact with, and deploy the current leadership power will be a good first step towards facilitating the emergence of new organisational cultures. Perhaps for change to occur, the organisational culture has to redefine the meaning of job competency and what it looks like to work in an organisation and be successful.

It is undeniable that women have made some significant gains in the workforce over the last decade; nevertheless corporations face an alarming gender gap in leadership. It is still true that the higher up in the organisation you look, the lower the percentage of women. This raises the question: Just how effective have our efforts been to embrace gender diversity? Almost all large corporate organisations have Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) and diversity policies. However insight from the 2004b Catalyst survey found that, while both men and women have overcome barriers on the way to the top:

Women report facing a host of stereotypes and environmental challenges that their male colleagues do not [and] women have made more trade offs and adopted more strategies to achieve balance than their male counterparts (p.1).

There appears to be more needed than writing policy to improve opportunities for women. I suggest that in many cases organisations are paying lip service to the benefits of gender diversity. Even when appropriate policies and programs are in
place, entrenched behaviour and attitudes within an organisation can prevent the policy’s implementation or undermine the historical gains made through the policy formation. Policies alone will not ensure diversity; I believe that people need to relate and interact differently. Most of all, change requires courageous leadership. By this I mean: leadership that is prepared to challenge on a daily basis everyone in the organisation on his or her actions and commitment to the organisation’s gender diversity program (if one exists).

There are hundreds of bookshelves filled with studies done, and literature written about leadership. See for example Covey (2002, 1992), Drucker (1999), Goleman (1998), and more specifically women and leadership: Sinclair (1998), Kanter (1977), Marshall (1995), Schein et al. (1996). The rapid social changes of the last few decades have not dislodged the ideology of masculinity as the ideal model of a leader. Drawing on the ‘Trials at the Top’ research, Amanda Sinclair (1998) writes that masculinity is virtually absent as a subject of analysis in leadership research. Despite men being almost universally the subject of leadership studies, masculine aspects of their leadership have been assumed or subsumed as the norm of leadership, rather than made the focus of attention (p.37). This assumption has saturated our corporate world and senior managers appear to be applying the same old gendered stereotypes to corporate leadership, that is, Women ‘take care’ and Men ‘take charge’ (Catalyst, 2004a: 4).

The Catalyst survey highlights a form of gendered social stereotyping that exists in organisations, that is, a generalisation we make to differentiate categories or groups of people (p.5). In this case generalisations about how men and women differ flow over into the workplace and can limit women’s opportunities for advancement into top leadership positions. The stereotypes of women often portray them as lacking the very qualities commonly associated with effective leadership. That is, we often think of leaders as dominant and ambitious: embodying qualities that closely match the stereotype of men (Schein, 2001a). Traditionally men have dominated the leadership of corporations; Schein’s (1976) evocative title ‘Think Manager Think Male’ is still a fair representation of many corporate contexts. Sinclair (1998) found that chief
executives describe corporate life at the top as ‘a man’s world’. Many of the ‘Trials at the Top’ interviewees used the metaphor of the older man’s club to describe the masculinism of the executive culture (Sinclair, 1998:40).

In the corporate world male leadership is usually experienced as the norm, against which suitability for senior leadership promotions is made. Gender appears to be an important determinant of appointments to executive positions. As Sinclair highlights above, the boys club remains prominent in a number of organisations, despite the existence of diversity programs which are designed to regulate entry around education, demonstrated experience, measurable attributes, competence and skill. The assumptions we hold about femininity/masculinity and women’s/men’s roles in society appear deeply embedded: According to Sinclair (1998) our conceptions of leadership are locked in a time-warp, constrained by lingering archetypes of heroic warriors and wise distant fathers (p.22).

To talk of the word ‘gender’ is to talk about the inherent differences between men and women. I prefer to use ‘gender’ in a way that leaves the matter open as to the cause of the differences (whether inherent or culturally created). Halford and Leonard (2001) argue that many men and women in today’s organisations deny that gender plays a significant part in their experience or career development. Yet many research questions about women in organisational leadership positions are still shaped along the similarity/difference debate and are seen through a paradigm which already encodes gender-power assumptions (Marshall, 1995; Rakow, 1986). The old question around whether women and men are really different has influenced much gender related research. This type of research was largely successful in showing that women, if they choose the appropriate groupings, can have similar leadership styles, motivations for working and career aspirations as men (Catalyst, 2004a). However, despite the similarities in style and motivation, women were not automatically accepted as legitimate leaders. Nieva and Gutek (1981) identified four different themes that have developed to explain why so few women have attained positions of significant authority: individual deficits, structural factors, sex roles and inter group phenomena (Nieva and Gutek, 1981:10). Today the path of argument, which still runs along the difference / similarity debate, is to prove firstly that women sometimes differ from men, and then to argue for equality of difference, that is, to
argue for the value of diversity. The diversity argument, as I will call it, has also not won women significantly greater representation at the executive leadership table. Whilst a number of themes have been alluded to, which I will explore later, there appears to be little agreement on why there are so few women at the table. So perhaps it is timely to explore what can be learned from those women who do hold executive positions.

Work is commonplace and it feeds the enormous need in humans for getting things done. It provides money, respect, community, and for many, meaning. For many women, a career defines their worth in society: for the 58.6% of adult Australian women in paid work, that work is often an integral part of their identity. Whilst work can be the thing that defines women; it can also be the thing that confines them. When I joined my first organisation in the 1970’s equal rights legislation was enacted. As a woman, I was told that if I was educated, worked hard and played by the rules I would succeed in the corporate world; it was just a matter of time. Current data indicates we have a critical mass of educated women in the workforce, yet there is little change in corporate executive leadership. A glimpse of what is happening can be found in the University of Melbourne’s Life Patterns study,¹ which found that only 38% of tertiary-qualified Generation-X women work full-time, compared with 90% of Generation-X men at the same level. Professor Johanna Wyn explains this trend as:

[A] mis-match between educational and workplace policies. While our young women are encouraged to excel academically, when its time to start a family, there is very little support available from employers and more traditional attitudes to gender roles seem to prevail. So unfortunately, we find our workforce losing huge numbers of talented individuals (Daily Telegraph, 5th July, 2010:13).

¹ University of Melbourne’s Life Patterns, running since the early 1990’s is Australia’s longest running study of the lives of young people. Professor Johanna Wyn, Director of the Melbourne Graduate School of Education’s Youth Research Centre, leads the study.
Many women do opt in and out of corporate life for a number of complex and varying reasons (Hewlett 2007). One theme appears too often not to be explored: the price of the executive corporate career for many women is just too high. It is increasingly rare for corporations to directly exclude women (except for some associations such as golf clubs or religious organisations). Having a corporate career can involve long working hours in an office environment that agitates against family life. Lingering attitudes place indirect barriers for working mothers, which may include insufficient or no financial support during maternity leave or difficulty accessing affordable child care, and inflexible working hours, which all combine to make participation for more women difficult. Despite the liberal push for an opening up of leadership opportunities for women in Australian corporate organisations, the EOWA 2010 statistics show that gender imbalance still exists in Australian corporate executive positions. The same questions arise again and again. Why are so few women being designated executive positions? Are women being forced out because the Australian work culture is untenable for women (Hewlett 2007) or are women being constrained by prejudices around their capabilities and current social expectations about what they should and should not do? Could it be that success in the form of career promotion appears to require assimilation into a culture that many women find untenable or unattainable? Why do some women stay and others leave? What is the experience of women who do stay, and achieve what they describe as successful and fulfilling careers in executive positions? Is their experience of corporate career different from other women? If so what can be learned from their experience? I will explore these questions further in the inquiry.

Whyte (1994) proposes that many women have a deep worry about the politics and misuse of power in corporations and that corporations do not provide a rewarding experience for women. Many women, he believes, find that the corporate workplace requires them to relinquish their personal power, which is not an option for them. He says women have often chosen to take a safer path by refusing to be part of the messy and complicated corporate political world. This picture is contradictory, as many of the women I spoke to in this research do have successful corporate careers some would say in spite of the above odds outlined above. They are powerful,
determined and intelligent women deeply invested in their careers. They love what they do and expect to have meaningful and fulfilling roles despite the difficulties and compromises experienced in their careers.

Writers over the years have indentified many stories, which indicate the complexity of the issues for women rather than a single reason for their low representation in executive positions. Some of the issues include:

- There is not enough female talent in the organisational leadership pipeline.
- Women do not make the necessary work sacrifices to succeed, that is, they are not prepared to do the hard yards like their male colleagues.
- There are a number of invisible barriers that women tend to face when reaching for higher positions; the high status careers have networks of associated processes of gate keeping that women are unable to move through.
- Women do not cut it as leaders therefore there are no role models to lead the way.
- Systematic organisational discrimination and oppression exists.
- Organisations are not doing enough of the right diversity programs.
- Gender prejudice and stereotyping is culturally entrenched in our society.
- Organisational leadership appointments are more often than not political appointments.
- Organisational leadership appointments are the result of power struggles rather than appointments based on who can add the most value at the time.
- Women are questioning the corporate career model by creating their own career model outside the corporate organisation.
- Women are not taking leadership roles because they are paralysed by mother guilt.
- The barriers to success faced by women are ones women have built themselves.
- The focus on equality has distracted us from the real issues.
- Women do not want corporate leadership roles.
- Women lack the operational experience needed for executive positions.
- Women are poor at networking.
- The workplace culture undermines and marginalises women.
Gender stereotypes and gender role bias blocks progression.
Women are meant to be mothers.
Women are constrained by prejudices around their capabilities and social expectations.

The list goes on. Writers and organisational specialists have proposed many interventions to solve the issues identified above. The introduction of women’s networking groups, diversity boards, quotas for women in leadership, new organisational structures or competency based training initiatives such as developing operational and technical skills, are all worthwhile initiatives which appear to chip away at the issues in the hope that things will improve. I acknowledge that these interventions have made some difference over the years, however, all these initiatives have not made a sustainable difference. What change I have experienced over the years appears superficial; that is, we always seem to be looking and trying to solve the same issues over and over again in differing variations of the same theme. Take for example the following initiatives: Affirmative Action legislation, anti-discrimination legislation, Diversity policies and quotas, or Equal Employment initiatives. The result: little has changed. When we view the same problems over and over again with the same way of thinking little changes, and we can be fairly sure that we are addressing the symptoms rather than the underlying core issues or drivers of the problem. Is there another path to illuminate, a path open to possibility and forward momentum rather than the circular path of cause and effect, which we appear to be stuck on? Is it possible that there are underlying generally held principles around women and work that need to be explored? What is driving those women who are in executive positions?

1.3 Purpose of this research

The purpose of this research is to contribute to emergent and ongoing thought about the nature of women’s career development in today’s corporate organisations. Fostering gender diversity is more than a social imperative - it makes good business sense. When we take into account the benefits of gender diversity for society and organisations as a whole, it appears paramount that we understand why women are still underrepresented in executive positions within corporate organisations.
What tantalises my curiosity is the question: What can be learned from those women who do hold executive positions? This research seeks to explore this question by developing a rich picture of the career development journey of twelve women who hold executive positions within the Australian Financial Services Industry.

Applying the business principle ‘what gets measured gets done’ I want to generate focused attention on women in corporate executive positions to ignite the energy for change. As Heraclitus, the Greek Philosopher remarked: *You cannot step twice into the same river; for fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you* (Russell 1995: 63). We cannot keep looking at the same phenomenon through the same lens and expect to see something different. Organisations as social contexts are never the same; they are in a continual state of flux. Therefore, after talking to the women who participated in this inquiry, this research has more than change intent. I now seek to transcend our current understanding of women and work. Building on the valuable work of those who have researched this subject before, I have chosen to explore a new way of looking at this phenomenon in the hope that something new will emerge that builds a bridge between what we think we know and what is actually happening.

By reflecting on the historical influences of women’s career development and gathering empirical evidence of their current experiences, I will build a rich layered picture that pays attention to the higher order principles that serve as explanations for the unfolding complexity as it relates to the career development of women in executive positions. Exploring the context-dependent thought and behaviour patterns of how the women in this inquiry ‘get things done’ in organisations provides a glimpse of the day-to-day strategies (sequence of internal and external processes that consistently produce a particular result) they use to get the outcomes they have obtained. I seek to focus our gaze on different issues from those previously explored. For example, issues around genuine sponsorship of women versus sprouting good intent, gender redefinition versus feminism, access to resources versus tokenism, merit based promotion and developments versus meritocracy are just a few. This inquiry looks at these issues specifically in relation to the effect they have on women’s career choices and opportunities in today’s corporate organisation.
The research originally had the intent of finding a solution to the problem of why women are underrepresented in executive positions. As the research developed it became obvious that there was no easily defined problem or easy answer, and that I needed to explore other ways of illuminating women’s career decision behaviour in organisations. As I progressed along my research journey (which was greatly influenced by my personal history and organisational work experience) my thinking moved from identifying the problem of ‘what is not’ happening for women to understanding ‘what is’ happening for women. This has created an opportunity to understand the influences and decision points that made a difference to women’s choices to take executive positions and continue their career development within the corporate organisation. By providing an opportunity to focus on ‘what is’ rather than focusing on ‘what is not’, I want to ignite energy for change through new understanding. New understanding, synthesised from that which is already known, provides a compelling impetus to explore what else is possible. This creates the space to imagine more possibilities and a different future for women in executive positions in corporate organisations.

Organisational life today is fast, dynamic and complex. Some see this as demanding and chaotic, while to others it is exciting and empowering, depending on the lens, through which they view their world. Exploring beyond the surface of ‘what is going on’ to the deeper patterns and connections of ‘how and why it is going on’ may at first sound like a need for something more complicated. However I suggest the opposite: what is needed is a simpler, richer and more transparent way of seeing and thinking. Through my study and work experience I have found that Complexity thinking provides some helpful new insights and when used in tandem with other theories (Kuhn, 2009), it is a useful and practical framework to understand social phenomena and organisational life. Complexity thinking provides the researcher with the opportunity to glean new insights and make sense of today’s dynamic and unpredictable organisational life, supporting the purpose of this thesis to illuminate new understandings around women and their corporate career.

As a woman who holds an executive position in a financial services organisation I am a fractal (that is, my indirect experiences are indicative of the experience of many women in other corporate organisations) of what I am researching. I bring my
distinct voice and story to a collaborative meeting with the other participants. In this research project, my role as the researcher is to open the interplay of sensemaking, facilitating an opportunity for women to tell their story. It is in the (re)reflecting, (re)membering and (re)telling of their stories that cooperatively created, new and deeper, reflective understanding can emerge. Thus understanding goes beyond the obvious day-to-day superficial cause and effect issues that are often cited as the reason why women are not in executive positions. I have chosen to focus on what is happening for women as opposed to what is not happening. I have asked them to share their career story: how they make sense of their everyday corporate experiences and their career development process. What made their corporate experience rewarding? What was their experience of success, failure and hope? Did they see gender as an issue in their personal development or, as organisational writers often suggest, attainment of their executive positions?

Many women and men working in today’s organisations deny that gender plays a significant part in their experience or career development (Halford and Leonard, 2001). However, the term ‘glass ceiling’ is a popular way of referring to the scarcity of women in executive positions. The phrase suggests that invisible factors as much as, or more than, overt forms of discrimination stop women from rising to executive positions in organisations. If there are invisible factors at work, which limit women’s opportunity and progress in the organisation, what are they and how do they work? Could these invisible factors have hindered structural workplace and policy changes from increasing the representation of women? Does this explain why these efforts appear to have had little sustainable effect to date? Or could it be women and their perception of their role in the corporation that is influencing their decision to walk away from corporate work? Fred Wolf (1984) suggests we create our own reality. If we accept this view, the question we need to explore is: What career world are professional women creating? I will pursue this idea further in this inquiry.

As I have highlighted above this research does have change intent at its core. I hope to ignite the energy for change through dialogue and the production of new information: synthesised from information already known yet not seen. I believe that women need to be heard in corporations because they hold half the human story; if heard they may support the building of more holistic leadership and decision-
making. Anne Summers (1975) in her book *Damned Whores and God’s Police* aptly highlighted that, when women arrived to the early Australian colony, they brought with them a new way of ‘being’ which enabled men to behave differently. I want corporations to be run differently, because we are not just talking about a ‘place’ within which people build careers, but a ‘place’ that impacts our everyday life, a ‘place’ that makes everyday decisions about how our world functions.

I am personally attached to the notion, some say naively, of the corporate organisation providing a greater sense of place and community for its employees, and of community being broadened, contributing to an expanded sense of communal ethos (Kuhn and Woog, 2003). Whyte (1994) argues that the western cultural tradition is based on a primary interior struggle: the essential aloneness of the individual, coupled with a wish to be part of some larger corporate body – literally a corpus, a corporation – to achieve things that would be impossible alone. Yet, for many, the wellsprings of our creativity are stopped at the source by the pressures, rules and regulations of that same organisation.

Corporations, whether we like it or not, are Western society’s 21st century villages. Together they form global communities, and it is within these corporate communities that we spend most of our time, when awake, in local relationships with work colleagues. Therefore I believe it is imperative that this community time be spent in an environment that enables both men and women to be the best they can be. This requires equitable opportunities and environments.

Traditionally men have dominated the leadership of organisations and held the power afforded the role of leader. It could be said that our leaders are not delivering appropriate stewardship of the companies’ assets or delivering in the area of engaging employees by facilitating a fulfilling workplace. Do we need to look for leadership in new places? Would having more women in senior leadership roles make a difference to the decision-making practices of organisations? Mark Holden, an executive trainer believes:
Corporate disasters such as the Pan Pharmaceutical’s recall, the HIH collapse and the AMP share crash could have been avoided if more women were at the helm of big companies (Sydney Morning Herald, 23/05/2003:10).

He goes so far as to suggest the major company collapses resulted because of the old hierarchal board structures dominated by men, because they were:

[U]sually very bloke, old school tie, old boy networks with few women that … lacked the balance and accountability that women often bring (Sydney Morning Herald, 23/05/2003:10).

Like the Chinese philosophy of Yin and Yang, I propose that more women in executive leadership will provide the ‘other’ to enrich corporate decision-making. Having more women in executive positions appears to be a worthy goal for top organisations and it could be said that, with the collapse of many corporate organisations, women may find that they are now the beneficiaries of changing conceptions of what constitutes leadership. Will the changing conceptions of leadership actually change the culture and the way things are done? Is it time for women to lead? Chesterman (2006) thinks so; she suggests that with the changes we are seeing in leadership style, women’s time to lead might be near. This thinking supports the view that the corporate system has been stopping women from taking executive positions because of a perceived lack of leadership style. Could the answer to women’s absence from leadership really be as simple as a gender style issue, suggesting that culturally we just needed to outgrow the perception of what made a great leader? Or is it deeper than that? Carl Jung observed:

All the greatest and most important problems of life are basically insoluble … they cannot be solved, but only transcended. This transcendence of the individual’s personal problems reveals itself, however as a raising of the level of consciousness (1967:17).

To define women’s leadership as leading to a new level of consciousnesses is to see it as a process of ‘bringing something new into being’ i.e., a new perspective on what constitutes leadership.
As demonstrated in this chapter women are underrepresented in corporate executive positions and there appears no single reason why. Nor is there one historical sequence of cause and effect events that can give us the answer. This is because: there is no single history. Human experience of an event, even one person’s experience, is more like a kaleidoscope pattern, which is then continually shaken and rearranged by later experience (Broomfield, 1997:9). Every woman has her own story, which in the telling will provide a rich picture of her interpretation of past events, glimpses of the fragments which form her tapestry of life experience, which now serve as a guide in her present beliefs and behaviour. The point is that past events grow. They are never finished (Roberts, 1981:68). In the next section I present a personal reflection of my journey to this research topic and outline my remembering of history, that is my story: my experience as a mother who has a corporate career and as a woman who holds an executive leadership role in a corporate organisation.

1.4 Reflection on my journey to this research

Having made a discovery, I shall never see the world again as before. My eyes have become different; I have made myself into a person seeing and thinking differently. I have crossed a gap, the heuristic gap, which lies between problem and discovery (Polanyi, 1962: 142).

This research arose out of a curiosity as to why there are so few women moving into executive positions within corporate organisations, given women’s ability and passion to lead, increased labour participation rates, higher education levels and significant legislative developments. Armed with my real-world problem and a driving curiosity I began my research journey. Like many before me, it has been a long and winding road. Driving down a highway, detouring to old familiar roads and exploring new ones. Whatever road I took illuminated something new or challenged me to think differently and, as uncomfortable as that was at times, I always returned to the road with more questions than when I started yet eager to continue the journey. According to Moustakas (1981) this has been a heuristic experience. For me, this also means, like Polanyi (1962: 142) I too have crossed a gap, the heuristic gap, which lies between problem and discovery. I too shall never see the world again as before. My eyes have become different and my world will never look
as it did before this journey began. I can never erase what I have seen or experienced; my world is a richer place from having experienced the journey.

As a woman, a mother and a friend, a wife who has a career, an employee who is a leader, I bring to this study my own ways of knowing as well as more than thirty years experience in the corporate organisation. My own career path was serendipitous and fostered by events that transpired rather than by a burning ambition to succeed in the corporate world. My early socialisation directed my ambitions to marital goals where I believed I would achieve happiness and fulfilment. Bound by the traditional notions of a husband as sole breadwinner and a wife who stayed at home, I tailored my goals to accommodate this primary end. I got married, had children, and went to university part-time, worked part-time, looked after my husband and children and the running of the home. As I began talking to women about their career experience I realised very quickly there were multiple stories and experiences that were very different from my own experience and at times very similar.

Not surprisingly my early literature research led me to feminism and the many varied perspectives held by these writers (see, for example: Andermahr, Lovell, Wolkwitz (1997); Cox (1996); de Beauvoir (1953); Dowling (1981); Friedan (1963, 1976); Greer (1970); Oakley (1981); Reinharz (1992); Summers (1975); Wolf (1991)). I found myself exploring a world that for a woman who grew up in the 60’s and 70’s was foreign. Having never thought of myself as a feminist I had never really understood the feminist perspective; now it seemed important to understand it from a historical perspective. According to Broomfield (1997) history provides a form of discourse on experience:

History is not ‘the past’, the landscape of human experience. It is interpretations of fragments of human experience, maps drawn to differing projections and inevitably incorporating varying distortions, which serve as a guide in present belief and behaviour. As such, history is inescapably political … His-story is present politics (p.26).
Many feminist writers have emphasised the rewriting and assessing of histories that have been denied. As Marcia Langton wrote in the Melbourne Age on February 13, 1981:

> Aboriginal contributions to Australian history have fundamental cultural and political purpose. We are reclaiming our right to identify and define ourselves.

The women’s movement and scholarship raised many important issues and I devoured many books over the first years of this research process and, sitting at my computer one night, had a feeling of déjà vu. In August 1981, I was part of a research group that conducted an attitude survey, A Comparison Of Attitudes Between Employers and Female Employees Toward Career Development For Women - are they getting it - do they want it. (Baxter-Armstrong, Askew, Bishop, Elliott, Taylor, Wishart, 1981). The survey resulted from observation and research, that indicated increased social awareness and legislation for equal opportunities for women in the workplace appeared not to have much impact on women’s opportunities for career development. The survey involved 222 participants in 72 organisations and assessed their attitudes regarding women’s career development. The conclusions from the survey (which took into account the reduced ability to generalise which is inherent in an attitude survey) were:

- When asked to evaluate the career opportunities being provided, employers and employees differed in their assessment. Employers were more likely to express ‘public’ attitudes in response to this issue and therefore were more positive about their own organisation and more critical of the opportunities for career development provided generally. Employees on the other hand, were constantly less positive in their opinions.

- The impact of social awareness and legislation upon opportunities for career development for women was, in the opinion of the respondents, slightly positive.

- When asked whether women want opportunities for career development, employees responded that women mainly or always wanted opportunities, with employers being less definite in their opinion. This difference was seen as indicating that employers may not be aware of their female employees requirements. This was reflected in the opinion by employees that they are
given less encouragement to pursue career ambitions, whilst employers felt that they did encourage their female employees.

- Family commitment was considered by both groups as having some influence on whether women want opportunities for career development.

- The presence of family commitments was seen to reduce a women’s desire for career opportunities in that family would take priority over a career. Older age groups were more positive that women with family commitments could pursue long term careers, possibly this was based on their own experience and the general tendency for women with families to continue working.

- Employers were less positive about the effectiveness of women in their career development when they had family commitments. Possibly employers are less positive due to their own experience with women employees, or due to their expectation that family commitments will take priority over career commitments.

- The relationship between family commitments and career needs is particularly evident in the respondent’s second priority for why women work. Female employees, in particular, considered that women with family commitments work because they want to meet people, whereas the women without family commitments were considered to want a career.

- Over all the attitude was that women want to work for economic reasons, with career coming a controversial second. This attitude may have some bearing on the perpetuation of less adequate career opportunities for women.

- On the three factors chosen to elicit whether women face different conditions than men in their career opportunities, only one, the need to perform better than men, was regarded as being a major consideration. Employees were more positive that women have to be seen to perform better than men in order to achieve the same rate of advancement in their organisation. This attitude could be due to an employee misconception or that employers fail to acknowledge the impact of this requirement. Nevertheless the strong female attitude has to be seriously considered as this may:
  - Limit whether women can get their advancement.
  - Discourage those women who do not believe they have sufficiently outstanding ability to compete.
Several views of sex role stereotypes were considered to be influential on opportunities for women’s career development: women are emotional, approachable, dedicated, and will leave to have a family. These are all considered to be more feminine qualities and rather than being assessed on presence or absence of masculine qualities, the findings suggest that women are assessed on their female qualities.

The report made five recommendations:

1. Improve the opportunities for career development for women. It was suggested that this would come about through improved communication patterns, with counselling and appraisal being of major importance in establishing individual career paths. Organisations are to fully utilise their female and male human resources when (man)power planning.

2. Women want opportunities for career development whether or not they have family commitments and suggested that consideration needed to be given to their individual needs. In some instances, it must be appreciated by both parties that the presence of family commitments will affect the degree to which women are able to take advantage of particular opportunities.

3. Actively promote the concept that men and women must be considered on the basis of their merits, not their sex, when being assessed for advancement.

4. Further study needed to be carried out on all levels and sectors of industry.

5. The stereotypes surrounding perceived feminine characteristics need to be further investigated in the Australian context.

As I reviewed the findings and recommendations from the 1981 report it became apparent to me that the same themes were still relevant in 2010. This observation concerned and puzzled me. Australia still has an appalling record in regard to promoting women to senior executive and board positions; nothing much was
changing (EOWA, 2010). I expected to see increasing numbers of women in senior positions having major influence in the decision making processes of large corporations yet what I was seeing is that women are still not leading.

There has been a lot written about women in leadership (Piterman (2008), Hewlett (2007), Frankel (2004), Halford and Leonard (2001), Kanter (1977), Marshall (1991, 1989), Valian (1999), Sinclair (1998)). So what value and benefit will this research add to the abundance of literature already produced? Throughout this research journey I have asked myself this question many times. What do I have to say that is different to what has already been told? Most importantly, in the early stages of the research process I asked how could I write about something I was not part of? That questioning encouraged me to take an executive position in a major financial services organisation and in doing so I became part of the story I was attempting to understand, finding my passion and voice.

The stories we live by can be empowering or disempowering (Broomfield, 2007). My story, ‘lack of authority to speak’ was disempowering me. It was not until I had the courage to move to a different place and accept the challenge of an executive position that I found my voice.

Reflecting on my writing (August 2003) I note the conflicting effect that taking the executive position had on my research process. Firstly, finding my authority to speak enabled me to see that by including my own lived experience and style I would have something different to say. Secondly, the long hours and intense focus that the executive position required meant I had little free time to focus on my research. At this point with what seemed like too many balls to juggle (wife, mother, friend, full time career and researcher), a part of me simply wanted to avoid the research challenge. However, my burning determination to understand why women were not taking executive positions would not die. I then realised that as one of a minority in an executive corporate position I felt a strong responsibility to at least attempt to explore what was going on, so I continued the journey. So it is from a personal perspective as a woman and a mother who holds an executive position in a corporate organisation that I conduct this research. My personal story forms an integral part of this research inquiry.
My personal journey in this century as a woman has been one of many opportunities and challenges. In my mother’s eyes, as a woman today I am spoilt for choice and when I hear her stories about the things she would like to have done and was not able to do because of the era into which she was born I am grateful to be part of this exciting time and for the life it has afforded me personally. I have a fortunate life, a wonderful family, access to a fine education, and the opportunity to build a career following my passion of people development. At first glimpse this passion for people development may appear to be better engaged outside the corporate world. However, over the years I have been provided with multiple opportunities to support the development of many people and most importantly, corporate women. Being part of the corporate system has enabled me to foster change through day-to-day interaction and connection with others in that system. In my leadership role I have travelled around the world communicating, challenging, facilitating or coaching a diverse group of people while visiting places that my mother and her mother before her only dreamed about visiting; they would not have envisaged being an executive leader in an international corporation and travelling the world. To those women, on whose shoulders I write, I am truly thankful.

Reflecting on my working career, my greatest success and personal joy has come from being part of a mixed gendered executive leadership team within a financial services corporation. This executive team successfully turned a $65m loss into a $10m profit over two years. By focusing on the operational basics, leadership, team and personal development, the team facilitated a culture where personal development, regardless of gender or position, was the norm rather than the exception. This experience supported my personal view that mixed gendered teams make more informed decisions and that the continual development of people is one of the key ingredients to organisational growth and success. Encouraging and facilitating the opportunity for people to build or achieve something they did not think possible required a high level of skill and personal commitment from every member of the organisation.

The statement ‘People are our greatest asset’ rolls easily from the tongues of many corporate leaders. However, I suggest that maintaining and developing those greatest assets - people, through their personal development, are often found to be more
rhetoric than practice. Many organisations overlook personal development as a priority. Firstly, because the organisational focus appears firmly placed on cost and efficiencies, and personal development being hard to quantify financially is pushed aside. Secondly, personal development is unique to every individual, and difficult to systemise and qualify in a way that satisfies generic training plans. To build an environment that encourages diversity of thought and supports everyone’s development requires commitment, trust and courage from the organisational leaders.

I found that working in an organisation with a culture of continual personal development, the leadership team were more likely to match employee expectations and the organisation’s expectations in a timely manner. What this meant in day-to-day management practice is that there was a culture committed to supporting all employees ‘to be the best they can be’ by providing an environment that was conducive to self-expression. This provided transparency in communication and a matching of expectations, which enabled people to build the skills and confidence they needed to make sound decisions and take the unpredictable opportunities that came their way.

Reading Dr Seuss’s ‘Oh the Places You'll Go!’ I see a parallel between his emphasis on encouragement for all, and my emphasis on development for women:

Congratulations!
Today is your day.
You’re off to Great Places!
You’re off and away!
You have brains in your head.
You have feet in your shoes.
You can steer yourself any direction you choose.
You’re on your own. And you know what you know.
And you are the [gal] who’ll decide where to go.

Dr Seuss’s verse is so positive, emphasising as a ‘gal’ we can Be, Do and Have what we decide. It would be nice if this were indeed true for all women in corporations.

When I reflect on my personal experience and that of the women who have participated in this research, the idea that women can decide to go in any direction they choose does not appear to be a reality for ‘all’ women. This is especially true for Ruby whose story follows. For a few women it appears they can choose, and this research looks at a group of women who have, in their view, successfully created executive leadership careers. However, I suggest that for the majority of women who work outside the home and choose to pursue a corporate leadership career, it is not that easy. Why not? I find myself asking this question over and over again.

1.4.1 Ruby’s story

There are many stories told in corporations and this inquiry uses narrative to harness a rich array of stories. Let me share with you Ruby’s story. With tears in her eyes, Ruby said:

> On my day off last Friday my son craved attention, my daughter did not leave my side, my mother cried that she could not cope any longer and I cried. I cannot keep this life going, they all need my attention, I have just got to resign. (Ruby, Head of Legal, Sydney, August 26, 2008)

Ruby’s story highlights the stress involved with struggling to cope with both work and family. Her story appears to be familiar for many working mothers, with women prepared to resign from their job in search of a greater work/life balance (EOWA, 2006:20). An intelligent, well-educated lawyer, Ruby has won medals at elite sport; determined and dedicated she does not give up easily. However in the end, being a part-time corporate professional, working mother and wife had become untenable. It just got too much for her and her family:

> It is just not worth it, my kids need me, not my mother, not my husband. They need me – their mother (Ruby, 2008).
Ruby walked away from corporate life and as she left my office she stopped, turned and quietly said:

I am giving up my job and my professional identity that scares me (Ruby, 2008).

For now Ruby has walked away from corporate life and the corporation has lost another professional female who was a member of their leadership talent pool. Ruby was a well-educated, well-trained and highly effective lawyer. She walked away from corporate life, and her story is not unique.

1.5 Methodological approach

This thesis constitutes a Complexity informed inquiry that draws on Complexity theory (or science as it is also known) to provide the overarching logic of the inquiry, the methodological approach, inquiry methods and techniques as well as the primary metaphors via which the findings are articulated and elaborated. Complexity (science or theory) is an emerging worldview and field of research for working with complex systems. Complexity assumes that reality is self-organising, dynamic, sensitive to initial conditions and emergent (Kuhn, 2009; Wolfram, 2002; Kauffman, 1995). Taking a Complexity approach to human sense making, it is similarly construed as self-organising, dynamic, sensitive to initial conditions and emergent (Kuhn, 2009).

Many scholars have used Complexity in organisational research. Drawing on the scientific work of Kauffman (1993), Prigogine and Stengers (1984), Stewart (1989) and others, there is a diverse body of work exploring the practical everyday issues of organisational life (see, for example, Kuhn (2009); Stacey, Griffin and Shaw (2000); Lewin and Regine (2000); Stacey (2003, 1996); Checkland and Scholes (1990); Lissack (1999); Lissack and Roos (1999); Marion (1999); Brown and Eisenhardt (1997,1998); Cilliers (1998, 2000); Milton Kelly (1998); Morgan (1997, 1993); Thietart and Forgues (1995); Levy (1994); Parker and Stacey (1994); Gell-Mann (1994); Lewin (1993); Wheatley (1992); Schein (1992); Waldrop (1992); Gleick (1988); Weick (1979)). What all these Complexity writers seek in common is a compelling way to challenge the way we think and engage in organisational life.
The overarching logic to this inquiry constitutes a Complexity re-framing of the systemic social research approaches of soft systems methodology (Checkland and Scholes, 1990) and rich picture development (Checkland and Poulter, 2006). Rich pictures, as defined by Checkland (1981), pictorially and informally capture the Structures, viewpoints, responsibilities, and processes of a situation, as well as illustrating the relationships between all three aspects. Thus, these pictures provide a means of exploring a problem in a holistic or contextually rich manner.

Using the language of Complexity, the thesis looks at the same related dynamics from the perspective of phase space (a space comprising all of the possible states of a complex entity) and phrase space (a concept that suggests we live within a minute proportion of our possibilities) as individuals and as societies (Kuhn, Woog and Hodgson, 2003; Kuhn and Woog, 2007). What the two approaches (soft systems and Complexity) have in common is that they privilege seeking to be intuitively interpretive over analytical precision. The intuitive interpretation is elaborated and given rigor through recourse to literature and experiential observations.

This approach is appropriate to this inquiry for a number of reasons. It enables the inquiry focus to transverse the terrain between ‘why are there not more women in executive positions’ and ‘why these women are in executive positions’. In developing a rich picture of the phase space and phrase space as this relates to the career development of women who lead, the focus can move from exploration of why there are not more women involved in executive management positions, to exploration of the factors that contribute to women being in executive management positions in the Australian Financial Services Industry. Secondly, because in seeking to enrich understanding of the career development of women in executive management positions in the Australian Financial Services Industry, the narrow focus engendered by taking singular perspectives (such as organisational leadership or gender and cultural studies) on why more women do not lead, is not considered effective for developing an understanding of the women’s experiences within the context of multiple, interacting factors (such as societal norms, historical patterns of employment of women, power relations, gender and cultural issues and so on). It can be assumed that appropriate understanding of these factors may then lead to generating situational improvement, such that more women are represented in
executive positions. Previous research however, which has revealed specific causal factors as to why more women are not in executive management positions (such as patriarchal bias and gender prejudice) and from which institutional changes aimed at improving women’s representation in executive positions have been developed, have not led to significant changes in the involvement of women in executive management positions. This lack of significant change indicates a need for a different type of inquiry approach.

By traditional research I mean problem-based research. An approach that looks backwards for causes and tries to rationally predict solutions to a problem. One could characterise the previous research as ‘problem focused’ where the research admires and addresses information known about the nature of the problem. The different type of research approach I take is influenced by appreciative inquiry, which is an approach that focuses our gaze toward the future and what is possible by exploring ‘what is happening’ rather than ‘what is not happening’. This is a generative approach that explores the behaviours, relational, interactional and structural considerations that give rise to the activity of these women’s careers.

The methodological approach explores, in the language of Complexity, human experiential space. Human experiential space (Dimitrov and Hodge, 2002) describes that area of human action where people make sense and construe meanings with relation to their life events. Many writers (see, for example, Kelly, 1955; Freire, 1970; Vickers, 1983) have described this process of sense making and knowledge construction, highlighting that it is impossible to predict the reactive effect that tiny changes can cause in experiential space over time. In order to manage the sequential development of understanding as it is generated through such a large-scale inquiry, it is convenient for me to organise my inquiry conceptually around three themes,

- Historical influences as they relate to women’s participation, and taking of executive positions in business organisations (via a critical review of pertinent literature);
- Experiential reflection (of my experiences as a female senior executive); and
- Empirical evidence (generated through a qualitative interpretive project garnering women’s own stories about their experiences as executive managers).
While material relating to historical influences and to empirical evidence is presented in separate chapters, my experiential reflection permeates and directs the overall approach as well as the way in which I make sense of (interpret) the inquiry.

I am fully aware of the influence the researcher has in this type of inquiry process. As the researcher the understanding I glean from the text, dialogue and observations made in the inquiry is uniquely influenced by my beliefs, assumptions and intentions. In this view: *understanding is always interpretative, there is no uniquely privileged standpoint for understanding* (Hoy 1986:399). Understanding this dynamic, it is useful for me to make a declaration that as the interpreter I bring my own personal style and experience to the inquiry. It is also important to acknowledge this as the process unfolds in the interpretation of the narratives.

While addressing historical influences and empirical evidence, I will draw attention to higher order principles that serve as explanations of the unfolding complexity as it relates to the career development of women in executive management positions in the Australian Financial Services Industry. In order to support and guide the interpretive process I will make use of a Complexity theory cosmography and associated interpretive metaphors such as human experiential space, phase space – phrase space, coherent conversations, communicative connectedness, attractor narrative analysis and fractal narrative analysis.

In choosing to inquire in this way my work may be positioned within what has broadly been described as subjectivist or constructivist qualitative inquiry approaches. These approaches share the view that humans construct meaning through their social interactions. My account of the historical influences of business organisations in relation to women’s participation, and taking of executive positions in them, focuses on identification of patterns of social interaction and meaning construction.

The empirical evidence generated in this inquiry concerns the ways that the women involved make meaning of their experiences in corporate organisations. So it is appropriate that a subjectivist/constructivist qualitative inquiry approach be used to explore the lived experience, career development and social behaviour of women.
who hold executive positions in corporate organisations. This undertaking, according to Polkinhorne (2005:138) comprises an attempt to describe and clarify experience as it is lived and constituted in the awareness of those being studied.

This research is initially driven by critical exploration and reflection on lived experience. Various bodies of relevant literature are engaged with at various points in the thesis and therefore there will be no section in which an extensive exploration is made of pertinent bodies of literature, such as power and politics.

The technique of coherent conversation is used to generate rich common sense narratives. Coherent conversations provide a way to gain insight into why particular ways of organising arise and persist in organisations (Kuhn 2009:84). The assumption is that the more information that a group or social system has about the way people think and interact within it, the better the group is able to understand itself. Coherent conversations seek to engage with the participants in a way that is permissive and accepting of all the knowledge and opinions they bring to the conversation, providing a space for critical self-reflection as the conversation emerges. Through the process of critical reflection, analysis and synthesis, the taken for granted assumptions held within the individual and group are made visible (Kuhn, 2009; Kuhn and Woog 2007). The (re)telling and reflection of an individual’s narrative facilitates self awareness in connection to the success, failure and hopes of everyday lived experience. Made visible, there is an opportunity for change and the loosening of the self-imposed boundary conditions in which we live (Jung, 1968).

Coherent conversations generate narratives that can be analysed and synthesized through Complexity-based techniques such as fractal narrative analysis and attractor narrative analysis (Kuhn and Woog, 2007). It is helpful at this point to unpack the concepts and elaborate on the usefulness of this type of analysis for this inquiry.

The Complexity concepts of attractors and fractals are used in this study as metaphorical constructs. The attractor metaphor is used in a thought provoking way to identify the connections between the lived career experience (human interaction)
of the professional women in this study and what motivates and guides their attitudes and behaviours in relation to their taking of executive positions in corporate organisations.

We see more and more the paradox of conflicting external (societal) and internal (personal) expectations on women having professional corporate careers. It is my hope that by looking at professional women’s career journeys differently, the new understanding gained will encourage us to move on and develop mind-sets and skills that focus on recognizing and changing patterns. Stacey (2003) argues that complexity theory cannot be applied directly to human action because human interaction is not deterministic (p.46). On the other hand Morgan (1997) identifies the creation of the environment where chaos can emerge as perhaps the most important contribution educational leaders can provide for their institutions. Morgan (1997) further suggests Chaos theory provides a methodology for analyzing a system's ‘attractor patterns’ and for changing the trajectory (p. 282). According to Kuhn (2009:15) complexity concepts or metaphors can be used as tools for developing new insights and understandings of the organisational forms, processes, practices, issues and problems highlighted through fractal fragments.

The narratives on which the fractal fragments in this study were collected come from a randomly selected group of women who hold executive positions in corporate organisations. In describing these professional women’s attitude and behaviour patterns I provide powerful new insight into the way these women manage their corporate career development over time.

Complex systems contain simultaneous order and disorder. Attractors are pervasive in both near- equilibrium and chaotic systems. They act as magnetic forces that draw complex systems towards given trajectories (Wheatley, 2006). Modern computers have enabled us to track the behaviour of chaotic systems. The speed of the computer enables us to observe, through points of light, how the system evolves. The system moves back and forth unpredictability, in a dance between turbulence and order, never returning to the same point twice. What is quickly observed is that the chaotic behaviour weaves a pattern from which order emerges (Wheatley, 2006).
Evidencing ‘attraction’ to its pattern behaviour, the chaotic movements form themselves into a shape known as attractors.

Attractors function as organising forces that guide actions [or] energies that motivate (Kuhn, 2009:60). For example, the sun is an attractor for our planets. In the social realm an attractor may influence people for long periods of time and then there may be a shift to another attractor, for example Communism was the attractor around which the old Soviet Union was organised before they unpredictably moved to organise around the attractor of Capitalism. Albert Einstein gives an example of his attractor to working in his chosen field of science when he described his thoughts as:

… one of the strongest motives that leads men to art and science is escape from the everyday life with its painful crudity and hopeless dreariness, from the fetters of one’s own ever shifting desires. A finely tempered nature longs to escape from personal life into the world of objective perception and thought … (Einstein, 1954:224)

Identification of the attractor, or number of attractors, will assist in building (without simplification) a common sense understanding of what is guiding and shaping the behaviour of the women who participated in this inquiry.

Although Stacey (2003) argues against the application of complexity theory at the macro level, he does suggest that our use of strange attractor metaphors can coincide with metaphors describing human interaction.

This study uses attractor metaphors to provide a method for identifying and facilitating understanding around the emergent and complex careers of the women participating in this study. It seeks to explore what attracts and holds these women’s behaviour within the boundary of the corporate organisation and what they see as the motivators or values that are guiding and shaping their behaviour and attitudes towards their emergent professional careers.
The implications of this understanding will extend beyond the women involved in the coherent conversations of this inquiry. From the attractors identified one can make inferences about the self-organising character of the broader system (Kuhn and Woog, 2007). From a complexity perspective our world is full of intersections and linkages and at some level everything is interdependent. Further, our knowledge of the interconnectedness of everything has caused us to look differently at organisations and human interactions (Porter- O’Grady and Mallock, 2007). Aided by the use of complex relational algorithms, researchers have been diverted from vertical (linear) processing to more relational and whole system models, which form the foundation of scientific and organisational research.

The notion of fractals is critical for understanding the order that exists in chaos and for appreciating the impact of complexity on organisations and human behaviour.

According to Mandelbrot (1977) an entity with characteristics that are simultaneously apparent at many scales of focus may be termed a fractal. Fractality then can be generally described as simultaneous self-similarity at many varying scales of focus (Mandelbrot, 1977). The smallest level of a single organisation and the most complex array of a large aggregated system containing the organisation are connected inexorably through the power of fractals (Porter- O’Grady and Mallock, 2007:13) For example, a hologram is a good way of explaining the nature of fractals. No matter what size section you focus in on, the entire image is still present in the smaller piece. For in a fractal the complete pattern is present in any component regardless of the level of detail or complexity. Another good example is a tree, the overall structure of a tree, including the trunk and branches, is similar to the branching pattern of each leaf.

*Fractals have tremendous implications for organisations. From the smallest structural elements to the very complex patterns of behaviour existing throughout an organisation, the same patterns appear and are played out in precise detail* (Porter-O’Grady and Malloch, 2007:14). As is true with all things that are fractal, understanding the inner-workings of one level of the structure offers insight into all other levels of the structure.
Human beings can be seen as fractally organised. This means that as human beings (societies, organisations or families) we can be depicted as having fractal properties, where the smallest part represents the whole based on the understanding that the whole is always greater than the whole. Each fractal is a whole, but at different scale. Each fractal exists because of the existence of the whole. Edgar Morin provocatively describes human fractality as:

In human beings as in many other living creatures, the whole is present within the parts; every cell of a multicellular organism contains the totality of its genetic patrimony, and society inasmuch as a whole I present within every individual in his language, knowledge, obligations and standards (Morin, 2001:31).

The implications of fractality for this study are exciting. The notion of fractals is used in this study to explore self-similarity in regard to the dynamic actions of the women in this study in relation to their career development. The recurrent patterns over time, I argue, are compatible with the hypothesis of self-similarity.

Through fractal narrative analysis each women’s individual narrative can be examined for patterns or characteristics of similarity (Kuhn and Woog 2007). If society, organisations and families show fractality, then some of the characteristics present in the fractal identified in the individual woman’s narrative (at the local level) will likewise be present in the larger groups (at the global level). Further, by focusing on the stories of individual women (termed here as fractal fragments) (Kuhn, 2009), information will have been generated about the structure and related characteristics of the whole system. The smaller fractal is derived from and representative of, the larger fractal, and thus the researcher can make generalisations from one to another.

Essentially this inquiry will use fractality as way of identifying narratives, views or patterns of behaviour that are indicative of repeatedly expressed experiences of women in societies, organisations, families and individuals all over the world. As a woman who holds an executive position within a financial service organisation a fractal approach enables my personal experiences to have implications for the emergent understanding of the whole industry.
The quest to produce new understanding with personal and professional integrity permeates this inquiry. When researching real-world problems, through qualitative approaches, the production of knowledge can be complicated and messy because of the human element (O'Leary, 2005). Qualitative research, which includes participatory inquiry and post-modern approaches (Guba and Lincoln, 1994), does not try to explain causal relationships by means of ‘objective’ facts and statistical analyses. Instead it uses a more interpretative process to understand ‘reality’ and emerging insights. What can be taken as data includes the conversations contained in the interview transcripts, coherent conversations and fractal fragments taken from the narratives. Theory is derived from the data and it is illustrated by characteristic examples of the data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Recognising and balancing subjectivities is central to integrity in knowledge production. I recognise that the adoption of this mode of research over another directly influences what I discover (Morgan, 1993). I am intrinsically involved in the production of the social knowledge I am seeking to interpret and define and that in turn will shape the finished thesis. Responsibility and integrity are therefore a paramount consideration in the production of knowledge and are expressed through the design of a sound methodology, and through consistency in methods and processes. This includes responsibility and integrity in dealing with research participants to ensure an ethical process was followed, by gaining full informed consent and a right to privacy, taking time to build rapport and trust. It was important to me that this process was not just a snatch and grab exercise. I wanted the process to be engaging and, to use Tyler’s (1986) terminology, ‘evoking’. I wanted a process that provided the opportunity for all involved to illuminate new ways of seeing and understanding our everyday experience thus fostering the opportunity to imagine into possibility a new way of being.

I advocate reflexivity in an attempt to make the research process of sensemaking more transparent as I seek to develop critical subjectivity in relation to the research findings, acknowledging my perspectives and the other issues that may arise (Reason and Rowan, 1981). Reflexivity provides an additional layer of integrity to the research process as I reflect critically on myself as the researcher: I am in a sense the ‘human instrument’ (Guba and Lincoln, 1981). Reflexivity forces the researcher to
come to terms with not only the research content, but with the multiple selves s/he brings to the research. Reinharz (1997), argues that we not only bring ourselves to the field; we also create the self in the field. She suggests that although we have many selves we bring with us, these selves fall into three categories:

… research based selves, brought selves, the selves that historically, socially, and personally create our standpoints, and situationally created selves (Reinharz, 1997:5).

Each of the selves comes into play in the research and each has a distinctive voice. It is the researcher’s responsibility to acknowledge and manage these subjectivities with transparency. Reflexivity supports this process, as it demands that we interrogate each of our selves regarding the ways in which our research efforts are shaped and staged around the binaries, contradictions, and paradoxes that form our own lives. We must not only question ourselves, but our writing and our interactions with the research participants. I seek to ensure reflexivity in my work, by continually journaling and reflecting on what I have interpreted and by providing the participants the opportunity to view what has been written reflexivity in my work.

Rigour in this inquiry has been addressed not in terms of the precision of the application of specific research methods, but in terms of depth and creativity applied to the analysis and interpretation of data. Rigour is maintained by not overreaching the validity of the interpretations of evidence in the data. Keeping accurate and open research accounts of the research process, and providing full explication of methods used, allows others to see how and why (I) the researcher arrived at his/her (my) conclusions. The key to enabling the findings of the research to be reliable is to provide detailed description of the research setting and methods so that those reading the research account can determine its applicability to their work (O’Leary, 2010:39). The usefulness of the research to stakeholders may be judged in its ability to make a practical and relevant contribution to our understanding of women and their career development within the corporate organisation. The conclusions seek to highlight ‘lessons learned’ and illuminate relevant issues and new understanding that are more than theoretical and which can provide rich learning within the organisational context.
1.6 Road map

Chapter 1 of this inquiry introduces the research focus. I outline the research problem, which identifies that women are underrepresented in executive leadership within the corporate organisation and argue the value of approaching this problem by moving away from a problem-solution focus to focussing on what is possible by interviewing women who do hold executive positions within the corporate organisation. I then give an explanation of women’s career development, specifically focussing on the last forty years and the patterns and factors that shape women’s career development in 20th and 21st century organisations. I define the purpose and reflect on my personal journey to the research. I describe and outline the methodological approach, which introduces Complexity as a way of providing new understanding around women and their career development within the corporate organisation.

Chapter 2 is a critical review of the initial conditions relating to women’s participation and taking of executive positions in corporate organisations. It introduces a framework that considers the world as a system that is complex. This framework sees human beings as mutually interdependent individuals who make sense of their daily lives through language and conversations that are created in social relationships.

I introduce the principles that guide my interpreting of the influences on women’s career journey. How we think about history. History is one form of discourse on experience. The idea that history is not a set of facts fixed in the past awaiting proper selection and ordering, but present perception of past events (Broomfield, 1977). Complexity highlights that complex systems are sensitive to initial conditions; even the smallest perturbations can send a system off in a wildly different direction, making the future unpredictable and change non-replicable over time. What value does glancing upon anothers construction of experience add to our knowledge and understanding in this research? Foucault writes in The Birth of the Clinic:

What counts in the things said by men is not so much what they may have thought or the extent to which these things represent their thoughts, as that which systematises them from the outset (1973, p.xix).
Therefore rich narrative histories are used in this thesis as a way to explain behaviour so that … we can at least reconstruct the particular constellation of structured choice and accident that led to the present reality (Reed and Harvey, 1992). This enables the construction of a rich picture (Checkland, 1999) of the structure, viewpoints, possibilities, and processes of women’s career development within the corporate organisation. This method illustrates the relationship between all three aspects to provide a rich picture that enables learning from the wisdom of others and the opportunity to identify those attractors, which have driven the historical behaviour of women within organisations.

The Complexity concept of experiential space is explained in relation to this inquiry (that is, the area of human action where people make sense of and construe meanings with relation to their life events) and elaborated together with the concept of sensemaking. The concept of sensemaking and the importance of conversation and relationship to a person’s perception of reality are introduced. The view that conversation, relationship, language and context really matter to our understanding of how women make sense of their everyday realities is explored together with the notion of ‘joint action’ (that is, the flow of responsive and relational activities and practices) in social activity and meaning making. The world-views and assumptions brought to the research are discussed.

Drawing on the social construction theory work of Kenneth Gergen, as a way of theorising people in relation to self, we can see that the context in which we interact influences our construction of reality. The assumptions and stories we bring are shaped by our own histories of being, and associated communities of belonging, therefore I explore the conversations and stories around women within the social contexts of society, organisations, family and the personal domain.

The interactional and communal contexts of women in society, corporate organisations, the family, and the personal are discussed in relation to how they influence women’s engagement with the organisation.

Complexity stresses the significant influence of initial conditions. Therefore I look at how organised work developed and evolved - becoming the place we know as the
corporate organisation. I look briefly at the history of the organisation and how the 21st century organisation is structured in an attempt to deliver on its purpose and promise of economic profit.

The idea of power relations, introduced in Chapter 1, draws attention to how power relations play out within the corporate organisation. I explore the dynamics of power and the influences and perception of power for women.

The concept of gender and culture are discussed further. I describe the power of language, and its effect on how we see ourselves and create expectations and perceptions, which guide our lives, for example gendered binaries. Gendered stereotypes and attitudes are further explored for relevance to our understanding of women’s career development.

Chapter 3 describes the nature of the empirical study, which makes a methodological contribution through a Complexity - informed style of ethnographic research.

Coherent conversations are introduced as the principle process used for generating the narratives. Inviting the women to share their personal stories which nest within a particular social, historical and organisational context. The Complexity metaphors used in the analysis are further described together with a reflective exploration of the integrity of the collection and analysis process. The chapter is concluded with an overview of the financial services landscape.

Chapter 4 presents the empirical findings of this inquiry. The fieldwork from which the empirical evidence has been derived came from coherent conversations that were conducted in two phases. Each phase is outlined separately. Phase 2 represents the primary source of the empirical findings and the basis of the emergent contribution to the knowledge of this thesis. From the narratives generated in this phase I have identified major themes and attractor sets from which I make inferences about what has guided and shaped these women’s taking of executive positions.
Chapter 5 discusses the thematic interpretation of the research findings. The chapter begins with an explanation of how the attractor sets: Passion (achievement, doing what they loved, learning and passion leaps); Identity (confidence, courageous, values, differentiated - optimistic attitude); Freedom (counter suggestive, opportunistic, managed risks and self-directed) and Connection (family, networked, relationship mutuality and support) offer insight and explanation into the research questions. I then identify and elaborate on the three explanatory principles that have emerged from this research: Firstly, the concept of potentiality found in the face of complexity; Secondly, an explanation of the attractor interface and how the exchanges that occurred between the women and the simple recurrent rules identified in the self-organising behaviour of the women in the creation of their careers led to the complex behaviour and emergent career outcomes. Thirdly, and finally, I describe the co-evolutionary matches that were identified for these women’s achievement and success. I conclude by suggesting that the lack of women in executive leadership has little to do with women’s lack of ability, motivation or interest in holding executive positions. Nor does it have to do with women’s leaps in and out of corporate organisations. I propose that it has more to do with what women think is possible and the relationships that women form at work, which when combined with the way work is organised and the subtle, but deeply held, gender assumptions that continue to shape models of the corporate career, leadership and leaders behaviour can be a strong deterrent to stay in corporate organisations. So what can be learned from these women who hold executive positions in corporate organisations? I have identified 15 key learnings, which provide important insight into how these women get things done.

Following the conclusions, I outline the emergent implications of this study for women’s executive careers and those corporate organisations that are seeking to enhance their development, engagement and retention of women in executive positions.
1.7 Conclusion

Within this chapter I have contextualised my inquiry. I have presented an overview of the contradictory and complex messages around women’s taking of executive positions within the 21st century corporate organisation together with the factors that appear to shape women’s career development. I argue that, despite the significant gains made by women in the workforce over the last few decades, very little has changed for women in executive leadership highlighting the need to look at things differently. I propose that Complexity thinking offers a way of illuminating new understanding about what is happening for women and their taking of executive positions within the corporate organisation. The Complexity metaphor sensitive dependence on initial conditions highlights the important influence and shaping effect of initial conditions. Whilst we can not predict future behaviour from these initial conditions we can identify the significant shaping influences that have contributed to the overall emergence of women’s participation and taking of executive positions within corporate organisations. I will now move to explore those influences contextually.
Chapter 2 - Critical review of the initial conditions relating to women’s participation and taking of executive positions in corporate organisations

2.1 Introduction

The overall framework I bring to this thesis is one that considers the world as a system that is complex: *in the sense that a great many independent agents are interacting with each other in a great many ways* (Waldrop, 1992: 11). This framework emphasises human beings as mutually interdependent individuals, who act and make sense of their daily lives through a network of conversations that are created in social relationship with others. Therefore it is understood that everyday conversations and relationships really matter to sensemaking. The concepts of sensemaking, and local conversation, are used throughout this inquiry as ways to explore the themes, patterns, events and emerging issues that appear to influence women’s participation and taking of executive positions within corporate organisations.

From time immemorial, understanding ‘how’ and ‘why’ humans behave the way they do in the moment-to-moment interactions of daily life has intrigued sociologists, philosophers and management consultants alike. Puzzled by the unpredictability of human sensemaking and the enormous complexity it entails, writers in the modern West have generally attempted to predict and understand human behaviour by defining and explaining behaviour in a cause and effect, linear fashion. That is to say: in directional terms that are logical and rational. Broomfield (1997) suggests that modern western thinking is possessed by a *chain-reacting, linear power, which accelerates by repeating more and more of the same* (p.29). I would add that by defining and explaining behaviour along a linear timeline, we focus on cause and effect solutions that lead to repetition of more of the same. We also limit our view of what is going on. Such linear explanations divert our attention from exploration of the complex, multilayered and novel ways humans make sense of their daily experiences.
Complexity thinking offers an opportunity to build a rich deep picture of the way humans interact and make sense of their complex multilayered lives by focusing our attention on exploration of how novelty, order and emergence co-exist in the world (Kuhn and Woog, 2006). From a Complexity perspective: *organisational actions are emerging self-organising and paradoxical patterns of human interaction* (Johannessen, 2009:219). Therefore managing relationships is important in organisational life as they affect the actions we take on a daily basis. In taking a Complexity approach this inquiry focuses on the exploration of women’s everyday social interactions, local relationships, informal networks, alliances and conversations that appear integral to the emergence of women’s self-organising career patterns in relation to executive positions within the corporate organisation. Focusing on interaction and emergence is important to our understanding of self-organising behaviour in Complexity thinking because as Johannessen states: *human interaction [can be seen as] the cause of emergence, and human interaction only creates further human interaction and emergence* (Johannessen, 2009:217).

The experiences of life are emergent, organic and unpredictable. Interconnected and mutually influencing, small changes in complex systems can bring about large and different effects (sensitive dependence on initial conditions). This raises the question: What are the implications of this ‘butterfly’ effect on our understanding of women’s taking of executive positions within today’s corporate organisations?

The Complexity metaphor *sensitive dependence on initial conditions* (often described as the butterfly effect) highlights that even the smallest perturbations can send a system off in a widely different direction. From this view the future is unpredictable and change is non-replicable over time. This suggests that gaining an understanding of a system’s past behaviour will provide little guide to predicting future behaviour (Reed and Harvey 1992; Elliot and Kiel, 1996). The idea that the future is unpredictable, however, does not imply that we cannot explain the behaviour of complex systems. According to Reed and Harvey (1992): …*we can at least reconstruct the particular constellation of structured choice and accident that led to the present reality* (p.364). Therefore this section will explore an indicative and eclectic array of historical events to see what significant shaping influences have contributed to the overall emergence of women’s participation and taking of executive positions within the corporate organisation.
The challenge for anyone wishing to create a new shared understanding is to recognise that we are dealing with a complex act of inquiry (Kuhn and Woog, 2007) and that there will be many forms of interpretation and many possibilities to explore. A rich indicative and eclectic historical perspective almost always poses a dilemma for the researcher around what to include. This dilemma relates to whether I should make selection based on relevance and efficiency, or on a breadth of scholarly reading. I have followed the relevance and efficiency road. This section aims to provide an understanding of the higher organising principles that serve as explanations of the unfolding complexity as it relates to the historical career development of women in corporate organisations.

This research explores women’s taking of executive positions within the specific context of the corporate organisation. As a complex system the organisation is comprised of a large number of interconnected, interdependent and evolving parts (Carroll and Burton, 2000). It is important therefore to look at the history of the organisation as it is. By looking at that history we can begin to see how the self-organising, dynamic, and emergent organisation has evolved and what influencing effects this evolution has had on women’s participation and taking of executive positions within the organisational context. A critical review of organisational literature was explored. This revealed that the 21st century corporate organisation is full of contradictory and complex messages around women and their careers (Halford and Leonard, 2001). The literature concerning women in management suggests that gender discrimination is so embedded in organisational life that it has become the norm (Kanter, 1977; Mills, 1988; Schein, 1976). That is: ‘it’s just the way it is’. Given society and organisations are interdependent, it is not surprising to find that this type of norm exists within organisations. Not only do some individuals in society prosper more than others, but certain types of people prosper more than others: men more than women, whites more than blacks, able bodied more than disabled, and so on (Dalal, 2009). These societal norms, shape what is going on in the organisation, and in particular they shape the patterns regarding women’s taking of executive positions.
Western social change (emerging out of the Liberalism ethos of equality, privacy, ownership and freedom for all) introduced in the latter half of the 20th century, sought to give a voice to disadvantaged groups through the introduction of anti-discrimination legislation (see Australian examples; Anti Discrimination Act 1977; Disability Discrimination Act 1992; Racial Discrimination Act 1975; Racial and Religious Tolerance Act 2001; Sex Discrimination Act 1984). It could be said that the diversity agenda arose out of these emancipatory movements and that it claims to speak for all varieties of difference. Whilst this thesis specifically focuses on women within the organisational context, this is not to deny that there may be many other serious diversity issues to be explored within organisations, such as to how and why some kinds of individuals appear to advance and others hit ‘shattered’, ‘coloured’ or ‘stain glass ceilings’.

It could be said that the gender diversity agenda has been embraced by corporate organisations where previous specific discrimination programmes (for example, anti-racism and multiculturalism) did not gain much traction. Thompson (2001) claims that this is because in the diversity approach:

\[D\]ifferences are best seen as assets to be valued and affirmed, rather than as problems to be solved. … The ‘diversity’ approach seeks to tackle discrimination by presenting differences as positives to be benefited from, rather that the basis of negative, unfair discrimination (p.35).

Dalal (2009) offers a provocative alternative view to the acceptance of the diversity agenda in organisations. Suggesting that behind the egalitarian ethos of the diversity program lies an ethics of spreadsheets and sustained power difference which creates the danger of maintaining the established power relations between labelled groups in society and organisations.

There is an array of literature written on gender diversity and numerous organisational diversity programmes have been introduced. Have these change programmes increased women’s attainment of executive positions? Statistics (EOWA) suggest not, highlighting that here has been little real shift in the demographics of the people in executive positions. Despite four decades of EEO
action, the ‘glass ceiling’ (as writers often refer to it) appears to be firmly in place for women above middle management. Understanding the history of organised work and how it evolved into what we know today as ‘the corporate organisation’ may shed light on how ‘things get done’ and some of the contradictory messages I am hearing in the media, around management tables, and in statistics about women’s careers. In this chapter I critically examine the corporate organisation and what writers have to say about how the 21st century organisation is structured to deliver on its purpose and promise of economic profit, and the effect of this on historical attempts to promote gender diversity strategies in executive positions.

Much of the literature concerning women in management identifies the existence of organisational cultural norms, power discourses and gendered stories which illuminate unspoken arrangements that impede women’s career advancement (Kanter, 1977; Mills, 1988). These forces drive workplace structures and gender dynamics that result in men and women negotiating different career ladders. The literature indicates that arrangements are often unconscious (Schein, 1992), driven by subtle underlying assumptions that have the ability to limit and hinder women’s opportunities and experience at work. Studies by Beck and Davis, 2005; Hewlett and Luce, 2005; Meyerson and Fletcher, 2000 and others, have identified a correlation between structural and cultural forces and the underrepresentation of women in executive positions. Therefore in order to explore our understanding of women’s taking of executive positions this section will critically review what these writers have to say in regard to: the effect of organisational culture on the norms that exist; the power of language in generating gendered stereotypes and attitudes; the role of leadership and the norms that determine eligibility for executive leadership roles (roles that hold the power and authority to make decisions within the corporate organisation); along with the idea of power relations (introduced in Chapter 1).

Gergen (2001) postulates that the context in which we interact influences our construction of reality: the assumptions and stories we bring are shaped by our own histories of being and associated communities of belonging. This view argues that our experiences within each context do not exist in isolation. It is not sufficient to focus on women’s experience within the organisational context alone, because women exist within social, historical and cultural contexts, with each context
influencing and shaping the way they think and behave. This idea is that people are shaped by multiple independent contexts (Hopkins, 1994). Similarly, Johannessen (2009:218) draws our attention to the thinking of Mead (1967) and Elias (2000) who add that reality is constructed by the paradoxical and simultaneous emergence of individuals and society from ongoing human interaction, developing the idea of the emergence of individual and social identity as social action. Therefore, this study not only draws on literature from organisational management theory but also from the broader cultural literature pertaining to gendered constraints.

From the perspective of this thesis meaning is understood as constructed in relation to our personal life events. With this framing the meaning or story that we ascribe to the interactions we have in different contexts is understood to be fashioned by the work of creating and interpreting stories in relation to other stories told, created or (re)created in relationships. In this chapter I will explore how women and others have explained the underrepresentation of women in executive positions by critically reviewing a number of writers which I see as positioned within the complex web of conversations, and stories created around ‘women’ within the social contexts of society, organisations, family, and the personal domain. In so doing, I am exploring the initial conditions that appear to continue to influence women’s participation and taking of executive positions in today’s organisation.

2.2 **Principles that guide my interpreting of the influences on women’s career journey**

Historical change served to redefine the nature of the labour market and the way society viewed work and careers suitable for women. The impact of these reconstructed views for women’s orientation to work and family are discussed in this section. How we think about history and its implications are explored. I will introduce the concept of sensemaking, arguing that the way we make sense of our history affects our day-to-day interactions and the actions we take. History is recreated in stories and made coherent in conversation communicated in language. I argue that we live into the language we speak and explore this view.
2.2.1 How we think about history

Broomfield (1997) suggests there is no single history out here to be discovered; history is a form of discourse that provides a view of human experience.

History is not the past, the landscape of human experience. It is interpretation of fragments of that experience, maps drawn to differing projections and inevitably incorporating varying distortions, which serve as a guide in present belief and behaviour (p. 25).

What happens if we accept this view, that history is only a partial and distorted projection of human experience? If the vague notion that ‘past behaviour influences future behaviour’ no longer holds predictive value, does looking at the ‘history’ of women’s career development experience (contextually) really matter to our understanding of what is happening today in relation to women’s careers? Broomfield (1997) argues that the Fleeting glimpses of human experience fragments of reality [those] partial and blurred perceptions are all we humans have to work with, given the limitations of our organism (p.26). I agree with Broomfield, and add that when viewed through a Complexity (interpretative) perspective we have an opportunity to see more than the words written on paper. We have an opportunity to reinterpret through approximations, examples of coincidence, change patterns and drivers of behaviour those things that have influenced women’s taking of executive positions thus contributing to the emerging (her)story being created.

Whether we agree that there is a historical truth out there to be uncovered about women’s career experience, or that each woman’s story is constructed and interpreted in the telling, it is still evident that humans engage in rhetorical stories for the purpose of coming to terms with their world and behaving in it (Cherwitz, 1990). According to Polkinghorne (1988): the human realm of meaning is not related to a ‘thing’ or a ‘substance’ but to an activity (p.4). As social beings, everything we experience is interpreted, understood and made meaningful in relation to activity (action). The meaning of past activity (action) is determined by the relation of those activities (action) to present activity (action), organised activity (action) that is
contextually-embedded in meaning. Our human social life, then, is perpetual action and construction in relation to others (Mead, 1967). Johannessen (2009) further adds on this point:

Human patterns of action are in character repetitive with transformational potential in the sense they are structured and unstructured, created and recreated, repeated and transformed simultaneously. There is no blue print or grand plan that decides the development of human organised activity. It evolves in self-organising, emergent ways, which is to say, in complex dynamical ways (p.219).

Every woman’s situation in this inquiry is different; each of them told stories of past events that have meanings that have changed over time as novel events emerged in their ongoing experiences. If we accept the premise that history is the present perception of events from the past, we must acknowledge a corollary: numerous histories result from diverse present perceptions of differently remembered pasts (Broomfield, 1997). Events occurred, things happened, meaning was made and stories were told about women and those events, and looking at these fleeting glimpses of historical fragments and the stories constructed, I posit, will provide new connections and draw attention to new phenomena and help us to see what we could not see before (Rorty, 1989). The more know-how is brought forward from the past and is elaborated into new contributions and representations that extrapolate farther into the future (Weick and Roberts 1993: 366) the more the collective mind becomes strengthened and is capable of heedful action [that] reaches more places (Weick and Roberts, 1993: 366). Weick and Roberts’ view of history as foundational supports a key aim of this inquiry, which is to illuminate new understanding and raise broader awareness around women’s taking of executive positions.

It could be said that we are all historians (Broomfield, 1997). Everyday we make interpretations of the past to explain the present. Everyone has a story, a history that is dynamic and self-organising, and with our changing perceptions, the endings are redefined. As a consequence, history is rewritten endlessly (Broomfield, 1997). Each action or event we attempt to interpret can only become an object of attention after it has occurred. Therefore as we make our interpretation, in a different time and context, there can only be approximations. That is, there can be no precise
interpretation and, as Kuhn and Woog (2006) and others suggest, we should never expect precision when only approximations are possible. Reflecting on our experience we try and make sense of our individual actions. Sensemaking can provide a useful framework.

### 2.2.2 How we make sense of the things we do

In exploring how women who hold executive positions within corporate organisations express leadership and construct meaning of the individual career choices, the idea of sensemaking can provide a useful framework. According to Weick (1995) women (humans) make sense of their daily lives through the process of sensemaking. Weick says that sensemaking literally means making sense of something. For him, it is grounded both in individual and social activity. Beginning with the individual, Weick argues that sensemaking occurs when: *someone notices something, in an ongoing flow of events, something in the form of a surprise, a discrepant set of cues ... spotted when someone looks back over elapsed experience* (Weick, 1995: 2). Weick views sensemaking as a process (activity) where the activity rather than the outcome is the focus. He adds:

> To talk about sensemaking is to talk about reality as an ongoing accomplishment that takes form when people make retrospective sense of the situations in which they find themselves and their creation (p.15).

For Weick sensemaking is not interpretation. Whilst recognising that interpretation can be a process, Weick argues that it is more likely to describe a product. As discussed previously in this chapter, the act of interpretation can be understood as an action that infers that something already exists (for example, a text or an event) that can be interpreted. Thus sensemaking is understood to be about the ways (the activity and the processes) people generate what they interpret (Weick, 1995). Therefore the process of how, what and why we construct what we construct becomes important to our understanding in sensemaking. Ring and Van de Ven (1989) add that:
Sensemaking processes derive from … the need within individuals to have an identity - that is, a general orientation to situations that maintain esteem and consistency of ones self conceptions. Sensemaking processes have a strong influence on the manner by which individuals within organisations begin the process of transacting with others (p. 180).

It is therefore understood that it is through this process of sensemaking and reality construction that people in an organisation give meaning to the events and actions of that organisation. This is seen to occur at two principal levels: the individual and the organisation. For example, the emergence of flexible work hours, family friendly policies and increased maternity leave policies can be viewed as highlighting the organisation’s attempts to respond to the changing workforce demographics in a changing social and economic landscape. On an individual level the way working mothers make sense of their career identity and what it means for them to be a working mother will greatly influence how, when and why they access the organisation’s flexible work polices and whether they see them as supportive and valuable to their career. I propose that the discussion process entered into when an employee wishes to enact the flexible policy will be more important to the outcome than the policy wording. By exploring in this thesis the organisational policy decision-making patterns, and the stories told by women about how they made sense of and constructed their work-family choices and identities may provide more understanding and appreciation of what it takes to create and manage an executive corporate career within a corporate organisation.

Complex and often unconscious, women’s differing perceptions of their relationship experience within the corporate organisation highlights the need to explore how women individually ascribe meaning to their relationships and make sense of their own identity and role expectations. …the concept of sensemaking highlights the action, activity, and creating that lays down the traces that are interpreted and then reinterpreted (Weick, 1995:13).
From a Complexity perspective, organisations can be viewed as patterns of joint human action (Johannessen and Stacey, 2005) therefore building and maintaining relationships are integral to organisational life. Piterman (2008) argues that good relationships are fundamental to women’s career sustainability and advancement because:

[I]t is often men who hold positions of power, women who wish to succeed must establish good relationship with men. They must become conversant with the unspoken rules and codes of behaviour that shape the strategic relationship dynamic (p.10).

The dynamics of the relationship (relational interaction) that exists between men and women at work is unpredictable (Stacey, 2003b). Identity and role struggles may exist for professional career women because of conflicting expectations around their traditional female role and career role (see Martin, 2004; Schwartz, 1989, 1992). How women make sense of these expectations will strongly influence how they behave in response to the expectations. Thus exploration of women’s response to conflicting expectations will shed light on their career choices and how they manage any competing tensions and societal expectations of their individual choices.

Women’s sense of identity can change as they shift their attention from role to role (career and motherhood). Identity is an abstract thing: evident through language, dress, behaviour and choice of place, its effect depends on the recognition by other social beings. I wonder what effect the lack of recognition has on women’s career identity when they are continually being passed over for career promotion? Piterman (2008) argues that Women are particularly vulnerable given the power inequality in most organisations (p.10) and further suggests that many women find themselves dependant on male advocacy for career progression. This places women in a vulnerable position because:
In order to retain the favour of a ‘champion’, a woman treads a fine line to ensure she is not perceived as a threat. It is incumbent upon her to demonstrate the good judgment of a male advocate through the highest level of achievement. A woman who steps outside her designated role or who does not prove her worth may attract aggression or rejection from the senior male advocate (Piterman, 2008:10-11).

I argue that women’s sensemaking of the relational dynamics within the corporate organisation influences their choice to stay or leave the organisation. In Chapter 4 I present a number of fractal fragments from the women participating in this inquiry that show a variety of patterns and themes which indicate these women’s organisational experiences varied depending on how they made sense of their relational expectations and differing perceptions of the roles they were in.

2.2.3 Living into our stories

That human beings make sense of their daily lives through a network of conversations in social relationships emphasises that human social life is intensely linguistic. Our distinctively human way of being, and being humanly active, invariably takes place through language (Maturana and Varela, 1998). It is important to note that language is not a tool to reveal the world; it creates the world we live into. As Maturana and Veralo (1998) explain:

[I]t is by languaging that the act of knowing, in the behavioural coordination, which is language, brings forth a world. We work out our lives in a mutual linguistic coupling, not because language permits us to reveal ourselves but because we are constituted in language in a continuous becoming that we bring forth with others (p.234).

According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), originating in face-to face interaction, language is the way human beings make their own environment real.

As discussed above, conversations and relationships are central to how women make sense of and perceive their careers emerging within the corporate organisation. An important implication of taking a Complexity perspective is the need to take notice of the ordinary, everyday experiences of local conversation and relationship. Analysing the social complexity in prevalent narratives (Kuhn and Woog, 2003) and
the language patterns found in the narrative fractal fragments of the women in this inquiry provide a powerful way of taking notice of their organisational career experience and how they created their careers. Such analysis provides insight into the social dynamics of their behaviour, the connectedness of their relationships and the meaning they ascribed to their everyday work experience.

Language provides a universal community (Mead, 1934). It is through significant communication that individuals are able to generalise their experience to include the experiences of others. Social interaction and social organisation require a commonality of meaning, a ‘universe of discourse’; within which individual acts can take on significance (Mead, 1934:89-90). Berger and Luckmann (1966) add that language is the most important sign system of human society.

Language can thus be seen as foundational to relationship. Language is made up of words and words are tokens for linguistic coordination of actions. It is then, our history of recurrent interactions in the complex web of conversation that makes possible our world. Managing relationships is intrinsic to getting things done in organisations.

Relationships are an emergent dynamic characteristic of organisational function, and while influenced by, they are not predictable products of organisational structure, reporting lines, directives or policy mandates (Kuhn and Woog, 2003:7).

Specifically, good relationships are fundamental to holding a position, gaining career advancement opportunities and career development opportunities within the corporate organisation (Piterman, 2008). Women’s ability to engage in the organisation and maintain key supportive relationships appears to be a key factor in their ability to build a corporate executive career (Mintzberg, 1983b). Mainiero (1994b) argued that political skill is a necessary, even vital, aspect of women’s career advancement — that breaking the glass ceiling without shattering hopes for a promising executive career requires delicate political skill (p.7). However good intent and willingness to engage in building and maintaining relationships may not always result in ‘communicative connectedness’ and a supportive working
relationship for women. ...gender differences in language and communication style [can] exacerbate the cultural tensions between men and women at senior levels (Piterman, 2008: 43) hindering women’s career advancement.

Meaning-making is crafted between us in our every day talk in response to unique events in our unique surroundings (Shotter, 1997). Any consideration of language should therefore take into consideration context. Gergen (1994) adds that language is just one aspect of the cultural and biological context that influences meaning construction. Drawing on Gergen’s work (1999) we can see that the context in which we interact influences our construction of reality. The perspectives offered by systems, Complexity, Maturana and Varela and Gergen all argue that the stories that emerge in our conversations are shaped by our own histories of being and associated communities of belonging. For example: Women’s entry into leadership career paths is more difficult in male domains where ‘like attracts like’ and ‘like begets like.’ These subtle and often unconscious dynamics influence how talent is recognised and rewarded (Piterman, 2008:10). This view suggests that it is not just what women do that makes a difference to how they are perceived for leadership positions. Other people’s subtle and often unconscious rules and codes of behaviour influence the organisational dynamics, which have a strong influence on how talent is recognised and rewarded in the organisation (Piterman, 2008).

John Shotter (1997) highlights the importance of ‘joint action’ (that is, the flow of responsive and relational activities and practices) in social activity and meaning making. He suggests that:

[B]oth the surrounding circumstances and other people's actions are just as much a formative influence in what we do as anything within ourselves; people are not so much acting ‘out of’ any of their own inner plans, or scripts, or suchlike, as ‘into’ a situation or circumstance already partially shaped by previous talk intertwined activities of others. … what is so special about joint action, is that its overall outcome is not up to any of the individuals concerned in it; it is entirely novel; its outcomes are as if they have ‘come out of the blue’ (p.6).
Shotter’s perspective draws our attention to how we must shift our expectation of finding predictable outcomes and simple cause and effect reasons for women’s current underrepresentation in executive positions. There is a need I believe, to create and tell other career path stories, stories of interrupted career paths that can be seen as opportunities for learning. Bateson (1994) adds that we need to tell other stories of shifting identities and interrupted paths, and to celebrate the triumph of adaption (p.83). Weick (1995) adds that if we were to make sense of interrupted career paths as opportunities for learning and improvisation, then ‘triumphs of adaption’ would occur. This reframing would create a new story for women and organisations to live into that is built on the expectation of catching career moments in time and place, a new unpredictable career landscape with novel outcomes created in joint action.

I argue that stories created through conversation in joint action are more useful as the focus for developing our understanding of women’s taking of career positions. Holman and Thorpe (2003) add support to this thinking, arguing that we are embedded in a web of storytelling where all the stories influence the multiple ways we construct our personal narrative. Further, Sacks’ (1995) work on conversation analysis, revealed how social reality is both patterned and emergent, constructed in the utterance-by-utterance dynamic of the ongoing exchange of conversation. The work of this thesis similarly reveals how the situation regarding women’s taking of executive positions is revealed in the analysis of the coherent conversations generated in this thesis.

Therefore, as Holman and Thorpe (2003), Sacks (1995) and others suggest, there is no one true story, event or possible problem out there waiting for me to uncover the solution as to the question: Why are women underrepresented in executive corporate positions? There are however, multiple stories stitched together like patchwork, each highlighting themes and patterns of interaction and action that affect their taking of executive positions. Sacks (1995) proposes that these patterned stories and multiple re(productions) of everyday encounters, are constructed in social practices, and unfold over time building a rich layered story which we can explore to illuminate what is happening for women in relation to the taking of executive positions.
In researching the literature for this inquiry I found very little research on women who held executive positions and a lot written about why women are underrepresented. The literature cites a myriad of reasons and explanations ranging from personal to societal for this underrepresentation. Along the way it became clear to me that what is really critical is what women believe about themselves and the meaning they made from their interactions and experiences. What they think about, what they can ‘be’, and what they can ‘do’ appeared to represent their experience of what they can ‘have’ in the corporate organisation and their corporate career. Understanding women’s underlying thought patterns around their role and sensemaking process in relation to career opportunities and development really mattered to their achievement within the corporate organisation. The stories women tell themselves may make the difference between women holding executive positions or women continuing to be underrepresented.

It has been my experience that the way people relate within organisations makes a difference to what emerges. Often the vocabulary of busyness takes over corporate life and we find we are caught up in a world of work that is full of growing cynicism supported by vocabularies of deficit and a frenzy of problem solving action. I also believe there is another way of doing things. Social researchers have a great opportunity to set hopeful research agendas that focus on enhancing organisational life by exploring different and more positive vocabularies. Ludema (2001) proposes:

[T]he purpose of social and organisational inquiry ought to be to create textured vocabularies of hope - stories, theories, evidence, and illustrations - that provide organisations and communities with new guiding images of relational possibility (Abstract).

Cooperrider (2005) encourages the use of positive questions to direct our attention to ‘what is happening’ offering an alternative to contemporary social science inquiries that focus on critical, problem solving gap finding. This approach, known as Appreciative Inquiry, is based on a:
‘reverence for life’, [Appreciate Inquiry] …‘is an inquiry process’ that tries to apprehend the factors that give life to a living system and seeks to articulate those possibilities that can lead to a better future (Cooperrider, Whitney and Starvos, 2003:387).

Based on the premise that there is a direct and simultaneous link between the questions we ask and the vocabularies we use (Cooperrider and Srivasta, 1987) Appreciative Inquiry uses questions that focus on identifying the best of ‘what is’ in order to pursue possibilities of ‘what could be’ rather than using gap finding questions of ‘what is not’. As a co-operative approach this type of inquiry searches for strengths and life giving forces that are found with in every system. Those positive forces hold the potential for inspired exploration on ‘how to organise what might be’ (Cooperrider, 2005). Appreciative Inquiry is a way of living with, being with, and directly participating in the varieties of social organisation we are compelled to study (Cooperrider and Srivasta, 1987:131) it focuses on people’s own sensemaking and seeking new possibilities, supporting my aim of seeking new possibilities for women in the corporate organisation therefore this is the approach I have used in the interviews with the women in this inquiry.

2.3 The interactional and communal contexts that influence women’s engagement with the corporate organisation

In this section I look at the interactional and communal contexts that are recognised as influencing women’s engagement with the corporate organisation. I explore how these contexts influence what we are seeing and hearing around women’s roles and the way they manage their executive careers. Context in this framework is thought of as a multi-relational and linguistic domain in which behaviour, feelings, emotions, understandings, and so forth are communal constructions. I specifically focus on the stories told within the context of society, organisation, family and the personal domain.

Shotter (1984) says that the actions of a particular person living within a network of relations with others in a social group, in different ways at different times is: diallogically or responsively linked in some way, both to previous, already executed actions and to anticipated, next possible actions (pp.52-53). Therefore by looking at
the stories that emerge around women from the ever changing, complex web of relationships, conversations and social activity that women engage in, within the local and broader domains and discourses over time, may provide an indication of the influences on women’s engagement with the corporate organisation and their taking of executive positions.

Our personal stories nest within a particular social, historical and organisational context (Greenhalgh, Russell and Swinglehurst, 2005). Unfolding over time and emerging through conversation, they form part of the collective sensemaking of social systems. For example, Piterman (2008) in her research ‘the leadership challenge women in management’, found that the organisational environment is dominated by a limiting female archetype that places women in a cultural straight jacket (p. 10) which few women are able to seamlessly navigate. She suggests that as a result of this straight jacket, women are subjected to intense scrutiny that transcends performance: [Women] are judged on appearance and communication style. Highly talented women can be sidelined and excluded from leadership positions based on a perception of poor cultural fit (p.10).

Sociologist Peter Berger (1963; 1966) has emphasised the importance of stories in shaping social realities, showing how people’s characteristic stories change as they progress from one life theme to another. Similarly Pradl (1984) notes that it is through story that an individual creates meaning out of daily happenings, and this story provides the basis for future anticipation of events. This is demonstrated by Piterman (2008) who found a number of women in her research who accept the challenge of organisational life in a ‘straight jacket’ and attempt to adjust their way of being to the environment, internalising the responsibility for their poor cultural fit (Piterman, 2006:10). Kelly (1955) adds that our personalities grow out of the stories we have chosen to construct from our perceptions of what happened to us, and how these stories influence our future expectations. What stories have influenced the expectations of the women in this research? What other organisational stories have influenced these women’s career expectations and career development? How have the women in this inquiry navigated the corporate organisation to take their executive positions? What are the organisations to which these women belong doing to retain and develop them? I will address these questions in Chapter 4.
It would be easy for me as a woman to assume that I know the story I am researching: as a woman in Western society, as a woman who holds an executive position in a financial services corporation, as a woman who has a family. However, the most erroneous stories are those we think we know best – and therefore we never scrutinise or question (Gould, 1997: 57). I am cautious not to make the assumption that I know what is going on for women because of the way I make sense of society, my corporate career, my family or personal experience as a woman. My personal experience may contain some common threads with other women, and I may see similar patterns that are representative of a larger group of women’s experience. However this does not form a universal truth, which tells the whole story of women’s lived experience. That is to say, I do not know what I do not know and the important thing is not to stop questioning; curiosity has its own reason for existing (Albert Einstein, quoted in Life Magazine 2 May, 1955).

I believe that new understanding is facilitated through thoughtful questioning that unpacks and builds on current conversations. Through my interpretations, in a different time and space, the possibility of new insight arises, thus creating a new story from which new life arises, novel ideas with a different meaning and understanding that create momentum towards a new emergent conversation. Decision-making plays a key role in influencing organisational outcomes. …the quality of the strategic decisions made by senior leadership teams most directly affects overall organisational performance (Hazy and Silberstang, 2009:230) and the culture of the organisation (Burman and Evans, 2008).

During this research I had many conversations with different people about women in leadership. As I reflect on those conversations, one of the comments I heard regularly was ‘It’s a boys club at the top and nothing will ever change’, if that story is continually held and perpetuated without challenge, I suspect that regardless of what is happening, the perception will be that nothing has changed. Rodriguez (2002) suggests:
For narrative to live and prosper, it must remain open and this requires us to foster ways of being in the world that promote interpretation, that is, the evolution of new and different ways of experiencing and understanding the world. There is always new and different interpretation (p. 4).

Complexity implies that people’s interpretation (narrative) of experience is emergent out of multiple constructions of past events and experiences and subject to context, time and place. Realities and futures are continuously co-created in the day-to-day interactions between people (Johannessen, 2009).

Gergen’s (1994) work focuses our attention on the contextual and complex webs of relationships and conversations that are embedded, through stories, in our everyday social actions. Below I draw on the scholarly work of many writers across a range of disciplinary domains to create a rich picture that is the contradictory and complex story of women and their executive career, highlighting the interactional and communal contexts (society, organisation, family and the personal domain) which influence women’s engagement with the corporate organisation and the way they manage their executive careers.

2.3.1 Women and society

The expectations held by a society define the role of its members. Throughout history, society has stereotyped men and women into traditional roles. For centuries the ‘traditional role’ of a woman in the West has held domesticity at its core (Rowbotham, 1997). A young woman's priority was ... the acquisition of a husband, a family, and a home (Schwartz, 1996). This was a male dominated social order, where women were not expected to harbour aspirations for a career outside the home. Changes in the family began when women wanted more from life and they voiced it. Women got the right to vote and along with access to education social expectations of women’s roles in society began to slowly change, enabling women to accomplish things they had only dreamt of.

Voting rights and access to education did not guarantee pursuit of an occupation. Society's expectation that women care for home and family left little room for personal growth and professional development. Women who sought professional
corporate careers were still a novelty long into the 20th century. However with women’s access to education came women’s ‘voice’. Women became activists pushing for rights and eventually were successful. The gain of suffrage set the precedent for other future gains. The corporate professional career door (albeit a very heavy swinging door) was opened to women, offering a world full of career opportunities set against conflicting societal expectations and norms of women’s role in society. Women's roles in the West have continued to grow, spurred on by a rapidly changing society.

It has been said that we live today in a global society that transcends distance and frontiers. It is a global world that can no longer be exclusively viewed as a number of differentiated societies, made up of individual national states. World system theory (Wallerstein, 2004) suggests that in this world all social action is seen as taking place within one overarching framework, the framework of the Capitalist world-system. The political theorist Rosenau (1995) talks of a different world system view, he speaks of the two worlds of world politics suggesting that there is not a single global society but at least two competing ones: the society of (national) states, and the many different transnational organisations, players, groups and individuals who build and consolidate a tissue of social relationships around the globe (Rosenau, 1995). What is common between both these theories is the recognition of the significance of connection and the relationships required for people to engage in purposive action to get things done.

Beck (2000a) speaks of a transnational world where:

[T]he linearity assumption and the Either – Or of national axiomatics are replaced by Both-And postulates: globalisation and regionalisation, linkage and fragmentation, centralisation and decentralisation, are [all] dynamics that belong together as two sides of the coin (p. 26).

According to Beck, the transnational social spaces cancel the local associations of community that are constrained in the national concept of society. Beck further proposes that as a result, traditional social identities have declined in social significance and modern society is ‘individualised’. No longer made up of social
communities with distinctive ‘life-worlds’, people in the modern world are
condemned to choose their own life-worlds outside the bounds of any particular
community or group.

So what does a world full of ‘circulation’, that is, the increased circulation of
information, ideas, movement of people, people’s work and capital mean for
people’s sensemaking and the traditional conceptualisation of sense of belonging and
local relationship with people and place? Giddens (1991) conceptualises this
globalisation as, *intensification of world-side social relations which link distant
localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many
miles away and vice versa* (p.64). A Complexity cosmography is a useful way of
looking at this world of ‘circulation’ as it draws our attention to the dynamic
networks and local relationships that self-organising entities, nations, communities,
organisations and individuals have as they constantly interact and react to each other.

The development of the global market has had far reaching effects for cultures,
identities and lifestyles (Robins, 1996) and there appears an ever-greater uniformity
and convergence of corporations, lifestyles, cultural symbols and behaviour. For
example, I noticed when travelling overseas that I can now buy the same brand
of clothes in Hong Kong, India, Australia, Paris, England, Rome or America for a
similar cost. There are many paradoxes and ambivalences associated with the word
globalisation. *Think globally, and act locally* is clearly becoming a reality. Robertson
(1992, 2006) emphasises that globalisation always involves a process of localisation.
Firms that produce and market globally must develop local connections. To situate
oneself globally and locally is the modern quintessence of modern sensibility
(Robertson, 1992). The implication of this global economy on the way work is
organised locally is far reaching. When employed by global corporate organisations,
business models shaped on the global economy likely impact women’s local working
conditions. For example, as an executive of a global team, there is often an
underlying expectation to frequently travel overseas for meetings and training
seminars and attendance is expected at team meetings that are held 24/7 at varying
times, without regard for family or personal commitments. This highlights the
inconstancy of family friendly work policies and actual work practices. Interestingly,
research shows that women at senior levels in organisations are less likely to take up
flexibility initiatives or family friendly policies than those women at a general staff level (EOWA, 2003). Australian studies point to a prevailing belief by women that participation in flexibility initiatives may undermine their promotion and career opportunities (Hewlett and Luce, 2005; HREOC, 2002). With these inflexible types of work demands many women (and men) with responsibility for family commitments struggle to accommodate the demands of both work and families. Studies present compelling evidence that the 24/7 work culture is placing extreme pressure on both employees (Piterman, 2008) and the family unit, contributing to worrying social trends such as stress related health problems and family breakdowns (Relationship Forum Australia 2007). I would argue that as women thread their way through the complexities of every day social life (Weick, 1992:172) and the work and family issues that arise, these worrying trends add to women’s tension and concern over the choices they make about work and family. Many women report exhaustion and guilt over the time and energy conflicts between competing (public-private) realms (Buzzanell, Meisenbach, Remke, Meina, Bowers and Conn, 2005) with many writers identifying role conflicts for white, married, professional and managerial women (Friedman and Greenhaus, 2000; Hochschild, 1997; Perlow, 1997; Williams, 2000).

In everyday life we speak of Australian, American or English society. Internally each of these societies can be understood as being made up of a number of ‘collective identities’ such as: male and female ways of being; class groups; status groups; ethnic groups; and religious groups. Each of these groups operate within a dynamic social system and they change and evolve into worlds of family, science, economics, law, politics, and so on. Each of these worlds have a distinctive set of rules and regulations, as well as social practises. Examples include the labour market, culture, language, education systems, production and capital which are known as the local economy, local language, and so on. The concept of local, therefore, can be either place-orientated or people-orientated: in other words it is contextual and relational. With sensemaking being primarily social and always communicative (Weick, 1979) understanding how women make sense of their local working relationships within a global frame is important to our understanding of the choices they make regarding their career.
What happens to our local way of life, our culture, communication, self-image of groups and individuals when we lift our gaze beyond the immediate experience of the familiar ‘local’ to the distant ‘global’ world and its circulating, people, images, information, ideas and capital? Appadurai (cited in Beck, 2000a) suggests that it opens up greater opportunity because:

Imagination gains a special kind of power in people’s every day lives. More people in more parts of the world dream of and consider a greater range of ‘possible’ lives than they have ever done before (p.53).

For example, the ‘international professional’ has arisen, the person who makes the world their home, mobile people who create their own spatial and cultural universes through daily routines and practices wherever they go.

Many mothers give up their job when they have children in the hope that when they are ready they will return to work. However returning to work after children is not that easy. Often there is a ‘motherhood penalty’ (Correll, Benard and Paik, 2007) on role suitability and wages and there is an illusion that full and permanent employment is available, yet this rarely exists today. The rapid advances made by globalisation and the telecom revolution has made the outsourcing of administration and innovation services, contact centres, knowledge and analytical services and information technology cheap and effective (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2010). The result is that many firms, for example American Express, have switched entire sections of their administration to low-wage countries (in this case Southern India). Hordes of data processors are sitting in back rooms at computer terminals linked to worldwide databases (Knowledge @Wharton, 2002). The effect of this outsourcing is that local jobs became obsolete. Whole occupational categories such as typists, clerks and administrative officers, as well as information technology jobs, which provided a return entry point into the labour market for women returning to work after raising a family, have slowly disappeared to offshore locations. Jobs today can often be transferred and conducted from anywhere in the world.
The result of these changes are that local labour demand has been shifting employment growth from traditionally low skill occupations and sectors where working mothers have predominated, to higher-level more qualified occupations. Interestingly, this trend has had the reverse effect for some developing countries by providing novel opportunities for women and men: for example, employment opportunities in information processing work such as home-based teleworking, employment in telecentres or telecottages. These modes of working offer flexibility in location and working hours and thus can overcome some of the constraints facing women, by providing alternative work arrangements. However in developed countries such as Australia, UK and the US this trend appears less opportunistic and the effects on gender equality require further research.

At the other end of the professional employment spectrum, women seeking executive leadership positions appear to experience a whole set of different subtle inhibitors to women’s work experience such as: stereotypical mindsets around gender relations; discriminatory organisational work structures; gendered perceptions of leadership eligibility; male dominated cultures that exclude women based on poor cultural fit (Piterman, 2008). There have been many approaches implemented around the world aimed at achieving higher representation of women in executive positions in corporate organisations. Some countries have used formal legal control. For example, in 2004 Norway introduced a 40% quota aimed at increasing the number of women on company boards. Storvik and Teigen (2010) report that six years on the quotas have been successful but only after a period of voluntary compliance that yielded few results; the government was forced to introduce tough sanctions for companies that failed to implement the quota (Storvik and Teigen, 2010). In analysing how the increase in women’s representation came about, and the reasons for the adoption of quotas, Matland (2004) highlights that:

[I]t is clear that culture is important. Second wave feminism raised a number of equity issues that were especially salient within the Nordic context of egalitarianism. But the egalitarian culture is not in itself sufficient. While women have been quite successful in gaining access to positions of political power, they have been much less successful, despite a mighty struggle, in gaining access to large numbers of prominent positions in business (p.8).
It appears that social norms provide a form of informal social control that obviates the necessity of more formal, institutionalised legal sanctions. Social norms are generally unwritten but commonly understood formulas for both determining what patterns of behaviour are expected in a given social context and for defining what forms of behaviour are valued or socially approved. Based on this view it could be said from the abysmal statistics (EOWA, 2010) of women in executive positions, that society does not value women as leaders in corporations.

The question to be asked is will institutions, customs, public opinion, and the whole social context, change to value men and women equally if we change legal sanctions? It appears from the Norway experience that it does have an immediate short-term effect, however I wonder if something else is required and if there is not a more sustainable and holistic way forward. I will explore this idea further in this inquiry by interpreting the experiences of women who are holding executive positions.

Will implementing quotas, changing laws, corporate cultures, public opinion, and the whole social context, lead to true gender equity?

We must not believe, certainly, that a change in women’s economic condition alone is enough to transform her, though this factor has been and remains the basic factor in her evolution; but until it has brought about the moral, social, cultural, and other consequences that it promises and requires, the new women cannot appear (de Beauvoir, 1953:304).

De Beauvoir highlights an important point: women’s access to work and the improvement of their economic conditions does not mean societal expectations of women’s roles have changed. A woman must shed her old skin and cut her own new clothes to transform her role in society (de Beauvoir, 1949). To do this we need to have a social revolution, she suggests. With women now making up half the workforce participation rate in Australia (ABS) perhaps we could be tricked into thinking that women have come so far that we have had a social revolution, or is it an historical myth?
Despite entry into the world of work many women talk about being constantly challenged by stereotyping from society. Certain rules have to be followed and certain ideal women images have to be kept. Society’s idea of the typical role of women never seems to change.

Social revolution or historical myth? The increase of women’s participation in the workforce is undeniable and it could be seen as a social revolution; however the progression of women in executive positions has been slow, so what does this mean? I will now look at women at work in the corporation to see why the story is so paradoxical.

2.3.2 Women and work in the corporate organisation

I have yet to hear a man ask for advice on how to combine marriage and a career.

Gloria Steinem

The ‘organisational man’ the Oxford dictionary tells us is *a man who subordinates his individuality and his personal life to the organisation he serves*. Historically when a man gets a job he rarely has to break his employment or prove he can be a good father and a great gardener as well, unlike women. For example, in the recent Australian political debate there has been much to do about Ms Gillard’s red hair and Tony Abbott’s swimwear. What relevance do these observations have to their ability to fulfil their role? That these topics are making news headlines demonstrates how people make important decisions based on their perceptions. For example, research released in 2001 by the UK Social Issues Research Center (SIRC) showed that attractive people have distinct advantages in our society … and that attractive applicants have a better chance of getting jobs and of receiving higher salaries. It has long been argued that women in corporations have been judged on their gender and appearance. It is not just anecdotal that male bosses are perceived to be better at their jobs.

According to Gallup poll data from 2006, Americans are nearly twice as likely to say they would prefer to have a man rather than a woman as a boss if they were accepting a new job. The Survey found that 34% of men preferred a male boss, while 10% preferred a female boss, and 40% of women preferred a male boss, while 26%
preferred a female boss. The remaining respondents of both genders had no preference. One explanation for the across-the-board preference of male leaders may be deeply instilled gender stereotypes held by both men and women. The cultural model of a leader still appears to be masculine. The January 2009 issue of the Harvard Business Review looked at how female and male leaders were rated in 360-degree feedback reviews on leadership competencies as defined by Insead's Global Leadership Centre in Fontainebleau Cedex, France. The eight competencies were: envisioning, energising, designing and aligning, rewarding and feedback, team building, outside orientation, tenacity, and emotional intelligence. It ends up that female leaders were rated higher on every dimension but one, envisioning, which is the ability to recognise new opportunities and trends in the environment and develop a new strategic direction for an enterprise. This indicates that women do not necessarily make worse bosses, they are just perceived as such.

Perceptions effect how we interact and get things done. The corporate organisation can be seen simply as a complex bounded organising unit to get things done; an organising unit which contains a lot of social action and has a number of challenges. Different groups of people construct different stories about the same organisation and each person’s story changes with each (re)telling of the experience. These different stories, in turn, facilitate different ways of experiencing life (Grenz, 1996). Stories are told subjectively from the viewpoint of the teller. Stories about what they did, what happened to them and about what happened next, were ignited by what happened before with each person bringing along his or her own assumptions, experiences and ideas to the telling. Attitudinal studies show that men in business continue to perceive women’s ineffective leadership style and their lack of skills to reach executive levels as the source of many women managers’ problems (Wellington et al. 2003:19). When the recruiter of executive positions holds this view it would be easy to see why women are being excluded from selection.

The cultural model of a corporate leader still appears to be masculine and the impediments to women’s advancements to executive positions in the corporate organisation are attributed to many factors. Cultural fit, masculine leadership constructs, the dynamics around managing strategic relationships and work life balance issues (Piterman, 2008) together with the linear career model and the way
work is organised within the corporation. What I think is interesting to note is that, most of the impediments are constructs, stories that were constructed long ago, stories that are told and retold in a way that makes women the ‘other’ option at the leadership table. This construct requires women to fit in as a women executive leader rather than as an executive leader that is a woman.

2.3.2.1 Fitting in

It is inherently difficult to understand what is going on with women’s appointment to executive positions in organisations because of the complexity and humanness of the organisational system. Early approaches by organisational management have focussed on diversity initiatives as a way to address the issue of underrepresentation. Diversity initiatives have been underpinned by what can be termed a person-centred approach (Tharenou, 1995) that is, women’s personal attributes, behaviour and relationship to work were viewed as the problem (Meyerson and Fletcher, 2000). The initiatives used in this approach (for example, increasing women’s skills through training and development, career development programs, coaching and networking initiatives, participation in the leadership pipeline) have had some personal benefit for women, but organisational change has been slow and women appear to have been sidetracked with these diversity initiatives without any real career advancement to executive positions. As a result of the lack of any real impact of this person-centred approach, there has been a move towards a focus on introducing environment-centred initiatives, for example, organisational systems and values change programs that endeavour to remove systemic organisational barriers to women’s progression by aligning and supporting women’s equality at work. This approach suggests gender inequality is underpinned by discriminatory organisational workplace cultures, systems, processes and practices (Tharenou, 1995). What both these strategies have in common is that they seek to have women ‘fit in’ and they make women special cases needing accommodation (Sinclair, 2000). Piterman (2008) found that many women in senior levels take the responsibility to fit in and attempt to adjust to the dynamics of the culture:
Women become sensitive to their marginality at a senior level and to the lack of cultural accommodation. Their visibility renders them highly vulnerable. They display the anxieties of the minority in infiltrating and surviving at the top (Piterman, 2008:10).

What do women think about these fit in strategies? Do they make a difference to their career decisions? How do women make sense of their experience at work and how does that perception of experience effect organisational behaviour? How do women make sense of their competing roles at work and at home? How and why do women mentally construct their work and what effect does this construction have on their career development? Is there something different about the way women and men think about their career? Can and do women want to lead? The questions are potentially endless. This is where this research can make a contribution. Using a Complexity approach to analyse the data here is appropriate: the researcher, using fractal patterns, extrapolates themes of a small group to the broader context.

Using a Complexity approach to analyse questions requires the researcher to pay attention to the language used in conversation, and to the interpretation of the way these conversations unfold as we communicate (Stacey, 2001a). By focussing my inquiry on women’s meaningful lived experiences (Schutz, 1967) joining the ongoing sensemaking conversation that exists within and around organisations, being sensitive to ‘local’ conversations, and participating in the living communication that ‘is’ around women and their corporate careers, this research seeks to illuminate new understanding on some of the above questions, and in the process participate in the evolution of their identity (Stacy, Griffin and Shaw 2000, Stacey 2001a).

I would argue that ‘fitting in’ is a lose/lose strategy for everyone. Women can rarely be themselves if they are under perpetual scrutiny, trying to adapt and second-guess what is expected of them. Thus they can never really bring themselves to work and as a result the organisation is missing out on the uniqueness, diversity and potential women have to contribute.
2.3.2.2 Looking back

It was not that long ago, in the 1960’s and 1970’s that many women tended to identify with the social class corresponding to their husband’s work, while giving little weight to their own occupation. That is no longer the case according to research conducted by the British ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) Identities Programme in 2005. According to the findings of the project *Are traditional identities in decline* (Heath, Curtice, Elgenius, Andersen and Thomson (research team)), there has been a major de-coupling of women’s class identity from their partner’s occupation. According to the findings, women gave more weight to their own occupation:

There has been a major change in the gendered basis of class identity. Forty years ago women derived their class identity from their partner’s occupational position. This pattern of ‘male dominance’ has largely disappeared (p.1).

The findings of this project suggest that women are finding their own place in the professional world of work; this should not be a surprise considering women’s increased participation rate in the workforce. Working mothers have quadrupled over the last 50 years in developed countries (OECD, 2007). As previously discussed the labour force participation rate of women in Australia has also increased significantly in 30 years, from 43.5% in 1978 to 58.6% in 2010. This has been a major factor in leading to better economic security for women. Paid work gives women the opportunity to ensure their own financial security, contribute to the family budget and secure their economic future into retirement (FaHCSIA, 2010).

There is a plethora of literature that addresses issues around women and work (Caro and Fox, 2008; Hewlett, 2007; Hochschild, 1989; McKenna, 1977; Marshall, 1995; Piterman, 2008; Sinclair, 1998; to name a few). As I read the literature, specifically focussing on women in executive positions, I found that a number of themes recurred. These are that: gender discrimination is often reported in corporations (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2008); organisational culture impacts on women’s experience at work; women have to assimilate and adopt
behaviours in line with the dominant male culture in order to succeed (Piterman, 2008); women do have the intellectual capacity to be CEO and when they choose to do so have a positive effect on the profit of the bottom line (Catalyst, 2004a). It appears that it is not just the workplace that has failed women, women are now rejecting the workplace (Hakim, 2000).

Many women who are thinking of having a family in two to four years are already planning their exit. They do not think it is possible to manage a career and a family. My personal experience is that I found it hard to reconcile the unpredictability of organisational life with the structure and stability I thought necessary for managing childcare and family. I was ‘lucky’ as my husband was able to provide the consistency our family needed. As I reflect on this statement, it was this consistency that was necessary for me to fulfil the expectations of my corporate role as well as my personal family expectations, and, to not feel guilty about leaving my children.

Have we just moved the chess pieces on the board by moving intelligent women from what Friedan (1963) believes was imprisonment in suburbia, to being over stressed corporate career women who are now juggling work and family? Women, according to Hochschild (1989), bear the brunt of a stalled revolution a revolution that saw the exodus of wives out of the home to take up their ‘first shift’ of paid employment returning home to a domestic ‘second shift’. Hochschild (1989) argues that:

The exodus of women into the economy has not been accompanied by a cultural understanding of marriage and work that would make the transition smooth… most workplaces have remained inflexible in the face of the family demands of their workers and at home, most men have yet to really adapt to the changes in women. The strain between the change in women and the absence of change in much else leads me to talk of a ‘stalled revolution’ (p. 12).

The language of domestic economics, in which husbands still help wives, suggests how little conceptual change has taken place. According to Hochschild’s (1989) research, the wife typically is still the primary parent and remains ultimately responsible for keeping house. In most marriages the man’s paid work is seen as a
career in contrast to a women’s paid work which is still considered a mere job, rationalising her continuing responsibility for the ‘second shift’ (Hochschild, 1989).

The additional hours that a working woman puts in on the ‘second shift’ of housework, Hochschild calculates, adds up to an extra month of twenty four hour days of work a year. The results of this second shift burnout, many women are…overtired, sick and emotionally drained (Hochschild, 1989:9).

Life-work balance is offered up by many as the complete answer to working women’s burnout with the assumption being that no energy is invested by women in battling the corporate culture, therefore, women’s burnout is usually caused by doing the bulk of the ‘second shift’, the juggling of long hours in the office in conjunction with returning home to look after the family and the bulk of the home duties. As a leader, I personally never liked the idea of pushing life-work balance policies as the answer to juggling and burnout. How can you ever have something so dynamic in balance? Alternatively, through my leadership and actions, I have actively encouraged employees to bring their whole selves to work. For this to be possible, what was usually required was a new level of flexibility and cooperation from the organisation and the employee, both women and men, to manage their work and family commitments harmoniously.

Psychologist Rebecca Kopcsandy, director of Advantage People Management Australia, has found:

[T]here is a significant gap between what an organisation says it is doing for equal opportunity, and what it actually does... It seems as though it’s the fashion to have a piece a paper saying you have all of these politically correct policies but very few actually live and breathe it, which is disappointing (Kopcsandy, 2007:120).

Kopcsandy found that when someone tried to activate a policy such as job share, typically the applicants were met with covert resistance. The discouragement is not obvious, it is hidden. For example, Piterman’s (2008) research highlights that women were in demand for roles and assignments before they announced they were pregnant, and afterwards it was if they had resigned. Piterman reflects:
The resistance is most manifest through the exclusion of working mothers from key roles, projects and opportunities (p.55). These implicit messages form a silent barrier, which leads women to ‘self select’ out of organisations (Kopcsandy, 2007). Much of the literature shows that women face barriers in attempting to pursue careers in corporate organisations. However research by Cabrera (2007) adds that women are leaving organisations for more complex reasons than for family reasons alone. Cabrera’s research showed that within her research group (of 497 randomly selected graduates of an international business school in the USA) 35% of the women who stopped working cited rearing children as their sole reason for opting out. 62% of the women reported that their career focus had changed. Mid-career women were most interested in finding balance in their lives and the desire for authenticity increased across the lifespan. We may ask why do so many women keep trying to juggle both career and family, if the toll on their personal lives is so high? Is it achievement, a sense of identity, success, power or simply financial independence? I will explore these questions in Chapter 4.

One of the more tacit, or as I would call it, shadow conversations, that appear to be present in organisations are around perceptions of ability based on sex differences. These perceptions play a central role in shaping men and women’s professional lives. Valian (1999) in her book Why So Slow? The Advancement of Women refers to these silent conversations as ‘gender schemas’. More commonly these are called stereotypes in organisational literature. Valian (1999) uses the notion of gender schemas (schemas being a term used to describe the mental framework that helps us organise our knowledge and assumptions about something and are used for interpreting and processing information) as a more inclusive term, to describe the social perceptions … which affect our expectations of men and women, our evaluations of their work, and their performance as professionals. She argues that:

[M]en and women acquire these unacknowledged beliefs in early childhood and …the most important consequence for professional life is that men are consistently overrated, while women are underrated (1999:2).
These schemas about men and women can arguably be seen to condition our reactions to men and women as individuals at work. According to Valian (1999) all schemas (stereotypes) and dominant forms of sensemaking influence how we perceive and treat group members. It is only by recognising how our perceptions and our actions are skewed by unconscious beliefs that we can learn to see others, and ourselves differently. As de Beauvoir (1949) postulated so long ago, if we imagine, … a society where sexual equality is concretely realised, this equality would newly assert itself in each individual (p.761). What is relevant for this inquiry is the effect of the consequences of small differences in the evaluation and treatment of men and women at work, and the long-term effect the accumulation of advantage and disadvantage (Merton, 1968) has over time. I highlight key differences between the treatment and evaluation of men and women in the corporation organisation throughout this inquiry, with the view that identifying them builds a clearer understanding that it is people’s perceptions of women and men’s professional ability that has shaped current organisational culture.

It is generally accepted that the figures for women’s workforce participation rate at the highest executive levels is abysmal. However, there seems to be little consensus as to the causes of this. As highlighted in Chapter 1 there are many different reasons and stories told about why women are underrepresented in executive positions. Ms Elizabeth Broderick, the Australian Federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner, in an ABC radio interview said that over the last 25 years we appear to have been successful in getting rid of many forms of overt sexual discrimination. *The formal part*[ the Sex Discrimination Act] has been done. But now we’re having difficulty getting rid of systemic discrimination (ABC radio AM, 22 July, 2008). I wonder if this statement reflects what is really going on, as we still have overt disparities in wages and responsibilities between women and men, with women on average being paid 17% less than men (ABS). The literature suggests negative stereotypes around women in the organisation are still pervasive (Piterman, 2008). My research suggest women leave organisations for a number of reasons, to set up their own business, to study, to return to the role of carer and home maker or to just take a break for the mundane routine. Women are finding their own place in the world and it does not always look like a corporate career.
2.3.3 Women and family

Recent commentators have argued that the family, as we have known it, has disappeared. For example, Giddens (2001) has referred to a global revolution in how we think of ourselves and how we form ties with others. Similarly Beck-Gernsheim has written about the post-familial family (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). The defining hallmark of the post-familial family according to Beck-Gernsheim is that it has become a transitional phase in people's lives. The family has not disappeared but has become a part-time commitment. So in this way the social significance of families has changed.

Beck (2000b) goes further, suggesting that family and neighborhoods have lost their sense of community: community is dissolved in the acid bath of competition (p.95). Competition and mobility, which are required in modern society, run against the contradictory demands of family. That is, the individualisation required in a corporate career runs against the self-sacrifice required for the communal aspects of family life. Community, Beck suggests, has been replaced by the modern labour market in conjunction with the modern welfare state, and the result has been a dissolving of the social foundations of class society and the nuclear family (Beck, 2000b). Competition causes the isolation of individuals within homogenous social groups. Piterman found a number of the women and men in her research interpreted characteristics such as an aggressively competitive environment or market driven 24/7 work ethic as pragmatic, rather than problematic (Piterman, 2008:35). They further indicated their acceptance that this type of behavior was a requirement of the executive role.

An historical interpretation on family put forward by some scholars (Gimbutas (1991); Eisler (1987b); Stone (1976); and others) suggest that the ideal of family, as we know it today, did not always exist. Some theorise that matriarchal societies existed in the earlier stages of societal development. The community of the Iroquois Indians (Morgan, 1877) has been singled out as one in which women had great influence. Iroquois women could take the role of sachems (chiefs) and, as such, constituted an important part of the governing segment of the society. Other writes, for example Engels (1884) and Marx (1954) suggest in European history (from the
ancient Greeks right up to Capitalism) the asymmetrical distribution of wealth and property between male and female gave rise to a familial organisation in which the male was privileged over the female:

Thus, as wealth increased, it, on the one hand, gave the man a more important status in the family than the women, and, on the other hand, created a stimulus to utilise this strengthened position in order to overthrow the traditional order of inheritance in favour of his children. But this was impossible as long as descent according to mother right prevailed. This had, therefore to be overthrown, and it was overthrown; ... and male lineage and right of inheritance from the father instituted (Engels, 1884:197).

This period, they suggest, saw the emergence of the patriarchal family, as the transition from a mother – right family (Bachofen (1861)) or as it is described today, Matrilineal (a societal structure in which inheritance and family descent pass through the female line and where men or children may have access to property only as a result of their relationship to the woman who is the legal owner) to the individual family as we know it today appeared. Moreover, this view suggests that this new family structure and property ownership had wider social implications to a gender division of labour (into male workers and female non-workers or, later, better-paid male workers and less well-paid female workers, that is, women either are not allowed to work or are underpaid). From this point of view, there existed a social subordination of women, which was a function of economic necessity and as such, was an inescapable feature of the social relations of production (the class structure) (Engels, 1884:197). The effect of individualisation and other social changes in society has meant that the subordination of women because of economic necessity is less an issue for women, as they can now earn their own money, which means they are no longer dependant on their husband’s earnings and can construct their own lives inside and outside the family changing the dynamics of the family.

Families in the 21st Century come in all shapes and sizes. As little as a half-century ago, the nuclear family would have been described as a place where children were typically raised in a home with two biological parents, where mother stayed home as the ‘homemaker’ and dad went to work as the ‘breadwinner’. Today we have divorce, remarriage, single mothers, single fathers, grandparents raising
grandchildren, multi generational families, gay and/or lesbian parent families, and a host of other variables, which have turned traditional nuclear families into the exception rather than the norm (ABS). Even in nuclear families, homemaker and breadwinner roles have evolved into something that makes it impossible to define and designate an ‘average’ family. The stereotypical breadwinner and homemaker roles rarely exist in most Australian households, which require the income of two full-time wage earners just to get by (ABS).

Despite the changes to the nuclear family, the EEO policies, government legislation and media coverage given to support and encourage women to stay in the workforce, women leave the workforce to have children and subsequently choose to be ‘stay at home mothers’ rather than return to an organisation to become a leader, or they return to the workforce in a less demanding or more flexible role. Some writers (Hakim, 2000; Odone, 2009) argue that women choose lower paid positions for the non-financial trade-offs like flexibility to allow for family responsibilities. Hakim (2000) and others have shown that many women end up in badly paid, low status, part-time jobs, not because of the cost of child care, or the inequality between the sexes but because they choose a part-time job that allows them to spend time with their family rather than a career that may compromise their family life. Hakim suggests this is the case for many women; they are happy working less than full-time so they can raise their children.

The alternative to part-time work for those who want both a professional full time career and a family life is to combine two worlds, which previously operated as self-contained universes (Mckenna, 1997). For many women who choose to pursue their professional career after having time off it often means that they are penalised for the remainder of their working life. Often they struggle for the rest of their working career, trying to make up or prove that they can make up, the skills and or perceived experience they lost while they were raising children, because it seems employers do not take women’s ambitions seriously once they have a family. I always found that idea hard to understand. It is my experience that raising a child requires an amazing amount of resilience, responsibility, leadership, relationship building, commitment, communication, rapport, planning, coordination, negotiation,
teaching, listening, delivery of outcomes, ability to learn quickly, not to mention love, caring, empathy, trust and nurturing. All these are qualities that I am sure would transfer across contexts if desired.

Having children was the most wonderful, rewarding and challenging experience of my life. Looking after them is the hardest and most constant work I have ever done; motherhood is a challenging job. Despite having the capability of managing 500 people at work I still found the job challenging and I cannot believe that women have been doing this job for centuries and they have never been paid. We still do not see the value of unpaid carer, domestic work, which is estimated to be around $250 million in Australia (ABS). It appears that motherhood is not as revered in our society as I think it should be.

There is a growing trend for women to marry and have families later in life. This is partly because of women’s desire to compete equally with men in the workplace for the rewards and opportunities of interesting and challenging work (McKenna, 1997) and partly because family commitments are perceived by some women as influencing their career development prospects negatively.

Farrell (1986) proposes that working woman today have grown up with two value systems: the system of her mother, which is said to be nurturing, be a mother. And the other was the value system of her father, the success-orientated career professional, from which she can either imitate or deviate. Deviation and imitation does not guarantee success, and the alternative, being a mother and having a career, asks women to spit themselves into two (Farrell, 1986). McKenna (1997) adds to this view suggesting:

[W]omen in the 70’s quickly gleaned that any hopes for increasing opportunities grew best in the fertile culture of personal achievement…We [women] were raised to evaluate ourselves by our accomplishments…we new what success looked like. We had to get married like our mothers and have careers like our fathers (p.42).
This idea, which on the surface appears plausible, at a closer look suggests a stereotypical view of the choices a woman has about her identity. Women can choose to be a ‘mother’, a ‘mother with a career’, or a woman with a ‘career’. Hakim’s (2000) research found a similar pattern, that is, 20% of women are work centred, 20% are home centred and happy to be that way, with 60% fall somewhere in between looking for the best of both worlds. Hakim’s central finding was that women’s work and child rearing preferences are too diverse to conform to a ‘one size fits all solution’, and that the idea that all women want a career outside the home is a myth.

So what do women want? There is no denying that over the past 40 years women’s access to the world of work has altered profoundly. There are more women participating in the labour market than ever before, the wage gap between men and women has decreased, EEO policies such as maternity leave have increased, and we are reminded daily in the media or by the law of how far women have come. However Odone (2009) from the British think tank, Centre of Policy Studies, suggests the celebration of women’s progress is unfounded, because it is based on the wrongful unspoken assumption: that women achieve self realisation through their career (p. 1). Data from the British government’s 2009 YouGov online polls found that only 12% of mothers wanted to work full time and 31% did not want to work at all. Only 1% of mothers with children under five thought that the mother, in a family where the father worked and there were two children under five, should work full time; 49% thought she should not work at all. Odone (2009) suggests women’s increased participation in the workplace should not be seen as evidence that women are drawing closer to fulfilling their potential, because the reality is that a career is not what all women want. She adds that most women are:

[F]ar from being committed to a career, the overwhelming majority of women would prefer to opt out of it. Instead of finding satisfaction in full-time work, most women realise themselves in their other roles as carers, partners, community members, and above all mothers (p.1).
Leaving aside for the moment the debate about what women really want, what is undeniable is that many women are torn. The historically created mixture of new consciousness and old conditioning has created a double bind for women. No longer defined by husband and family, women have increased professional opportunities, and can now earn their own money, which means they are no longer dependant on their husband’s earnings, but this increased opportunity has come with little decrease in their home responsibilities. Through equal education opportunities and an increased awareness of their position, women have built an expectation of a more equal partnership in career and family life. I would argue that despite the increased awareness of Equal Employment Opportunities, women encounter contradictory messages in the workforce. The unstable workforce opportunities (lack of positions made available after maternity leave) and male behaviour (gender stereotyping of leadership selection) are still apparent. Women, it would seem, are caught in a difficult place as their life becomes more defined by the language of ‘no longer’ and ‘not yet’ [which] generate[s] numerous ambivalences and contradictions in women’s lives (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001:56) as they face the pressures of choice, either pursue a career or become a mum. Neither of these ‘all or nothing’ choices appears to fit them comfortably, thus it is not surprising that large numbers of highly qualified women are dropping out of mainstream corporate careers (Hewlett and Luce, 2005) and that the statistics show the number of women owned business has grown over time. For example, the report on ‘Women Owned Businesses in the 21st Century’ (prepared by the U.S. Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration for the White House Council on Women and Girls, October 2010) showed that between 1997 and 2007, the number of women owned businesses grew by 44%, twice as fast as men-owned firms. The report also highlighted that the women who are self-employed worked fewer hours on average in their business than self-employed men (p. 1).

I question if the focus on equality has really made a difference to the lives of men and women in our culture. The data appears contradictory: on the one hand there have been huge changes in legalisation and education, on the other hand, we hear and read stories about many women who are struggling to find a middle ground between family and career, rather than accept the all or nothing choices allocated to them by society. As Beck argues perhaps consciousness has rushed ahead of conditions
(Beck, 2000b:104) and all these changes [we hold up as a sign of closing the inequality gap] exist more in consciousness and on paper especially when contrasted with constancy in behaviour and conditions of men and women (Beck, 2000b:103). I suggest that the removal of some inequalities has really just opened up people’s eyes to more inequality, because awareness enables us to see what else is possible.

We talk about equality as if it is the answer to women’s liberation from gender stereotypes. The male versus female equality yardstick is bound up in major systemic changes, power struggles and cultural revolutions (Beck, 2000b) that will always be dynamically emerging, adapting and self-organising. I suggest we will be forever chasing the equity yardstick as it continually morphs into something new. The danger of continuing down the road of comparison of women’s present situation with past social and material inequalities is that we are kept in a circular dialogue of women compared to male ways of being. This thinking suggests a loop that can only be changed by changing structures: at making marriages more equitable and work and family arrangements more flexible. These solutions do have implications, but can these structural ‘solutions’ deal with the more fundamental problem of women’s individual need for recognition and validation of what they choose to be and do?

As highlighted previously, a substantial change has taken place in the context of women’s lives over the last four decades in relation to society, work and family. These changes cannot be mapped along a linear line of progress or movement up an inequality yardstick, as much as they can be understood by moving our focus to the complex, multilayered and contradictory process of women’s everyday sensemaking. It is in the understanding of the everyday experiences of women as they interact in relationship with those around them who does what, when and how it is done that we will see women’s progress and will truly understand what women want.
2.3.4 Woman the personal domain

If I have to I can do anything,
I am strong (strong)
I am invincible (invincible)
I am woman…
(Helen Reddy and Ray Burton, 1972)

The words quoted above are from one of the most iconic and perhaps culturally significant songs of the 1970s "I Am Woman", penned by Ray Burton and Helen Reddy. The song earned Helen Reddy a Grammy Award and at the awards ceremony Reddy concluded her acceptance speech by famously thanking God because she makes everything possible.

Helen Reddy’s song title begs the question, ‘What is a woman?’ The biological and social sciences no longer support the view that we can ascribe pre-determined characteristics to unchangeable, fixed entities. Contemporary scholarship regards any characteristic as, in part, a reaction dependant on a situation (de Beauvoir, 1949). Lundberg and Farnham (1947) suggested that we should not treat woman as ‘woman’ but rather that all of us, men and women alike, should be regarded in the first place as human beings. I support this view, however, I also recognise every individual human being as a singular construct and I have no problem demonstrating that women are not men (by virtue of their anatomy and physiology). In this view, a woman exists as an individual member and contributor to society, as a woman in an organisation, as a mother, a member of a family and as a woman in her own right.

The ‘what are we?’ is a question concerned with metaphysics. So what do we mean when we talk about the construct of a ‘woman’? A woman according to the Oxford dictionary is: an adult human female. This description leaves me with little sense of what a ‘woman’ is; it breathes no life into the essence or identity of the human being who is described by the word ‘woman’. Perhaps the question to be asked is ‘who is women?’ The ‘who are we?’ question according to Rorty (1989) seeks to discover
some unifying thing, an idea or answer that, in part, provides answers that are always hopeful because these types of questions point to who we hope to be or who we are becoming the focus becomes hopeful future.

De Beauvoir (1949) suggests women are not born, but rather, they become, woman. *No biological, psychic, or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society. ...Only the mediation of another can constitute an individual as an OTHER (p. 283).*

Do we then create ourselves as a woman, or as Alcoff (1988) proposes, do women create themselves through a positional definition? Alcoff (1988) posits a positionality theory that has three key overlapping components: power relations, identities and context. Alcoff (1988) brings these three aspects of positionality together thus:

> When the concept of woman is defined not by a particular set of attributes but by a particular position, the internal characteristics of the person thus identified are not denoted so much as the external context within which that person is situated. The external situation determines the person's relative position, just as the position of a pawn on a chessboard is considered safe or dangerous, powerful or weak, according to its relation to the other chess pieces (p.433).

As Alcoff explains, the context not people’s internal characteristics, then becomes the focus. Alcoff is calling for a fluid identity for women, and using her chessboard metaphor above, she suggests that one’s view of the context and relationships (chess pieces) change as one moves around the chessboard. The assumption is that people’s perspective will differ in relatively predictable ways based on positioning, and she further suggests that it is the intersections in women's lives that make their experiences similar in many ways (Alcoff, 1988).

Alcoff is suggesting that we identify women by their positions within their network of relations, that as women, we develop our own sense of how the world is to be interpreted from our positional place in time. From this perspective it could be said that we talk ourselves into what we become, and this shapes how we behave. So we
are back to the possibility of choice in a situation in which there are contradictory requirements. As free and autonomous women, is there choice about how we behave and which paths are open? Or is it that women are still torn, as de Beauvoir (1949) suggested so long ago:

…today’s woman is torn between the past and the present; most often, she appears as a ‘real woman’ disguised as a man, and she feels as awkward in her women’s body as in her masculine garb. She has to shed her old skin and cut her own clothes. She will only be able to do this if there is a collective change (p.761).

According to Antakim and Widdicombe (1998):

people are subjected and trained to recognise themselves in particular ways, and they are thereby produced as particular kinds of being predisposed to certain kinds of activity which fit with the demands of society, [which results in the] illusion that we have freely chosen our way of life (p.200).

Ashforth (2001) adds to the debate on role identity by suggesting that in the 20th century the concept of role (position) became firmly established in its own right with people increasingly acting as role participants rather than as individuals per se. He suggests that as organisational members, our personal lives are colonised by the organisation we are part of and this has resulted in an awareness of the many roles one may play in the course of a typical week (or even a day). As these roles are typically enacted for different audiences within different social domains, they create concerns with inter role conflicts and fragmentation of self (Gergen, 1991). Ashforth (2001) further suggests that:

Role identities are enacted locally and therefore tend to vary across contexts, individuals generally remain able to abstract perceived similarities from the mass of idiosyncratic experiences and construct a more or less internally consistent and stable self-conception, a global identity (p.42).
If we understand identity as dynamically (re)produced in interaction, then it is important to note the temporary nature of identity construction. Riley (2008) highlights this point in her study of youth identity when she suggests identities today may be personal or social and that:

This context has opened up the possibility for young people to engage in a playful pick-and-mix approach to identity as they move through a kaleidoscope of temporary, fluid and multiple subjectivities (abstract).

So as we take up different story lines or play different roles are we able to make choices to behave as we wish? Roberts and Donahue (1994) found that women were able to describe themselves in general terms differentially across four roles (partner, friend, worker and daughter). As career professionals do we speak and behave as expected by the rules or code of conduct of that profession or as we wish? Woman will always be woman de Beauvoir (1949) suggests, because *woman could not be other than what she was made, and that past was bound to shadow her for life* (p.145). I appreciate the influence of history and context and I suggest that as spouses, parents, members of social groups, or as citizens in a society, we behave in ways that are socially expected of the position and I will explore this view further in discussion of my findings, because this has implications for women’s roles in the workplace.

So far I have laid out two aspects of identity. The first is Riley’s notion that ‘identity’ is temporary. The second is Alcoff and Ashforth’s ideas of identity as positional. Thinking of Riley’s (2008) ‘identity’ as temporary and constructed, and Alcoff’s (1988) and Ashforths (2001) ‘identity’ as positional we can add Gergen’s (1982, 1999) view of selves as inescapably relational with identity shaped through social engagement with others in context and time. It appears to me that women appear to create identities and that these identities demonstrate different patterns of behaviour as the women create and recreate themselves in multiple ways, shifting almost seamlessly across varying positions, engaging in coherent and sometimes contradictory conversations and story lines.
2.4 Implications of the corporate organisation for women

As I have suggested previously, the 21st century organisation is full of contradictory and complex messages around women and their careers in the corporate organisation. Forty years after the women’s revolution transformed female work opportunities:

[W]omen’s work lives remain very different from men’s. Fully 60% of highly qualified women have nonlinear careers. They take off-ramps and scenic routes and have a hard time conjuring up continuous, cumulative, lockstep employment - which is a necessary condition for success within the confines of the white male competitive model. The end result: too many talented women either leave their career or languish on the sidelines (Hewlett, 2007: 1).

What is it about the corporate organisation, and the way work is organised within it, that continues to drive a career model that does not appear to attract and retain women in executive positions? This section looks at the evolution and development of the corporate organisation in an attempt to identify the influences on women’s careers and the taking of executive positions with the corporate organisation.

Social psychologists have been studying our need for belonging for years Maslow (1954) proposed that this human need to belong was one of the five basic needs required for self-actualisation. Handy (1994) suggests that a paradox exists today with people wanting to be individualistic and at the same time wanting to belong to an organisation. The paradox lies in the ‘I’ and the ‘We’. This idea of belonging suggests to me that ‘connection’ may be a strong driving attractor for women choosing to work in a corporate organisation. So what have other writers found that would indicate what women want from their work experience in the organisation? According to research conducted by Hewlett (2007) 82% want to be associated with high quality colleagues they respect, 79% want to be themselves at work, 64% want access to flexible work schedules, 61% want to collaborate with others and work as part of a team, 56% want to give back to society through the work they do, both inside and outside the organisation, 51% want recognition, 42% want a high income and just 15% cite a powerful position as an important career goal. Hewlett suggests that this data indicates women want connection, flexibility and recognition.
Hewlett (2007) found that for many women their professional identity remains their primary identity, even when they are not employed. Clearly women’s career identity is important to them, as highlighted in the above section. I will explore the concept of identity and connection as drivers to women’s career further in Chapter 4.

Hewlett (2007) adds that despite the corporate work model not suiting a majority of women’s lifestyles, 93% of the women in her focus groups, who had off-ramped (that is, left their career within the corporate organisation) still wanted to return to their careers for various reasons: personal source of income (46%); satisfaction of a career (43%); give back to society (24%); partner’s income insufficient (24%); family needs less time (19%); regain status and power (16%); change in marital status (7%); friendship at work (6%) (Hewlett, 2007). This suggests that, while a large percentage of women work for economic reasons, many women work because they enjoy their career and the corporate work model is alluring in some way.

So if, as Hewlett suggests, the corporate work model is alluring for women, why do executive positions appear to be so elusive to women? From the stories I have heard from the women in this inquiry there appears to me, to be a push pull relationship between women and the organisation. They are pulled toward the connection of working in the corporate space and then pulled or drawn away by another stronger attractor. In an attempt to understand this relationship further I will now look at an eclectic mix of stories around the historical development of the organisation to see what patterns have shaped and influenced the emergence of the 21st century corporate organisation and the corporate career model it offers to women.

The organisation exists in many forms. Essentially the ‘corporate organisation’ can be seen as a complex adaptive system, complex because it is dynamic and made up of many interconnected sub-systems and adaptive in that it has the capacity to change and learn from experience (Holland, 1992, Gel-Mann, 1994). Individuals and organisations are seen to comprise a number of interacting self-organising, dynamic and emergent systems. The multiple interactions in complex systems produce emergent behaviour and from a Complexity perspective ‘attractors’ function as the organising forces that guide this behaviour. *Holding complex entities’ in particular patterns, attractors may be understood as energies that motivate* (Kuhn, 2009:60).
In exploring the evolution and development of the organisation I will seek to identify the attractor or attractor sets, which have guided organisational behaviour over time, thus influencing women’s participation and engagement with a corporate career and the taking of executive positions.

2.4.1 Evolution and development of the organisation

First forms of human organisation are thought to have come into being at about 10,000 B.C. Around this time, along the banks of the Nile, there is evidence of an early experiment with agriculture (Grimal, 1992) which appears to be a direct result of human beings discovering the advantage of the earth’s natural cycles in developing farming. Prior to farming, human beings are generally understood as being nomadic hunter /gatherers surviving in small bands, living life day to day, foraging for food hand to mouth (Diamond, 1998). Without any overarching centralised authority to govern them, it is thought that the elders of the community ruled and generally led through persuasion and cooperation. As a community they exchanged goods and services without recourse to market using relatively simple natural products and technology – fire, wood, bone, fibre and stone. Work was thought to have been a social and cooperative activity where there did not appear to have been a necessary connection between the production and distribution by individuals (Sahlins, 1972).

Leacock (1978) suggests that during this period there was no assumption of lower status being applied to women because of their work or because of women’s responsibility for childbearing, nor was there any special deferential status toward dominant men. According to Leacock women exercised control over their own lives, and the possibility that women would not have control over their own lives and their activities was not an issue in what she terms, ‘these egalitarian societies’.

There are many perspectives on the development of the organisation as we know it today. It has been suggested that with the emphasis on the future, effective farming required people to plan ahead, to go beyond merely satisfying their daily needs, in order to secure a more abundant future. It could be argued that sustainability of the future encouraged the organisation of work. Instead of wandering in a seasonal
hunting and gathering cycle, communities settled down on fertile land to practice agriculture. Permanent dwellings were built and it is posited that women held ownership of the land (Goettner-Abendroth, 1995). In this view sons and daughters lived with their mother and the mother ruled the family. Daughters inherited the property, and their male siblings usually continued to live in their sisters' houses taking on a more submissive role as farm labourers and guardians. As a result of the land ownership women are thought to have controlled the economy (Goettner-Abendroth, 1995).

According to archaeologist Gimbutas (1991), cultural historian Eisler (1987a), Stone, 1976) and others, before written records, men and women lived together peacefully and society was centred on women, who were honoured as incarnations of the Great Goddess. These woman-centered or matriarchal societies are thought to have focused on human reproduction and agricultural food production. During this period women's agricultural skills produced food more reliably and in greater quantities than the earlier male hunter/gatherer economy (Gimbutus, 1991). Interestingly in this view, as society evolved and moved out of the hunter/gatherer society, women had an advantage over men that men could never match fertility. Women's identity, skill and bodies became vastly more powerful than the male equivalents during this period, mainly because women’s bodies were infinitely more useful in exploiting the new knowledge that procreation could circumvent the finality of death. Paradoxically according to Gimbutus, (1991) it is possible that largely as a result of women’s success in human reproduction and agricultural food production that she lost a powerful role in the village. A women’s energies were needed for caring for the family and the community, they were less directly involved in food productions. As men took up the role of coordinating the production of the food supply, a transformation occurred: men became more useful and thereafter dominated society and, eventually, the new organisation.

Recent research done by the anthropologist and archaeologist Kuhn and anthropologist Stiner (2006) suggests that the sexual division of labour did not exist prior to the Upper Paleolithic Age and developed relatively recently in human history, giving modern humans an advantage over Neanderthals. Kuhn and Stiner
(2006) further suggest the emergence of ‘female labour roles’ played an important role in human evolutionary history, because it allowed early-human hunter-gatherer societies to draw on more food resources and live in larger communities.

The competitive advantage enjoyed by modern humans came not just from new weapons and devices but from the ways in which their economic lives were organised around the advantages of cooperation and complementary subsistence roles for men, women, and children (Kuhn and Stiner, 2006:961).

It could be said that these matriarchal societies became too successful and too complex. Agricultural success eventually led to a surplus of durable produce and a need for storage facilities and eventually trading centres. The urban centralisation and the division of labour required a new form of task organisation, which created just the right conditions for collective consciousness, too spill out of fertility and into status identity.

According to this ‘potted history’, by the 16th century, as trade and commerce thrived and expanded the need for more manufactured goods, greater reliability of supply led to increasing control of the production process by ‘merchant–capitalists’. The following years can be viewed as a time when humankind designed and developed many forms of organisation in an attempt to control and co-ordinate the activities of the large numbers of people required to run the new organisations needed in the new economy.

During the 18th century, in western civilisation, a militaristic command and control style of leadership was seen as the most effective leadership style. Leaders were responsible for all the coordinating, planning, thinking and controlling, while the employees role was to diligently follow and implement the plans handed down from above. Early scientific management writers, such as Taylor, (1911) and Fayol, (1916) developed universal principles to guide managers in controlling process and procedures required for organising the new organisation. In this industrial age the organisation was described by the metaphor of a ‘machine’ which could be pulled apart and put back together with no collateral damage to the people working in the organisation. Under this type of management thinking, it was thought that people
were motivated by extrinsic rewards, such as money and status and thus they were expected to respond to a carrot and stick management style. For example, if a person reached a production target they would receive a reward, if they missed the target they would receive punishment. This style of management generally neglected those tacit issues, that today we acknowledge as being key to an organisation's success: human freedom, environment, culture, employee engagement, integration and alignment.

Scientific management (Taylor, 1911) sought to eradicate inefficiency in the workplace by increasing controls over work. This was done by breaking down complex tasks into simple component parts, determining the most efficient way of performing each sub-task and training workers to carry out these sub-tasks in ‘one best way’. Sloan’s (1941) description of scientific management reflects the view at the time: scientific management means a constant search for the facts, the true actualities, and their intelligent, unprejudiced analysis. Thus, and in no other way, policies and their administration are determined (p.140). This top-down leadership approach combined close direction and supervision with the study of work and training. This approach failed to take into account the effect of human motivation factors such as values and team dynamics.

Most of the world’s industrialisation during the 19th and 20th centuries was based largely within the growth and influence of capitalism (Scott, 2005). Capitalism emerged over a number of centuries and it would be naive to suggest that attempts to understand capitalism began with the seminal work of Adam Smith (1776). Whilst it is accepted that Smith’s Wealth of Nations did influence modern economic thinking, there does not appear to be a general agreement between economists or economic historians about the beginning or exact features of capitalism. Most would agree, that capitalism is an economic system which is characterised by what Hunt (2002) describes as four sets of institutional and behavioural arrangements:

Market-orientated commodity production; private ownership of the means of production; a large segment of the population that cannot exist unless it sells its labour power in the market; and individualistic, acquisitive, maximising behaviour by most individuals within the economic systems (pp.4-5).
As an economic system premised on the need to generate private profits, capitalism produced a system that was both dynamic and capable of enormous productivity. Capitalism thus played an integral part in the development of western society and the development of the corporate organisation as we know it today.

With the growth of capitalism new societal relationship behaviours emerged. There was a move away from a paternalistic feudal hierarchy (based on mutual obligation and service up and down the hierarchy) where ‘the strong protected the weak’, and custom and tradition had been the key to understanding work relationships. The new legal and judicial system (based on enforcement of contract and universality of binding contract) introduced by capitalism was in sharp contrast to rule by custom and tradition. Capitalism viewed the human person as independent, self-directing, autonomous and free to be an individual, distinguished from the social mass, rather than immersed in it (Hunt, 2002). Hunt (2002) further suggests that the capitalists view of the nature of humanity and their need to be free from the extensive economic restrictions grew from the philosophy of individualism that provided the basis of classical liberalism (p.30).

Whilst some writers (Bernstein, 2005) suggest that capitalism brought about the triumph of the individual, other critics (Marx, 1954, Engles, 1884) suggest that capitalism actually subverts the individual’s needs and aspirations to the demands of an economic system which is controlled by, and works in the interest of, a few. Thus it represents triumph over the individual; it is individuals and the natural environment, which continually adjust to the demands of a profit-driven system and not the other way around (Bowles, 2007). Marx (1954) suggests that the capitalist system is based on the exploitation of the working class by the capitalist class, and this system is unjust and unstable. He argued that, like feudalism and previous socioeconomic systems, capitalism would inevitably produce internal tensions, which would lead to its destruction. To this, recent critics have added that it is also unsustainable, not just socially because of the inequality, which it generates, but also environmentally (Bowles, 2007). They argue this because capitalism depends on increasing growth and productivity to feed increasing consumerism with large profits for a minority.
With capitalism’s push, industrialisation progressed and so did the growth of the organisation, becoming a more widespread and purposive human grouping: new types of activity based on the underlying principle of division of labour were formed. Industrialisation had great human consequences. The majority of people came to belong to some organisation. They performed some sort of organised work; they received an hourly rate and collectively negotiated the value of their working lives (Jacques, 1990). Urbanisation and the division of labour gave rise to a new type of social organisation, which in turn led to the concepts of positional power and status together with the concept of social insignificance. (Leacock, 1978) and others suggests that during this period men perceived they had gained control over women because they were now in control of the agricultural supply and surplus. This gave them the opportunity to organise themselves in hierarchies of leadership and social status, making women’s roles as homemakers and carers less significant.

Writers such as Engels (1884) offer an historical account of the relations between the sexes. He suggests that women’s subordinate position in society can be attributed to capitalism, which destroyed the pre-capitalist period of sexual equality. Engel’s point is that the processes of economic production (male) and biological reproduction (female) are equally essential to the perpetuation of social life. This basic sexual division of labour resulted in men’s activities largely being confined to the public sphere (the world of business etc.) and women to the domestic sphere (household duties, family rearing, etc.). For Engels, male dominance over women is simply a configuration of the class-division between the propertied man and the property less woman. The unequal distribution of wealth and property between male and female gave rise, he suggests, to a familial organisation in which the male is privileged over the female and thus the patriarchal family emerged. Hence the family community was no longer led by elders but came under the supreme management of the master of the house, who represented it in external affairs, and managed the finances and conduct of the family business. The women and their work were under the direction of the mistress of the house (Engels, 1884). Moreover, Engels further suggested, this familial organisation gave rise at a wider social level to a sexual division of labour between men and women, where males worked and women were non workers, or as later emerged, males were paid more and women were paid less. Many Marxist feminists would argue this was the beginning of the
With capitalism came new forms of organisation, with many organisations owned and run by individuals. The industrial and commercial organisation developed considerably in the 1900’s, along with the concept of a controllable economic man (Smith, 1776) that saw the introduction of defined roles for women and men.

The concept of the corporation (Drucker, 1946) and the idea of ‘big business’ saw organisations become entities in themselves, having their own needs and goals, quite separate from the needs of the employees working in those organisations. It was thought that the organisation’s needs could be easily met by categorising actions into logically designed processes. It was thought that if these processes were planned and standardised then the organisation would successfully meet its end goal, which had become the generation of economic profit for owners and shareholders. Investment decisions were based on expectations of the future, expectations that Bowles (2007) suggests were premised on what Keynes (1936:148) termed the state of confidence. With the generation of economic profit maximisation came the insatiable need to control the flow of actions and resources required to meet the organisation’s goals. This top-down controlling leadership approach remained the dominant approach through to the 20th century.

The Industrial revolution brought about the emergence of large scale business and the need for professional managers with a high level of specialisation and diversity of skills. Morgan (1997) suggests that with the rise of the professional class in the 1920’s came a shift in the control of the business, from owners to managers, thus providing managers with culturally acceptable power. The concept of the ideal organisation as a bureaucracy (Weber, 1968) became popular in the west and the bureaucratic model saw the introduction of: graded hierarchies lined to specific tasks; standardisation of procedures and rules, and the objective allocation of people
to tasks and tasks to reward (Morgan 1997, Weber 1968). This established primacy of the formal organisational structure over any individual or personal relationships in the organisation.

Halford and Leonard (2001) suggest that at this time organisations systematised power relations between members by bestowing official rights of power on position holders. As men generally held the hierarchical positions, that gave rise to the view that:

\[
\text{[G]ender difference, disadvantage and discrimination in the work organisation was commonly seen as an outcome of the operation of power, in which men – individually and collectively or through discourse which privilege the masculine – wield power over women (p. 26).}
\]

This view supports the idea that gendered power flourishes in work organisations where there is no challenge to it. Halford and Leonard (2001) add that today’s gendered organisations (where discrimination and prejudice exist) may be an inappropriate hangover from earlier times. Later writers such as Foucault (1986) are critical of the top down functionalist view of power where power is understood as a possession held by someone. Foucault argues that power does not belong to individuals or to one group or another. Instead Foucault sees the practise of power as decentralised and argues that we are all part of its application as well as its subject. The notion of power and its application to organisation and women at work will be explored further in this chapter.

In the bureaucratic concept of an organisation, the ideal was that the individual’s skill was valued, and ‘objectively’ assessed and rewarded against achievement of agreed performance criteria. This idea infers the ideal of equality, a gender-neutral practice of ‘objective ‘performance and reward. However (leaving aside for the moment the argument on the ability to objectively assess performance) this ideal is a long way from the complex actual practice of day-to-day organisational practice. For example, the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling Report (2010) found; \textit{Simply being female is the major contributing factor to the [pay] gap in Australia, accounting for 60 per cent of the difference between women's and men's}
earnings. This report found that the dominant reason for the pay gap was that employers discriminated against women for ‘simply being female’. It does not matter how good your qualifications, or if you have the same responsibilities, employers think they can pay you less simply because you are female. The report suggests that this gap impacts negatively on women’s labour force participation. That is, women earning less than men, acts as a disincentive for women to enter paid work or to work more hours.

The corporate organisation contains similar characteristics to other systems: interaction, interdependence, purpose, integration and organisation. Organisations bring together people to undertake activities for purposes of achieving an objective. Most organisations consist of people in different departments that are governed by known company policies and procedures that have been developed over time. It is thought that, as long as there is close working together among the different departments, the organisation is bound to enjoy synergism in its operations and achievement of its future goals.

Early organisational management focused on the ‘formal systems’ within the organisation giving little consideration to what is tacit in an organisation, those ‘informal’ systems (Schein, 1992) that appear to drive what gets done. Research, conducted by Hubbard, Samuel, Heap Cocks (2002), on winning Australian organisations (which had successfully operated for at least 20 years) found that … winning is not about vision and mission statements (p.11). Winning organisations have clear strategies but they are expressed in a wide variety of ways, and vision and mission statements, one of the standard recommended tools of strategy development and communication, are rarely used. Strategy is both clear and fuzzy. The general direction is clear, but some of the specifics at the edges are fuzzy (2002: 18). So if the formal strategy tools are rarely used, and the specifics are fuzzy what informal things drive the winning organisation?

Stacey (1991) suggests that managers do not use explicit models in day-to-day performance because these formal models do not work in turbulent times. To align managers’ day-to-day behaviours with corporate policies, procedures and formal strategy assumes a linear path with little or no interruption. According to Stacey,
what we formally communicate or focus our attention on does not necessarily capture enough about the day-to-day connections made between individuals and groups within and between businesses and with people outside a business.

The increasing complexity and unpredictability of today’s business environment has seen a new emphasis on leadership. In the past managers were expected to maintain the status quo. Today leaders are expected to continually implement strategy and drive organisational success in a dynamic environment that requires them to motivate and engage employees into action. In every organisation there is the formal processes and structure and the informal network (Porter-O’Grady and Malloch, 2003). It is not a new idea that leaders need to pay attention to the informal networks and local relationships, which are key to the success of engaging employees into action. The informal network is primarily relational and carries most of the information about how people in the organisation think and feel about almost anything in the system. It is not a new idea that the informal networks and local working relationships are key to this success. According to Baets, (2005) knowledge is implicit and it is the dynamics of knowledge creation and sharing activities in local relationships that will determine how successfully the organisation performs. Therefore these local relationships need to be nurtured to grow and flourish. This idea is aptly reflected in the view that ‘people leave managers not organisations’ (Tate and White, 2008). Still, many organisations are so engrossed in the business of daily operational details and of doing business that they merely pay lip service to the idea of leadership accountability in local relationship.

The development of classical strategy theory (Chandler (1962), Ansoff (1965)) in the late 50’s and early 60’s had considerable impact on organisational life. With strategic policy creation came the separation of policy making from policy execution. This began organisational structures that allowed top managers to focus on their strategic responsibilities for strategy formulation and directing the worker who implemented the strategy with both seen as essential for long-term business success. The classicists’ strategy model was linear and rational and it did not take into account the internal complexity of the working organisation. As later writers began to see (Ansoff, 1990,1984), the increasing complexity of organisations and the people who work in them, found that change occurs more rapidly and is less
predictable than originally thought in the classical models. Complexity thinking takes into account the dynamic, self-organising and emergent nature of the organisation and seeks to understand how organisations adapt to their environments. When the organisation shares the properties of other complex adaptive systems they are more likely to adapt to their environment and, thus, survive.

Peter Fuda (2008), a business speaker and writer, suggests that in today’s business context 70% of all change management efforts fail because *the concept of ‘change management’ is an oxymoron; change cannot be managed* (p.1). He argues that the change practices conceived in the 1980’s and 1990s are insufficient to effectively navigate through the volume, speed and complexities of change in the modern corporate world because they were built on the underlying assumption that there was a magic formula relating to technical skills that guaranteed success. He suggests that at the core of successful change programs are 10% technical and 90% emotional intelligence. He goes so far as to say that for people to embark upon a journey from known to a largely unknown state, they must have a deep trust in the leader and that it is the relationships at the local level that make the difference to the success or failure of the change program.

I support the view that relationships at a local level make a critical difference, however I also wonder if there is really any beginning or end to change. Are we not always in the midst of a process of continuity and change, a process with no beginning or end? Through a Complexity lens, change can be seen as a continuum where our attention is drawn to the spontaneous self-organising shaping of the organisation and what is going on around and within it.

Gaining an understanding of the way the corporate organisation has evolved gives us an insight into the patterns, of beliefs and actions that have emerged in the corporate organisation. For the social researcher it reveals more about how things work, and this sociological perspectives give us immense insight into the into the social phenomena.
2.4.2 Organisational structure

There has been much research concerning the barriers women face in trying to climb the corporate ladder, with evidence suggesting that they typically confront a ‘glass ceiling’ while men are more likely to benefit from a ‘glass escalator’ (Ryan and Haslam, 2005). The metaphor of the ‘glass ceiling’ introduced by Morrison (1987) in her pioneering book, *Breaking the Glass Ceiling*, hypothesises that it is more difficult for women, than for men, to be promoted through hierarchies within workplaces. Not only is promotion difficult, but also the obstacles women face relative to men become greater as they move up the hierarchy. What happens as women attempt to move up the hierarchy? How does a structure that is generally written on paper in the form of an organisational chart keep women from reaching executive positions? I will now look at the importance of organisational structure and its influence on women’s career progression to executive positions.

Kanter's (1977) theory of structural empowerment asserts that there is a correlation between the structure of the work environment and employee attitude and behaviours in organisations. Kanter argued that it was men and women’s perceived access to power and opportunity that shaped their career attitudes and behaviours rather than their sex, as often suggested by other writers. A number of writers have explored the importance of the organisation’s structure and the relationship between the organisation’s culture, environment, technology, strategy and size. In addition to these factors, Burns and Stalker (1961) introduced the notion that there is a correlation between environments and structures.

Burns and Stalker (1961) concluded that different organisational structures are required for dynamic (unpredictable) environments than for static (predictable) environments: organisations that wish to maximise their potential performance must adapt their structure to match the rate of change in the differing environments. Mintzberg (1989, 1983, 1980) has written extensively on the subject and suggests an organisation's structure emerges from the interplay of the organisation's strategy, the environmental forces and experiences, and the organisational structure itself. When these fit together well, they combine to create organisations that perform well. When they do not fit, then the organisation is likely to experience severe problems.
Mintzberg (1980) argues that the effective organisation will favour some sort of configuration – some type of logically consistent clustering of its elements - as it searches for harmony in its internal processes and consonance with its environment (p. 322). Miller (1989) has explored the importance of strategy and structure. Handy (1990, 1993) highlights the importance of culture in relation to organisational structure, asserting that organisations exhibit role, task, power or person orientated cultures. Further Mabey, Salaman and Storey (2001) suggest organisational structure and design are closely entwined, affecting many aspects of human resource management. This suggests that the structure of the organisation and the underlying design principles that drive it, together with human interaction, need to be aligned so success can be achieved.

Traditionally organisational structure has been defined as the design of the organisation through which the enterprise is administered (Chandler, 1962:14). Mullins (1993) and Mabey, Salaman and Storey (2001) describe the structure of an organisation as a pattern of relationships between roles in an organisation and its different parts. They see the purpose of this structure as serving to allocate work and responsibilities in order to direct activities and achieve organisational goals. Burns and Stalker (1961) concluded that different organisational structures are appropriate for, or contingent on, different tasks. The relevance of the organisations structure is pertinent to this study to explore how the traditional organisational career ladder, which revolves around predictable organisational structures affects women’s careers.

Understanding organisations and their structural attributes (size, span of control, technology and task) owes a great deal to the work of Taylor (1947), Fayol (1916) and Weber, (1958). Max Weber coined the term ‘bureaucracy’ to describe a type of organisational structure that would be able to cope with the increased scale of production and expanding markets of the advancing capitalist society (Clegg, 1990). As the events of the world outside the modern organisation became more complex and unpredictable this form of bureaucratic organisation offered a way to stabilise and control the internal organisational environment, maximising efficiency and effectiveness. Effectiveness and efficiency had become the assumed guiding principles to which all modern organisations aspired; bureaucracy was seen to
embody the principles of rationality from which could be established the single best way of arranging organisational structures to achieve greatest efficiency. Weber recognised the enormous benefits that the bureaucratic model brought to the problem of dealing with the large-scale organisational demands characteristic of modern capitalist societies. It is clear that Weber had deep concerns with formal rationality and bureaucratisation steadily spreading to all spheres of social life. The individual in modern society was slowly, but inexorably, losing touch with their basic humanity. Weber (1958) expresses his concern for bureaucracies’ often dysfunctional consequences, suggesting what remains:

[P]rowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs … specialists without spirit, sensualists without hear … this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilisation never before achieved (p.182).

Broadly speaking, Weber suggests that bureaucratic efficiency is the underlying force that holds modern society and the organisation together, and yet that efficiency has a dehumanising effect.

When we consider that the traditional mechanistic view of the organisation, based on scientific management principles, has generally been understood as an empty framework of hierarchies and procedures into which people are simply slotted and allocated tasks, it is not hard to imagine the beginning of the dehumanising effect he was alluding to.

The classical bureaucracies of the early 20th century were structured on principles of formal hierarchy, adherence to the chain of command (authority) and notions of control. In a reductionist approach to design they are compartmentalised into layers, with functional division of labour and highly specialised jobs. The larger the organisation the larger the structure, and the more divisions and sub divisions it had. Mabey, Salaman and Storey (2001) suggest that classic bureaucracies harbour dual potential:

[T]hey can emphasise the rigid rules, multiple hierarchical levels and impede horizontal communication along with a command and control approach to worker
management. Or, they may emphasise the psychological contract of security for long
term commitment and loyalty along with an infrastructure for training and
development and corporate identity, in so far as the classic form has not been
abandoned these dualities remain (p. 82-183).

The assumption that organisations need a hierarchical command structure to work is
challenged by Handy (1993) who points out:

[T]here is no logic, which says that this horizontal decision sequence needs to be
turned into a vertical ladder so that those who take the necessary earlier decisions are
higher in the hierarchy than those who implement them. That is where history comes
in, for those who got there first obviously things are that way (p. 350).

As globalisation and technological change created increasingly dynamic and
competitive environments in the later half of the 20th century modern organisations
have reacted in many ways to streamline decision-making. Companies merged and
demerged, formed strategic outsourcing alliances and joint ventures, made
acquisitions and experimented with a number of designs in an attempt to become
more flexible and adaptable. This was done for example, by downsizing
(dramatically reducing the size of the company’s workforce) or by flattening existing
structures (delaying), reassigning support staff (decentralising roles) or splitting
companies into minicompanies (Dessler, 2001). When these approaches have not
been successful in bringing about the desired results, managers have tried new
structural approaches, such as using teams, networks and ‘boundaryless’ structures
to redesign organisations so as to better manage change (Dessler, 2001:227).

What we are seeing today is that organisations are restructuring and emerging in
non-traditional forms. The modern organic organisation is less preoccupied with
hierarchies and is more fluid and flexible. People are encouraged to be creative and
entrepreneurial, with less focus on playing by the rules and sticking to the chain of
command, with decision-making more decentralised (Burns and Stalker, 1961).
For example, Ashkenas et al. (1995) concept of the ‘boundaryless’ organisation
shares properties with Davidow and Malones (1992) ‘virtual’ organisation, and
Nonaka and Takeuchi’s (1995) ‘knowledge creating’ organisations shares a lot in
common with Senge’s (1990) ‘learning’ organisation. Reich (1992) and others argue that the organisation is no longer a triangle or bureaucracy but a ‘web of enterprise’. However despite this, most organisations have some bureaucratic aspects to them: such is the power of the mechanistic concept (Morgan, 1986).

Academic literature indicates that technical and professional workers are best placed to benefit from the changes we are seeing in the workplace. What implications, if any, do organisational structures have on the career development of women in corporate organisations? We know women have the education and capability to take on executive leadership positions, so again we must ask: what causes these continuing gendered patterns across the corporate organisation hierarchy? Could it be that organisational structures and procedures do determine organisational practise? Or does the power and authority associated with leadership determine who gets the opportunity to lead? Or could it be simply that women and men are intrinsically different, that they have different qualities, and therefore different wants and needs? Is it the case that men want corporate careers and women do not? With this argument these distinctively gendered orientations are seen as a matter of choice or predisposition, indicating that the reason for gender differences at work lies with the person; that is outside the organisation’s control.

The formal design of a corporate organisation is usually conceptualised by a chart showing job titles and reporting lines together with an inferred hierarchy of roles and job responsibilities. It is thought that these structures distribute specific degrees of positional power to the roles. For example chief operating officer, chief executive officer, director, vice-president, manager, and team leader all infer a degree of what Weber (1986) called rational legal authority (the belief that those in higher positions have the legitimacy of the leadership position and therefore have power over those in lower positions). This legal authority is achieved through the application of formal rules and procedures. Those in authority, ideally, must win their right to authority through transparent neutral procedures, such as a formal promotion processes, recruitment or selection processes. These processes, technically, should enable anyone with the appropriate skills or experience the opportunity to win the role and the inherent positional authority that goes with the role. So thinking about gender and organisational structure, it could be said that if the structure is neutral and structure
determines organisational practice, then the modern organisation is a “neutral place” and no gender inequality should exist (Halford and Leonard, 2001:38). In such a situation individuals would be judged on their skills and personal experience, and not on any prejudiced stereotypes attributed to gender. This view has been long held by many CEO’s as Guy Russo (in Brouard, et al. 2004) suggests:

For me, I must confess I did not get what advancing women was all about until many years into my senior management career. Even though I had management roles, and I was aware the company had policies about equal opportunity for women, I did not see it as my responsibility to be concerned about whether or not women as a group, let alone any other group, were succeeding in the organisation. I thought, as most men do (and men are traditionally in charge), that it was simply up to the individuals to make their own way in the organisation, as best they could. I was not aware, for example, of organisational barriers effectively blocking the career paths of women … I assumed women were opting out (of career paths) as a matter of personal choice (p.52).

If the view that there are no cultural barriers facing women in their career paths and leadership is obtained through skill and ability then, given the participation rates of women in the workforce, you would expect to see more women in executive leadership positions. Yet the statistics tell us this is not the case (EOWA 2010). Why not?

One argument could be that the reasons relate to women’s being relative latecomers to organisational employment, entering as opportunities in the domestic services contracted during the first two decades of the 20th century. Kanter (1977) argues that it was during this period that management became established as a masculine role, that is, it was something that men and not women, carried out. Further, Kanter suggests that because men dominated the early bureaucracies, leaders came to behave in ways that perpetuated male dominance and the positional power afforded by the roles they held. This idea suggests that the role held by the individual shapes the person, their behaviour and their identities. If we accept this view, the question worth exploring is: do existing organisational structures empower or disempower women and men?
If we accept Kanter’s (1977) point of view, that the power men gained from holding managerial roles was a result of the positions they held in the hierarchical structure, and was not related to them being men, then why is it that with more than 50% of the workforce now made up of women, women are rarely found in powerful positions? Why are most women still concentrated in the lower levels of the corporate structure? One idea proposed for the difference is that *Women attach less importance to promotion than men*’ (General Social Survey (GSS) 1991). The authors of the GSS survey examined the extent to which this difference stems from the sexes segregation into jobs with unequal opportunities, and the findings were largely consistent with Kanter's thesis: that men and women’s promotion is more likely to be based on organisational position and prior promotion, than gender. Men attach greater importance to promotion than women. This is largely because they are more likely to be located in organisational positions that encourage them to hope for a promotion. Women in low opportunity positions are unlikely to perform in ways, which make them appear to be suitable for higher opportunity positions. This view suggests that while women are located in lower level positions within the organisational structure, no matter how well they perform or how many additional skills they acquire, they will never be encouraged to hope for a promotion. Perhaps this attitude is one of the reasons there has been so little movement of women up the corporate structure over the years: potential and performance are not a considered criteria for women’s promotion at these levels.

Feminist writers (for example, Ressner, 1997) through out history have argued that those individuals (men) who hold appointed leadership roles have a degree of power over others, resources and decision-making and that they have used this power to suppress women and their career development. Kanter disagrees, arguing that male managers dominated the early bureaucracies and that it was the requirements of the managerial function which established their behaviour and culture, and not any masculine imperative to dominate women. Equally she argues, the relative powerlessness of women was a consequence of their lower structural location in the organisation, not their sex. Pringle (1989) also argues that male domination was not the intent of the bureaucratic structure and noted that for Weber:
Bureaucracy is progressive, in that it [ideally] breaks down the old patriarchal structures and removes the arbitrary power held by fathers and masters in traditional society (p.85).

Ressner (1987) disputes this view arguing that bureaucratic hierarchies are patriarchal structures where men dominate as managers and as men. Ressner suggests patriarchy resides in the organisational structure and in the organisation’s culture, and as a consequence serves to enhance men’s career position and constrain women’s career opportunities. Ferguson (1984) takes it one step further and suggests that organisations are not only patriarchal, but that bureaucracies have a tremendous capacity to hurt people, to manipulate, twist and damage human possibility (p.xii). Men and women alike would benefit from their destruction, as bureaucratic power dominates both men and women alike.

At one end of the management theory spectrum writers talk about organisational design, management control and standard procedures and practices (Fayol, 1948; Jaques, 1988). In this type of thinking managers are thought to stand objectively outside the organisational system making decisions about how to control and model the organisation through the use of sophisticated tools that can predict behaviour. The popularity of this thinking soon began to show in the way organisations were structured in an attempt to control behaviour and the way people worked in organisations (Taylor, 1947). The bureaucratic structure was thought to be gender neutral: the impact of the structure was supposed to be the same for men and women. Kanter, (1977) supports this view adding that, because men and women tend to be located in different places in the hierarchy, their behaviour and attitude to work is different. The majority of women today are employed in support roles and as such behave in the way expected of one in a support role. Men tend to be in leadership roles and take on the behaviour expected of a leader. This view however does not take into account the importance of relationships between structures which began to emerge in at the end of the 20th century (Mabey, Salaman and Storey, 2001).

Handy (1990) observes that the mechanistic systems are breaking down. The rapid transition of our industrial world into what has come to be called the information or knowledge society has facilitated the emergence of what some theorists term the
postmodern organisation, a de-structured organisation, which is at the other end of
the management theory spectrum. This complex, less predictable, postmodern
organisation depicts a shift from the classical bureaucratic structure based on the
principles of hierarchy and central control which worked towards reducing instability
and offered rational linear approaches to planned predictable work. It has shifted to
an increasingly dynamic less predictable structure (Ansoff, 1990). Mabey, Salaman
and Storey (2001) write about the emergence of a new paradigm for the way
organisations are formed as more flexible and adaptable. From a Complexity
perspective this shift in design appears encouraging. Management writers who take a
Complexity perspective recognise that organisations are not purely mechanical, but
rather take organic forms, which are more than the sum of their parts. The writers
add that the underlying principles of the self-organisation and emergence of organic
complex forms of organisations are paradoxically, stable and unstable. These limit
our ability to predict and control what form the organisation takes, without
understanding the causality of the stable and unstable patterns that form, or how and
why organisations come to be what they are (Stacey, Griffin and Shaw, 2000).

So the question that arises is: have organisational forms really transformed or is it
superficial change (Morgan, 1993)? It could be said that the knowledge and
technological age, with its extraordinary information systems capability, which
enables the globalisation of many work functions, has forced organisations to
challenge the way they do things for efficiency purposes only. We are seeing work
organised along communication networks, which span the globe through
“networking groups” and “virtual teams”. These groups are managed through flatter
management structures with new forms of order; equilibrium is no longer the ideal
norm because it just does not work. As information spans the globe, the postmodern
organisation now has the ability to gain information from anywhere on the globe
almost instantaneously. As it becomes more difficult for leaders to control the
information employees receive it has become more important than ever that
employees are enabled to take on the responsibility for legitimising their own
behaviour at a local level (Lyotard, 1984).
With the growing realisation of the importance of local relationships, focus needs to be put on those informal processes by which we construct our relationships, identity and understanding within organisations rather than the traditional leadership focus of authority hierarchies and managerial spans of control. So what are the implications of this change in focus for corporate cultures (the values, symbols, language and practises) and the way they affect how women and men work and behave in organisations?

2.4.3 Organisational cultures and women’s fit

Management literature highlights cultural fit as a key selection criterion for recruitment into executive positions (Burton, 1997). Recognition of talent is most commonly facilitated by the value systems that underpin existing organisational male dominated cultures. According to research by Piterman (2008) most women face numerous cultural dilemmas when they aspire to success; she further suggests that the business environment is dominated by a limiting female archetype that places women in a cultural ‘straight jacket’ (p.9). She argues that this subjects women to intense scrutiny about appearance and communication style that their male peers do not have to endure. The result is that women are often sidelined and excluded from positions because of perceived poor cultural fit.

Further, not only are women scrutinized within the corporate organisation, Caro and Fox (2008) argue women are being scrutinised within society for just about any life decision they make:

Stay-at-home mum? You’re a lazy bludger wasting your education and turning into a boring housewife. Career woman? Ball-breaker with no social life. Working mother? Selfish, money-hungry cow who runs the distinct risk of bringing up juvenile delinquents. Part-time jobs? Not carrying your weight at work and probably taking a job from a full-time breadwinner (p.5).

Their point is that it may seem like women are making their own decisions about the way they want to live, however despite the complex social changes that have occurred over the last few decades, their choices are still narrowed by a strong
undercurrent of societal disapproval. They argue that it is still largely a male
dominated world both in and out of the corporation.

Australian corporate culture is highly gendered (Piterman, 2008) and being a
successful corporate leader has traditionally also been an accomplishment of
masculinity (Sinclair, 1998:37). To negotiate the hierarchy one is often expected to
be a ‘good bloke’, have a few drinks, play sport and have a good mentor. The
metaphor of the sports club (locker room larrikinism) and the older mans club
(patrician elitism) is common among Australian executive cultures (Sinclair, 1998).
When combined with the traditional Australian value of mateship (togetherness and
solidarity), the Australian corporate environment takes its own distinctive form to
justify the exclusion of women (and some men) (Connell, 1995). Maddock and
Parkin (1993) add that masculine cultures have different vehicles and rationalisations
for women’s ineligibilities for leadership. They identify recent less explicit forms of
subjugation of women: ‘gender blind cultures’ where everyone is treated as men;
‘feminist pretenders’ cultures that expect all women to act as change agents; and a
‘discriminating macho’ culture driven by extreme competition which is hard to detect,
discriminating against those who cannot work at the same pace or who challenge the
economic criteria (1993:76). Women are often excluded from leadership positions
within these types of cultures because they are not perceived as a cultural fit.
For example, those fulltime career women who hold a disproportionate amount of
responsibility for home and family, and may not have the flexibility to travel
extensively on short notice, or attend meetings early or late in the day, are often
judged as having a lack of commitment to their career by those who have the
decision-making power in regard to career development. In particular Human
Resource (HR) Departments play an important part in policy implementation and
they have the capacity to play an integral part in ensuring equitable interpretation of
company policies. Often these organisational cultures and behaviour patterns become
so entrenched they appear to be unmovable.

Organisational cultures can be empowering or disempowering for women.
Today many organisational cultures place unrealistic demands on many women
(and men) who are reported to be struggling with the demands of work and family
life. Research by Piterman, 2008 reveals links between poor flexibility and the loss
of female talent from management positions, especially at the executive end of the organisation, where long hours are the norm, and flexible work opportunities are less of an option because of cultural expectations and demands. Despite the introduction of work/life balance policies, the expectation of time spent in the office is still seen as career commitment. I would argue that many policies appear to be rhetoric rather than actual day-to-day practice. This places women in a vulnerable position as the onus is placed on them to justify and negotiate their flexible work arrangements (Piterman, 2008). The impact of workplace culture on many women’s decision to pursue a corporate career or leave the corporate career cannot be denied. Workplace culture affects women’s behaviour and understanding of how they are valued or enabled to perform within the organisations. It influences their decision to stay or leave the corporate organisation, a decision that is not taken lightly:

For many women in our study, the decision to off-ramp is a tough one. These women have invested heavily in their education and training. They have spent years accumulating the skills and credentials necessary for successful careers. Most are not eager to toss that painstaking effort aside (Hewlett and Luce, 2005:46).

A study of 353 Fortune 500 companies in America showed that it makes good business sense to attract and retain women in corporations:

Companies with a higher representation of women in senior management positions financially outperform companies with proportionally fewer women at the top.

- The group of companies that had the highest representation of women on their senior management teams had a 35% higher Return on Equity (ROE) than companies with the lowest women’s representation.
- Those same companies had a 34% higher Total Return of Shareholders (TRS) than companies with the lowest women’s representation.
- Of the industries assessed, Consumer Discretionary, Consumer Staples and Financial Services companies with the highest representation of women in senior management experienced a considerably higher ROE and TRS than companies with the lowest.

(Catalyst, 2004a)
So if we accept that women, in executive positions are good for business, that most women do not make the decision to leave their corporate career lightly, and that workplace culture is a major influence on women continuing their corporate careers, why do corporate cultures not change to accommodate women’s needs accordingly? Given that cultures do not spring ready-made from above: people make cultures (Bacchi, 1998:78) building an inclusive culture would appear to be a matter of active intention and commitment. It sounds like an easy problem to solve. However it is not that simple, largely because work cultures frequently operate at an unconscious level. Many writers from a number of different perspectives have studied corporate culture, and some have concluded that:

There are still gaps in our understanding about the influences of organisational culture on women’s work experiences, ..., those unconscious workplace arrangements and unspoken rules create hidden barriers to female promotion and retard advancement towards leadership (Piterman, 2008:21).

Structural workplace policy changes to increase representation of women without strongly addressing issues of cultural change appear likely to be ineffective (Hudson 20:20, 2004). Equal employment opportunity strategies and programs require positioning within wider programs of change management in the workplace. The report suggests that understanding the cultural features that sustain gender bias in organisations is a critical step towards progressing women’s position in executive leadership.

So what exactly is this powerful organisational career deterrent, ‘culture’? Specifically, culture can be viewed from two perspectives; something an organisation ‘has’ or something an organisation ‘is’ Smircich (1983). The first concept sees culture as a management tool, which can be used to manage and change organisational behaviour and performance (Pemberton, 1995). Peters and Waterman (1982) identify rituals, which are designed to engage, unify and integrate the workforce. Culture clubs, Christmas parties, recognition awards, company volunteer days, and company branding logos are all examples of such rituals. In being designed
to unify the workforce towards a common purpose and a way of working, these rituals become symbols that shape an engaging company spirit or way of ‘being’ both internally and externally.

The second approach identified by Smircich (1983) shifts the focus from what kind of culture the organisation may ‘have’ to look at the way the organisation functions ‘as’ a culture. In this perspective culture is viewed as a metaphor for the organisation, and this culture is seen to emerge through the social interactions and negotiation of the organisational members (Legge, 1995). That is, their (often unconscious) shared thoughts and beliefs create a collective way of behaving which, in turn produces a system of norms and behavioural arrangements which are continually constructed and reconstructed. In this perspective, culture is seen as more diffuse, belonging to everyone; culture is both the shaper of employee action and an outcome of a process of social interaction.

Culture is an emergent and constructed concept that is highly dynamic and non-linear (Baetes, 2006) and it is clear that there is not one simple way to describe corporate organisational culture. Every organisation will be unique, determined by its own mix of historical events within the organisation, its industry or professional sector. When historical events are combined with the day-to day social experiences of employees, together with political and economic factors, which are specific to the context in which the organisation is placed, a unique corporate culture emerges. It is interesting to note that, despite each corporate organisation having their own unique culture, the pattern of white middle class men dominating executive leadership positions continues in most Australian corporate organisations. The way executive leadership cultures emerge to suit men, and impact women have been documented (Marshall, 1984; Gordon, 1991) highlighting the pressure placed on women to conform to those cultures (For example, expectations exist around commitment to permanent employment and continuous employment as a demonstration of ambition and dedication to a corporate career).

As previously discussed, the design of the early industrial organisation was heavily influenced by the classical scientific view of the world which called for the separation of the head (intellect) and the hand (the worker) that led to the emergence
of the separate cultures white collar and blue-collar workers. These distinctions are still ingrained in our working culture (McMillan, 2002). Men traditionally held those roles as head of the organisation as they do today. So are we to believe that men were ‘born to rule’? Or are leaders made? The debate over this question has been going for years with no real agreement by management writers (for example Kirkpatrick and Locke, 1991; Bennis, 1989; Kotter, 1990). If we dismiss the notion that some are ‘born to rule’ and accept the view that leaders are made, why is it that some men can make themselves into leaders and few women do?

Women have individual experiences around career development in different organisations, yet those individual experiences lead to similar repeated career patterns across organisations and industries. The term fractal, introduced in Section 1, is used in Complexity to describe irregular shapes that repeat themselves at different scales. Ubiquitous in nature, fractals form the basic design principles of many natural structures. Applied to organisational design, fractals highlight how the patterns of organisational behaviour formed locally (individually and organisationally) are repeated on a larger scale (at an industry level and at a societal level) again and again.

Kanter (1977) observed that varying levels of access to power and opportunity drive career behaviour. Kanter argues that individuals display different behaviours depending on the structural supports (power and opportunity) that are in place for them within the organisation. The first dimension, opportunity, refers to people’s opportunity for advancement, development and the chance to increase knowledge and skills. The second dimension, structure of power, refers to people’s ability to access and mobilize resources, information, and support from one's position in the organisation (Kanter, 1977).

Access to resources refers to the ability to acquire necessary materials, supplies, money, and personnel needed to meet organisational goals. Information relates to the data, technical knowledge, and expertise required to perform one's job. Support refers to guidance and feedback received from subordinates, peers, and supervisors to enhance effectiveness (Kanter, 1977; Laschinger, 1996).
The status quo in organisations is that men are typically in charge: *leadership comes ready defined for executives. But it is a construction more likely to reflect men’s aspirations and understandings than women’s* (Sinclair, 1998:106). There are many studies that demonstrate women when establishing themselves in senior leadership roles, face a number of challenges and obstacles (Still, 1993a; Bellamy and Ramsay, 1994) that their male colleagues do not have to contend with. Marshall (1995) concluded that *creating a viable and self-congruent identity and finding ways to exercise power are significant challenges for many women* (1995:25). Sinclair (1998) adds that *establishing themselves in a leadership role is, for women, an ongoing struggle in which sex and their differences are often in the foreground of people’s response* (p.93).

I would argue that access to empowerment structures are more likely to lead to leadership appointments and that this access is associated with the degree of formal and informal power an individual believes they have in the organisation. If we consider power as an aspect of all social relationships, then it is intimately related to freedom and choice of action, thought and feeling. The stories told by the women in this research emerge as new stories. However, there appears a familiar pattern around the presence of power relations as an influencing factor to women’s career development and their working experience. Therefore it is integral to our understanding of what influences women’s career development within organisations, to explore the concept of power and how it shows itself within the corporate organisation.

2.4.4 The dynamics of power relationships in organisations

Kanter (1977) suggests that formal power is derived from jobs that allow flexibility, visibility, and creativity. Formal power is also derived from jobs that are considered relevant and central to the organisation. Informal power is developed from relationships and networks with peers, subordinates, and superiors within and outside of the organisation. From this perspective, having the right position and being connected to the right relationships are the key distinctions needed for eligibility into the executive leadership club and the power that membership bestows upon its members.
When we talk about the concept of power what are we actually talking about? There are diverse opinions about the concept of power and its use as a word, and therefore there are no universally accepted definitions. In reviewing the literature I found two fundamentally different ways of thinking about power: we look here at the effect each has on the way power relations are understood within organisations. Firstly, some writers view power as a monolithic concept that is solidly uniform and immovable. In this view power is seen as a possession providing the person with the ability to influence or direct the behaviour of others, or an event. For example, the idea that men have power over women or that a woman has a man under her power, follows this view. The second idea is that power is malleable; similar to Foucault’s view, it is something that is exercised, and only emerges through the interaction of individuals,

According to Weber (1986) power (macht) is the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his/her own will, despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests (p.37). Similarly, power is often described as control of behaviour (Dahl, 1957). The ideas expressed by both Weber and Dahl require the presence of conflict for power to exist. If conflict is not observable then consensus is assumed. Power in this model is intentional, observable. Individual action is sometimes expressed as someone having power over another. This concept of power provides the basis for the argument put forward by some feminist writers, that men as a social group dominate women as a social group.

A more postmodern critique of power comes from Olsen and Marger (1993) who claim that power is a dynamic process, not a static possession, that pervades all areas of social life (p.1) indicating power is always present in the every day actions and interactions of human beings. Foucault’s analysis of power as a grid of force relations provides a general frame for understanding the dynamic nature of power in the everyday practices of the organisation. Foucault (1983) goes further by suggesting power permeates all social relationships and therefore is simply unavoidable in our world, because it is everywhere. In all our relationships, power is both constraining and enabling. Foucault’s concept of power sees power as working
‘through people’ not on or over people. What these concepts have in common is the understanding that power is the ability to get things done through others and that it is pervasive in organisational activity, our communication and society as a whole.

Foucault (1983) developed the notion that power is intensely interactional and writes of ‘power relations’, which show themselves in our everyday interactions, reciprocal interactions that render reciprocal effect on our ability to act. Foucault’s framework departs from the view that power is monolithic, unilateral or repressive. Power from a Foucauldian perspective is in the organisation; it is not the organisation itself. Power, he suggests, exists in the micro relations, which exist person to person. The interaction from person to person is where the power is exercised; it entails the actions performed upon another person’s actions and reactions; it is not possessed by an individual. This view differs from the view of many feminists who speak of ‘patriarchy’ to describe the unjust systematic domination and oppressive subordination of women by individual men, or institutions run on masculine lines (Greer (1970), Halford and Leonard (2001)). Halford and Leonard (2001) further argue that:

... gender difference, disadvantage and discrimination in the work organisation is commonly seen as an outcome of the operation of power, in which men – individually and collectively or through discourse which privilege the masculine – wield power over women (p.26).

This view supports the idea that those who hold the leadership positions in organisations hold the power. Thus organisations systematise power relations between members by bestowing official rights of power on those who hold significant positions (Morgan, 1986). Men dominate leadership positions; therefore decisions that discriminate and disadvantage are commonly seen as the outcome of men’s personal decisions, rather than the operational power inherent in the positions. Writers such as Foucault (1986) are critical of this top down functionalist view where power is understood as a possession that is held by someone. Foucault argues for an understanding of power that does not belong to individuals, or to one group or another. Instead Foucault sees the practise of power as decentralised, and suggests we are all implicit in its application and as its subject. For Foucault (1977)
organisations are just a complex and contradictory mix of power relations coordinated in relationship with systems of knowledge (p.27). Foucault’s insistence on the inseparability of knowledge and power (Foucault’s 1980) is a central idea for understanding power relationships within organisations, and specifically those relationships between men and women.

Knowledge is an important prerequisite for power in advanced industrial societies in general, and the financial services industry in particular, as it is based on the production of information and knowledge. Organisations in the financial services industry do not produce material objects, but rather sell products and services built on scientific technical knowledge and expertise, which are formulated within their cultural ‘norms’. People, and their ability to create innovative solutions for financial problems, are the business. If we adopt the notion of power as productive (Foucualt, 1980), it becomes possible to recognise that people can both have power, and simultaneously be constrained by power. In my view, the notion of power as productive enables us the opportunity to explore the value of power’s transformative capacity to enable people to change the social world they live in. It is then possible that both men and women within organisations could produce power for mutual benefit. This raises the question: why is power not seen more positively? Perhaps the answer lies deeper in our subconscious perceptions of power or in our underlying values and principles.

For example, when people talk about power, the word often has a negative connotation. In 2005 I participated in a leadership program (Swiss Re Leadership Workshop, 2005) where we were asked to agree on a definition of power and leadership. We agreed that power is the ability to get things done through others and leadership is the ability to get things done. We were then asked the question: ‘how much power did we as members of the leadership team hold in our organisation?’ There was sudden silence, and then one by one my peers admitted they felt uncomfortable talking about having power. Overall there was a feeling among the team that power was a bad thing, because it inferred conflict and coercion. I found the contradiction between seeing ourselves as members of the leadership
team and being uncomfortable with how much power we had interesting, given that our agreed definitions for leadership and power were so similar. How could we be leaders by our own definition, yet not acknowledge the possibility of the power inherent in our positions?

It became evident from the conversations that followed that my colleagues were more comfortable talking about our team’s ‘authority’ to get things done than the ‘power’ they personally had to get things done. Why? The word ‘authority’ had a perceived legitimacy for them and therefore did not necessarily imply they were using force. They chose to believe their team members followed their procedural requests because they were company policy. Further, they saw compliance to their requests as part of our culture of mutual accountability and self-responsibility, which encouraged and supported this way of behaving. Thus, they rationalised that no force was involved. After much debate and discussion it was agreed that there was power inherent in our leadership positions; further, its positive potential could be seen as a force that produced positive action, discourse and knowledge (SR Executive Leadership Program May 2005).

Just as my colleagues struggled to own their ability to achieve their work objectives at the expense of what the individuals in their teams may or may not want to do, power is often viewed in western society as negative or repressive. Within this approach, power is only ever seen as toxic, with no room for productive power. I would suggest this purely judicial concept of power dismisses an individual’s personal ability to make a difference, rendering the individual powerless, with no room to produce or engage in a different tomorrow, by ‘being’ different, ‘doing’ things differently and ‘having’ things different. As Foucault (1980) aptly suggests,

If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought forward to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn’t only weigh on us as a force that sways not, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms of knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network, which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression (p.119).
Power, then, can be seen as productive network that infiltrates our everyday like an invisible thread weaving its way through and around our language and communication, effecting all our human interactions. As communicative human beings we create ourselves in part through the stories we tell about ourselves, stories which arise from within culturally social discourses and social relations of power through social interaction. White (1995) argues that our stories don’t reflect or represent our lives; our lives are, rather, constituted through our stories, our narratives (p.14). Within these narrative identity stories there is evidence of how human beings are shaped socially and are active participants in the creation of their own lives (Rabinow, 1984). Foucault’s approach is important to our understanding of the women’s stories in this research, for not only does his approach reiterate that the creation of the self is social but also that the self as social is inseparable from processes of knowledge and power. The empirical work of this thesis makes visible the relevant stories currently being told about women and power within the corporate organisation, while seeking to understand what keeps these stories in place.

Pfeffer (2010) wrote recently that women have an uneasy embrace of power and that their reluctance to espouse power is one part of the answer to women’s underrepresentation in corporate executive positions. He supported his comments through numerous studies, which showed that women are less power orientated than men. Others too have found that women have more negative attitudes toward holding power (Offerman and Schriver, 1985), and are less likely to pursue power based influence strategies (Ansari, 1989). Pratto, Stallworth and Sidanius (1997) argue that they are bothered by and disfavour hierarchical relationships and McClelland, (1976) and Maccoby (1990) suggests they are less motivated to dominate others and less likely to take actions to attain power. I argue that many men would also be unwilling to take the actions suggested above to attain power. The style of power described above reflects the values or attributes of those in power, in this case, men. I argue that today’s woman might not fit so neatly into this view. More recent studies conducted in 2003 and 2004 by the Simmons School of Managements, Center for Gender in Organisations (CGO), found a conflicting story. Their study of 500 professional and managerial women found that women’s attitudes toward power echoed their attitude towards leadership, which found:
Contrary to conventional wisdom asserting that women are often ambivalent about power, 80% of the 421 women respondents to our 2004 survey on power indicated that they were comfortable with power, respected it, and liked what they could accomplish with it (Merrill-Sands, Kickul, and Ingols 2005:2).

When the respondents from this survey (2004) were asked to characterise their perceptions of the behaviours of powerful men and women in their organisations, gender differences emerged showing that women tend to interpret and enact power differently from men:

Powerful men and women were both seen as “able to make things happen” and “achieve results,” men were seen as more likely to assert control over others while women were seen as working with others to achieve results. There was a significant difference in the extent to which powerful women as compared to powerful men, were seen to work well with others, make decisions collaboratively, communicate in a compelling manner, and develop others (Merrill-Sands, Kickul, and Ingols 2005:2).

These findings indicate, that contrary to what Pfeffer (2010) suggests above, women are comfortable with exercising power, they just ‘do it ‘differently to men. The survey found that, as a group, women are much less comfortable with traditional models of power over others but, indeed, are comfortable in exercising power with and through others (Merrill-Sands, Kickul, and Ingols 2005:2). If we accept the view that power is the ability to get things done (Kanter, 1977), that women want to lead to get things done, and are comfortable exercising power, (all be it, interpreted and enacted differently from men), why are there so few women holding executive powerful positions? Could the lack of women in executive positions have more to do with subtle, unspoken and deeply held gendered assumptions that continue to shape models of leadership and leaders?

There are distinct differences in the stereotyped perceptions of male and female leaders. Research conducted by Chesterman (2004) found that both men and women believe women bring different styles of leadership:
This research clearly demonstrated that both men and women participants believed the presence of women at senior levels had influenced organisational cultures in the universities studied. Much of the discussion reflected perceptions about what is ‘different’ about women’s approaches to managing. The key themes that emerged from this analysis were that when women are present, cultures at senior levels are believed to be more collaborative and consensual; there is more emphasis on building teams and individuals; more consultation; a change in styles of communication; less competitive behaviour; an emphasis on honesty and approachability; a greater level of balance, and a valuing of staff (p.16).

These findings highlight the generally held perception that men and women lead differently. It has been my experience that an all male team leads differently as a group to a mixed gender team and the more women that are involved in the leadership team the more the masculine character of leadership is diffused. Chesterman, Ross-Smith, and Peters (2004) suggest that one of the most compelling findings of their study was:

[T]he almost universal belief among our research participants - both male and female - firstly, that women brought a "different" approach to management and secondly, that this "difference" influenced the culture of the organisation in quite specific ways. A number of men we interviewed spoke of their own adoption of less masculinised approaches to management and of the value they placed upon the approach to management adopted by their female colleagues (pp.87-88).

My concern with so few women taking executive positions is not the lack of positional power. Rather, my concern is the lack of opportunity to influence and make decisions and the lack of access to the inherent authority of those positions. Organisations are power systems specifically in regard to the ways in which people conform to organisational rules. Organisations maintain control by dividing or fragmenting the people who work for them into hierarchies and functional roles. People comply with the norms of the organisation and so regulate themselves in relation to society (Foucault, 1983). If we think of power arrangements as being a consequence of organisational design, then power arrangements and other means by which organisations attempt to be effective are important in understanding organisational relationships.
Power has no life outside the network in which it is occurring; it is meaningless unless exercised. Therefore a group or person cannot have power in isolation (Pfeffer, 1992). Person to person power is an intrinsic part of everyday interaction and therefore cannot be taken away like a possession; it can only be exercised within relationship (Flasks and Humphreys, 1993). This understanding of power enables us to see how power is not held by an organisation or its structure. Rather power is held and exercised by the people who make up the community of the corporate organisation, those who hold the positions and engage in the micro relationships (Dahl, 1957) of day-to-day action.

To sustain positional power, ‘power holders’ must self-consciously exercise power to signify to others their awareness of their role obligations (Bigggart and Hamilton, 1984). Secondly, the recipients of power are crucial in determining if a power act has occurred. I have experienced this phenomenon directly. The fire alarm went off at work and our trained response to the evacuation procedure was to get up immediately and move to a designated meeting spot. On this particular occasion there was very little movement from the staff. As I walked to the meeting point I asked people along the way why they were not moving to the meeting point and then people started to move with more purpose. After the drill we debriefed the exercise with the fire wardens and I asked the fire warden in our section, Why did you not speak up and get everyone moving as outlined in the evacuation procedures? His response was …I did not see the need, you came past with your booming voice and as you are the boss I thought I would leave it up to you because everyone will follow you. The team had interpreted my action as a power act, and moved on that basis. They had responded to me because of my position. Reflecting on the response, I realised that I did not, in that instance, intend to utilise power to get them to move. Although I spoke out of concern for their safety they had responded because of the perceived power inherent in my position, not because they thought I was concerned for their safety. Interestingly if they had not responded, no power would have been exercised.
The relational aspect of power can be clearly seen when we introduce the idea of dependency. Power relationships entail mutual dependency, which means that two parties need each other (Emerson, 1962). Management need workers to produce services or products. Employees need management for employment and to get paid. Dependency is easy to see in organisations, which by their very nature require dependence of personnel and teams (Bacharach and Lawlwer, 1980). Power relationships are especially visible in highly bureaucratised organisations where power or authority tends to be hierarchic.

The design of these types of organisations rests largely on the power variable, with the intent of ensuring that each level in the organisation has sufficient power and everyone understands those levels. In many large corporate organisations the power relationships are tightly prescribed, being followed from the first day an employee joins the organisation. For example, when a new employee starts with an organisation it is best practice that an employee attends an employee Induction or Orientation session on day one, or as soon as possible. At this Induction the company sets out its code of conduct and defines its behavioural expectations ‘the way we work around here’. I suggest that at this point of the recruitment the new employee forms his psychological contract with the organisation. That is the moment when he/she signs up to the culture and agrees to follow the policies and procedures of the organisation. As part of the induction the new employee will usually be provided with a copy of the human resources policies and procedures together with the organisation chart which outlines the hierarchical decision making structure of the organisation. In effect, the power relations within the organisation are made highly visible to new employees, thus making sure the power variable is maintained.

I argue that the successful implementation of organisational policy and procedures is largely dependant on the ability and intent of those people executing the policies. In effect, those implementing policies have inadvertently been given great power because their actions and interpretations influence the implementation of those policies. Several factors strongly influence whether power is talked about openly, or whether that power remains implicit, or hidden. Such openness (or its lack) is influenced by societal norms, that particular organisation’s culture, and whether
power is viewed negatively or positively. Despite our apparent aversion to openly discuss power relationships, these power dynamics are unavoidably embedded within the organisational stories of both men and women, because they are an intrinsic part of all our relationships.

The implicit (unspoken) stories in corporate organisations need to be made visible and acknowledged because those stories reveal what actually happens in real time, on a day to day basis, thus revealing the myriad of ways power emerges in the multiplicity of relationships in those organisations. It has been suggested that the introduction of diversity polices within organisations is a demonstration that gender diversity is being taken seriously by corporations. I suggest that often what happens when someone tries to use the policy is that they find the organisation’s response is not what is actually written in the policies or procedure manuals. For example, a colleague and member of our executive team became a first time father. His wife, a corporate lawyer, wanted to continue her career and so they agreed they would share the child minding duties. To do this he would need to work four days week and work one day from home. Our organisation has a flexible work policy, which required him to provide a written business case to the executive team for agreement. In line with the policy he presented a business case outlining the child minding arrangements, how he would communicate with his colleagues and his team so they would not be adversely affected, and the minimal affect the change would have on his output and the business. This was the first time any executive had actually taken up the policy and as a member of the executive team I was part of the decision making process. As I sat at the table listening to the dialogue of his peers I realised that despite that this team had signed off on the policy they were not really committed to it. The dialogue around the table, went something like this; It is not possible to work part-time, he is an executive, he cannot be serious about his career; you can tell who wears the pants in that family and its not him; how will we contact him when we need something urgently? You cannot lead a team from home, it is a ridiculous request, imagine if we all did that. The lucky bugger, I bet the baby sitter is cute (SR, 2007).

The dialogue went on and on, with little real analysis of how he intended to make the new arrangement work, and in the end I had to speak up. Firstly we have a policy that says people can work flexibly, we have all endorsed this policy and it is offered
to all our staff as a staff benefit. Our benefits are part of the reason people come to work for us; it is part of the psychological contract we have made with them. Secondly if you believe his proposal is sound and his request will not adversely affect the business then I can see no reason for us to decline his request or at least trial it. I personally believe this team is responsible to support this request and help make this arrangement work and if we are not able to do that unitedly then we must withdraw the policy. It does not matter one way or the other if the policy is in or out, what matters are that we overtly make a decision and support what is in the policy.

The young man went on to successfully work those flexible arrangements and he has since been promoted with no adverse effect on his career. It is my view that his new diversity of life style broadened his ability as a leader. The point of this example is to demonstrate how the written policy would not have been enough to support the execution of the policy, as the team covertly undermined it. Some one had to exercise power by speaking up in real time in that moment of decision-making or it would not have been executed in line with the policy. His flexible work arrangement would never have been approved for all the silent (cultural) reasons, not because of what was written in the policy.

Kanter, 1977 argues that one of the most pressing concerns for an organisation is to balance the number of women and men across the hierarchy. I propose that one of the most pressing concerns for organisational leaders is to embrace the idea that leaders emerge in a variety of genders and ways, reflecting a broad range of talents and perspectives. It is most pressing that organisations engage more quality women and their perspectives in leadership. As demonstrated in the above example, diversity polices alone will not support an increase in women’s up take of executive positions within the corporate organisation. I argue women’s greater participation in decision-making is a necessary condition for women’s interests to be taken into account. However, would having more women at senior decision-making levels in organisations make a difference to women’s taking of executive positions? According to Summers (2003) most women at senior levels quickly learn that if they want to protect their own positions, they best forget about trying to improve other women’s.
Would more women at senior decision-making levels in companies lead to a change in this culture? It would be nice to think so but it is hardly ever the case. It seems to be an unfortunate fact that women directors or managers who argue the case for their sex are often seen as being guilty of ‘special pleading’ (p.184).

This suggests that the corporate culture discourages ‘team work’ or open mentoring among women. It is interesting to note that one of the things often cited by writers regarding the reason for men’s greater success in career development is their ability to network or mentor other men. Ragins and Cotton (1999) found that males mentored by males were better remunerated than females mentored by males yet the latter had received more promotions than the male mentees. Conversely, an Australian survey found that that female mentees with a male mentor had received fewer promotions than males with male mentors (Tharenou & Zambruno, 2001). It appears when women ‘tap one another on the shoulder’ for development the results are generally different and the behaviour between women and men is perceived differently (Summers, 2003). Is it all necessary, perhaps for things to ever change, the organisational culture has to redefine the meaning of job competency (Summers, 2003:185). I argue that it not about competence as much as it is about how realities and futures are continuously co-created in everyday encounters between people.

In such social processes, intentions and opinions emerge about direction and ambitions. Attempts to realise such intentions bring about themes of inclusion and exclusion, anxiety, power and political processes (Johannessen, 2009:223).

As highlighted previously, the term ‘authority’ is often used instead of power to provide perceived legitimacy for decision-making within the organisational structure. When an issue arises that is outside the expertise or authority of one level, it is passed up the organisation until it reaches the level where the decision can be appropriately made. In practice, engaging all the stakeholders before it reaches this level is prudent for successful sign-off on new polices. Few organisations would have such tightly prescribed power relationships, as over time informal patterns of authority emerge.
Every organisation has its networks and we are not talking here about the formal structures of lines of power and authority but the informal ones that operate behind the scenes. I have heard it said that it is a leadership myth to say power resides at the top of the organisation, because power resides anywhere there is relationship and resistance, and you need to know this to understand where the real decisions are being made. My experience of what happens, is for example, that the CEO is generally accountable for signing off policy yet before it is taken to him/her for signoff the key functional head whose teams will be required to implement the policy may have already discussed or signed off the proposal. It would be naive to say that informal networks do not exist; all leaders need to make themselves aware of the hidden organisational day-to-day practices and, in so doing identify decision makers along the way (Stephenson, 2002).

A recent example at work highlights how organisations actually operate on a day-to-day basis. As a result of a transfer to the UK a team leader position had became available in our office. The person who had been identified and groomed as the successor for the role was interviewed and offered the role. The woman, a married mother with one child had just found out she was pregnant with her second child. She asked to see me to discuss her options. She was obviously upset and confused when she arrived for the appointment. Her upset was three fold. Firstly, being pregnant she was concerned that when the second child came she may find it difficult to manage the work hour expectations and the family. Therefore she felt she needed some formal flexibility built into the role. Secondly, her mother was pressuring her to consider that she would never be able to have time with her baby if she went back to work full time. Thirdly, although she and her husband had agreed she would have a career (which she had worked for and valued) now she had this opportunity she was not so sure he would put his career on hold to share parenting responsibilities. Given all these factors she felt she should decline the promotion. We discussed her ability to do the role and if she really wanted it; the answer was yes to both questions. Could the role be done four days a week providing some flexibility? Yes that was possible if she was organised. I confirmed for her that being pregnant was not an issue, and, subject to the team’s agreement, we would support her decision as best we could (the company has a flexible work policy). Overnight she decided she did want the role and asked for the flexibility to do the role four days a
week. Her immediate boss (a young married women who has chosen not to have children) said she could not support the flexible work arrangement as it would not be fair to her team, nor did she think the role could be done on a part-time basis. She would pass on her request but would not support her appointment. Her Singapore based manager, (a married women who worked fulltime, had two children and a husband who had chosen to be a stay at home dad), received the request without her manager’s support. She reviewed the employees’ request to do the role part-time and decided she was not able to support the flexible arrangement either, first and foremost because she did not have support from the line manager in Australia. Secondly she believed her manager would not support the request because his comments over time indicated he was not supportive of women working flexible hours. At this point I offered my support to brainstorm some different ways of working: could they trial the arrangement? In the end she felt she just could not get it past her manager and it was too much risk. The applicant withdrew her nomination. She has since decided the timing was not right for her, she was probably better off without the pressure, and she would work part-time and focus for now on being a mum. Perhaps this story represents many women’s reality, as Governor General Quentin Bryce, once said, women can have it all, just not all at once.

The above example shows how each level of the hierarchy influenced the ultimate outcome. The person at the top of this structure, who holds the position of ultimate decision-making authority, will probably never know the role was originally accepted with a request for flexibility. He will only know the applicant withdrew her application to work part-time. He was never given the option to make the decision based on all the information: the line managers used their positional power and through their individual relationships made the decision by holding back the request. I observed two critical things in this situation. Firstly, the women appeared to judge one another based on their own experiences and secondly without the full story, the leader may well have his view reinforced that women with children are not serious about their careers.

As the above example shows, within organisations we not only have interpersonal power, but interdivision, and inter team power relationships to consider. Teams and divisions also have varying amounts of power. In my organisation the front-office
client-facing teams of Underwriting & Client Management are overwhelmingly regarded as having the most powerful positions, demonstrated by their higher rates of pay, formal career plans and departmental origins of key position holders within the organisation. The important point is that ignoring interdepartmental power relationships by looking only at interpersonal power obscures an important facet of organisational power relationships.

The nature of the power system used in organisations has important consequences for both the manner in which individuals attach themselves to organisations, and for the broader issue of organisational effectiveness. Compliance is common in organisations: people come to work on time, do what their bosses desire, and produce the goods or deliver the services. Organisational units generally also comply or obey. This is not the only response to power; people can withdraw from the situation or attempt to circumvent the power holder (Blau, 1964). Withdrawal involves backing off from the power relationships. Circumvention is exemplified by going over the boss’s head. However the outcome that usually gets the most attention in organisations is conflict. Conflict is part of the normal state of organisation. The consequences of conflict are also normal in that they are both positive and negative for individuals and for organisations.

Organisations appear to be still relying on outdated modes of sharing power. The power relations that inhibit women from leading fulfilling lives operate at many levels in society, from the most personal to the highly public. Throughout my career there have been many times when I felt overwhelmed and powerless in my ability to effect meaningful change in my organisation and thought of leaving the corporate world. However it has long been my personal view that if I wanted to make a difference within the corporate world I had to be part of the world and the change I was attempting to influence. If the effects of power are to be challenged, they can only be challenged from within the power relationship itself (Flaskas and Humphreys 1993:44). I do not believe it is possible to sit outside the experience and effect sustainable change, as change can only occur in the day to day challenging of interactions which may result in being and doing things differently. Every time a manager acts, he acts in response to power (resistance) and in accordance with force.
There is no place outside power where any individual can stand to ‘hold all the strings’ every act; every communication by every person in the organisation is already in power and simultaneously reconfigures power; sometimes in a minute way and sometimes in a big way (Foucault, 1977: 97).

Organisations are complex and dynamic social institutions. They not only shape, but also are shaped by, broader socio-historical forces and as a result corporate organisations find themselves compelled to change their practices in response to the challenges of social movements. When people start to take action and do things differently, things start to change. As was evident by the actions of the women’s movement in the 1970’s, so much pressure was put on the social system that in order to remain competitive organisations were required to adopt legislation such as the Australian Federal Sex Discrimination Act (1984), and the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act (1999). Human rights diversity issues are not just about taking care not to cause offence or providing the threat of being fined for non-compliance. They are also about recognising the opportunity for innovation, creativity, and insight that lies in bringing together peoples of different backgrounds, cultural traditions, and varied histories and experiences.

When we think of the outcomes from organisations and the effect they have on our economies, organisations are a powerful aspect of western society (Korten, 1997). For most people, income from paid employment is the main factor determining their material standard of living. (2010, Social Report). Those that work for a living in paid employment as an employee via the wage and salary system generally do so in a managerial hierarchy within an organisation. Employees spend on average 40 hours a week (ABS, 2010, Cat 1370), for 20 to 50 years in this organisation and their family’s wealth is mainly gained through the salary system they are engaged in. Put simply, corporations have become the most important of the social institutions in modern western society (Korten, 1997). It could be said that nearly everyone’s career is fixed by employment opportunity and the goodness and badness of judgment made by leaders and or managers of those organisations. Leadership is one of the key elements in the ability of individuals to apply their potential at work.
It is well established that people need to be able to apply their full potential at work. The quality of interpersonal relationships between leaders and staff is emotionally charged with satisfaction, frustration, opportunity, exasperation, stimulation and fairness, dishonest manipulation and, at times, joy or despair. In managerial hierarchies, it is the nature of the organisational setting, and the relationships we have in them that is by far the most powerful factor determining how well we function and get on at work. The power inherent in these leadership roles enable the bearer to influence and create decisions that affect us all.

2.5 Conclusion

We are our history and when you look at the where we have come it is little wonder today we have a contradictory picture about women in executive positions in the corporate organisation. A few women are transforming the face of organisational leadership by taking on high profile executive positions in all types of organisations, not only in the financial services industry but also in politics, academia, media, medicine, science and the public service. For these women the picture appears optimistic. Many women are the major breadwinner for the family. On the other hand, statistics tell us that the old familiar patterns of inequalities around women still exist, with lower wages, and under representation in the high profile roles. Even with the gap in labour force participation rates narrowing, men still dominate in terms of status, wages, rewards and opportunities. In the professional and managerial occupations, while women have increased their share of employment, we are left pondering the same old set of statistics that tell us that despite all the push for equality women remain under represented in corporate executive leadership roles. Women still only hold 8% of board positions; the boardroom remains essentially male. Not withstanding the changes in labor market participation and in cultural and social understanding about the role of men and women, gender appears to be a major issue within executive organisational leadership. The research shows that some women have made it to the top, and whilst they do earn comparable salaries with their male colleagues, they are the minority. The overall picture seems to indicate that corporate organisations still hold patterns of gender differences.
The conventional organisational career model or working patterns within the organisation, I suggest, are no longer relevant in today’s environment of rapid change and uncertainty. Halford and Leoneard (2001) suggest *At the very least the significance of gender may ebb and flow across individual and organisational time and space* (p. 9) raising the question of how can organisations be both static – repeating patterns of gender inequalities – and dynamic upturning traditional gender relations. How can they be oppressive and enabling for women? We will discuss this further chapter 4.

Fast-forward to 2010 and we find the ‘portfolio lifestyle’ (Handy, 1995) is the preferred choice for many workers. The male model of full time employee versus the female lower paid part–time has changed. Today anecdotally it appears common for people (male or female) to move back and forth between working part time and full time; they have one or several employers over the life of their working career. Many people work from home full time and or part time. The pleasures and dissatisfaction of working in corporations appears to cut across gender; burnout is something that has no gender. For many men and women a permanent position in an organisation offers financial security and a sense of identity. However more and more we are seeing choices made about this life style; the price it appears comes too high, a price that many people are not willing to make.

Corporations are the principal motor for growth and development; they are the creator of wealth and the provider of goods and services in most parts of the world. It could be said that corporations do well at producing economic value in support of basic needs, together with the life style they have provided many of us in the West, they have a lot to recommend them (Whyte, 1994). However, in the area of facilitating a fulfilling workplace that supports development for enabling us to bring our whole selves to work they appear not to be delivering. (Whyte, 1994; Marshall, 1995). I find a universal sense among people that corporations and the way they are organised by the people who lead them are failing us. Traditionally men have dominated the leadership of corporations and held the positional power afforded the role of leader. If corporations are not delivering in the area of facilitating a fulfilling
workplace then do we need to look for leadership in new places? Would having more women in senior leadership roles make a difference to the decision making of corporations?

Having explored an eclectic array of historical influences on women’s participation and taking of executive positions in corporate organisations, we can now see how the organisation works today and how the corporate career model has evolved over time. Exploration of the interactional and communal contexts (society, organisation, family and the personal domain) demonstrated that women’s careers emerge from within a complex web of contextual relationships, which influence their career choices. I will now move to describe the nature of the empirical study.
Chapter 3 - Generation of empirical evidence

3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the nature of this empirical study, which illuminates what can be learned from women who hold executive positions within corporate organisations. The study reveals a rich picture that makes methodological contribution through a Complexity informed style of ethnographic research (Kuhn and Woog, 2005), in that it records and seeks to make sense of the lived experience of women in their everyday contexts as reported to the researcher.

Firstly, as the purpose, research question and methodological approach are comprehensively explained in Chapter one, this chapter will provide a reiteration of Complexity and the primary metaphors used to articulate and elaborate the findings. Ethnography – the methodological approach which has been used to understand how women make sense of their lived experience within the corporate organisation – is described. Coherent conversations are introduced as the principle process used for working with the interviewees to generate the narratives of the research. Coherent conversation provides an opportunity to gain insight into why particular ways of organising arise and persist in organisations (Kuhn, 2009:84). The open conversation style gave the participants the opportunity to discuss the personal experiences, historical (initial conditions) events and societal influences that they remembered as shaping their career experiences. The Complexity metaphors used in the analysis are then described in detail. I then reflexively explore the integrity of the collection and analysis process by outlining the considerations identified as relevant to this research process: dependability, transferability, relevancy and reflexivity together with the key ethical considerations. I conclude the chapter with an overview of the Australian financial services industry to set the scene for the findings discussed in section 4 of this chapter.

Every woman who participated in this research had a corporate career; however the way they experienced that career was different. As an illustration, many years ago I saw Michelangelo’s statue of David, and felt overwhelmed by its beauty.
I pondered how such beauty emerged from a piece of stone. A piece of shapeless stone that had taken many forms before emerging as the magnificent statue of ‘David’. Over the years I have expressed my awe of the beauty of this statue to many people and soon began to realise that everyone’s experience of the statue was not the same as mine. Despite viewing the same piece of sculpture in the same location, we all experienced it differently. The women who participated in Phase Two of this study demonstrate the same level of diversity of experience. All of the women held an executive position within a corporate organisation; however their experience and the way they made sense of their career was uniquely different. What emerged from these women’s uniquely different experiences were common patterns and themes that appeared to drive their actions and the self-organisation of their careers. In the context of the corporate organisation women may appear to have similar career opportunities. However I would argue that what women do with the opportunities and how they experience them, is based on each woman’s own historical influences and how they shaped their view of those opportunities: everyone’s experience is uniquely different. As discussed in Chapter 1 this research takes an interpretivist perspective. This perspective claims that social meaning is created during interactions and by people’s interpretations of interactions (Nagy Hesse-Bier and Leavy, 2006:78) as a result each of these women’s interpretation of the same opportunity will be subjective and therefore will be different. This perspective influenced the research method. To access and understand the way these women organised their careers and made sense of their career experience I have used the Complexity-based inquiry methods introduced by Kuhn (2009) as a way of gaining insight into why particular ways of organising to get things done arise and persist (p.84) for these women and their careers.

All the participants in this study had worked in or with the Australian financial services industry at the time of selection. The Australian financial services industry was selected for two reasons, firstly, it is a vibrant and diverse sector, which has been growing strongly over the last few decades, and therefore it provided opportunity for women’s employment and financial strength to develop employees. Secondly I had taken an executive position within that industry and I felt the study would provide insightful observation and detail about women’s careers within the industry sector. Using a Complexity approach and viewing organisations (industry’s) as fractally
constructed means looking for similarities that are apparent across different scales (Kuhn, 2009). Through studying the fractal of women within the financial services industry the researcher can make generalisations about the larger fractal (women within other industries) from which the smaller fractal (women in financial services industry) is derived.

3.1.1 Complexity

In complex systems non-linear interaction occurs. This results in system elements self-organising to produce emergent order. I have previously shown, from a Complexity perspective, self-organisation, dynamism and emergence are characteristics essential to organisations, individuals, and teams locally and globally (Kuhn, 2009). Reflecting, reinterpreting and revisiting how women make sense of their every day experience in the corporate organisation supports the identification of themes and patterns that describe or otherwise account for the self-organisation and emergence of women’s executive career patterns in corporate organisations.

As introduced and discussed in Chapter one, analysing organisational life from a Complexity perspective provides a depth of insight that is far more than making metaphorical comparisons:

> We do more than just create an analogy; we create new qualities of connection, new relationships and, finally, the framework that creates meaning that our experiences have for us (Kuhn, 2009:45).

Using Complexity concepts as metaphors provides original thought provoking and productive ways of understanding organisational forms, processes and practices (Kuhn 2009:44). The specific Complexity based metaphors used in this research are:

- Fractal narrative analysis
- Attractor narrative analysis
- Communicative connectedness
- Sensitive dependence on initial conditions
- Phase space - phrase space
I propose Complexity’s emphasis on wholeness and non-reduction of its properties to individual parts (Milton-Kelly, 1998) supports the generation of special insight into social phenomena. This provides a more integrated approach to understanding ‘what is going’ on in organisations. The Complexity lens and the use of Complexity metaphors (Kuhn, 2009) gives us a glimpse of previously unseen connections and patterns enhancing and deepening our understanding of ‘what is going on’ in organisations with women and their career choices.

3.1.2 Ethnography

Ethnography is essentially a descriptive research process used to describe human cultural groups, ... having regard for mundane characteristics, through to the confusion of the whirling dynamics of evolving and changing human actions (Kuhn and Woog, 2005:140). As a research model ethnography is claimed to be a style that can construct better than any other type of research, a richly detailed picture of lived experience, a picture that is interesting, informative and potentially filled with implications (Kuhn and Woog, 2006).

Ethnography is a form of qualitative inquiry that supports the use of trans-disciplinary lenses in an attempt to evoke richer, deeper and more holistic understanding (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994; Gubrium and Holstein, 1999; Sanders, 1999). Its purpose is to provoke understanding and in this inquiry that understanding is around how women make sense of their lived experience and their taking of executive positions within the corporate organisation.

A compelling benefit of ethnography is that through dialogue the researcher enters the everyday world of the social group or phenomena they are studying. This process provides the researcher the opportunity to think a little bit more like someone else, and to participate in a coherent conversation with them. When the participant’s stories are woven together with my observations and interpretations as the ethnographer, the possibility of creating a more expansive and holistic explanation of the women’s behaviour in the social setting of the organisation is achieved. The interpretations and the meaning I make as the ethnographer are subjective. An interpretist perspective guides this perspective and the research.
As introduced previously, from an interpretist perspective: *social meaning is created during interactions and by people’s interpretations of interactions* (Nagy Hesse-Biber and Levy, 2006:78).

### 3.1.3 Coherent conversations

Coherent conversation, as previously explained, is a Complexity-based approach (Kuhn and Woog, 2007; Kuhn, 2009) where conversations between the researcher and the participants are free flowing, unstructured and open-ended. The aim of a coherent conversation is to:

> [H]old a permissive conversation, one that accepts the entirety of topics that people bring into the conversation and which is critically self-reflective of the processes via which the conversation emerges (Kuhn, 2009:86).

This approach encourages freedom of thought and novelty in a conversation that is not restrained by an agenda or defined outcomes. A significant benefit of using coherent conversations is that the method has the potential to *reveal the way people think, as much as what they say* (Kuhn 2009:86). In this way coherent conversations represent a Complexity informed ethnographic research approach.

Coherent conversations are basically focus groups or group interviews where the reliance is on interaction within the group, based on topics that are supplied by the researcher, who typically takes the role of moderator (Morgan, 1998). The hallmark of coherent conversations is the explicit use of interaction to produce data that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group. I originally chose coherent conversations because they provide opportunity to observe a large amount of interaction on the topic (Morgan, 1998).
Coherent conversations generated the narratives in this study and they have been analysed and interpreted through the Complexity based techniques of fractal narrative analysis, attractor narrative analysis, communicative connectedness and phase space - phrase space (Kuhn & Woog, 2007).

I will now move to outline the enquiry processes used in this research.

3.2 Working with the interviewees

The Complexity metaphor sensitive dependence on initial conditions highlights the importance of identifying initial conditions as a way of understanding how early influences shape the emergence of the system. Reflecting on the metaphor provided the impetus for me to explore the initial conditions of my fieldwork process. I began this research with a very different mindset. Firstly, I conducted a critical review of feminist, gender and organisational literature; many studies showed the effects of stereotypical and cultural barriers towards women. Their participation and representation was often measured but they have not looked at women embedded in their everyday contexts. This review influenced the way I approached my initial fieldwork. I went to the field exploring a problem: Why are women missing from executive leadership? Feedback from these groups together with the information gained from current management literature very quickly demonstrated that the story I was hearing was more of the same: out dated, generic and shapeless. I did not want to generate another story confirming the problem; I wanted to create a new story. I wanted to create a story that provided hope and excitement about what is possible, a story that women could live into and thus embrace. To do this I decided that the story around women’s underrepresentation in executive positions needed to be unpacked in more individual detail. I needed to look at the phenomena in a different way and with this thinking my fieldwork and research changed direction and shape, something new and unpredictable began to emerge.

I believe that we create the world we later discover. Therefore it was important that the new method complemented this view. It become obvious that I had to move away from looking at the phenomenon of women taking executive positions as a rational scientific problem, a problem with all the constrictions and prohibitions that come
with solving problems. In search of an alternative understanding that had the capacity to illuminate new understanding and the possibility for change, I searched for a different method, one that would define behaviour in terms of its generative capacity, that is, its:

[C]apacity to challenge the guiding assumptions of the culture, to raise fundamental questions regarding contemporary social life, to foster reconsideration of that which is ‘taken for granted’ and thereby furnish new alternatives for social actions (Gergen, 1978:1346).

I expanded the literature search to include a wider and more diversely relevant range of work from the worldview of the new sciences. As evidenced in Chapters 1 and 2 there are a number of writers in the scientific field, together with a growing number of Complexity based organisational literature writers, who draw on scientific work which demonstrates the practical application of Complexity to address the everyday issues of organisational life. I propose Complexity thinking alongside current management theory and practice can support us in rethinking the corporate career model. This new insight into organisational behaviour will be useful in influencing changes that support women’s career development and the way career processes and procedures get done in organisations.

Influenced by the concept of appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987) my gaze moved to explore ‘what is happening’ rather than ‘what is not happening’. This new focus facilitated the asking of a different question: What could be learned from women who hold executive leadership positions in corporate organisations? What was their experience of creating a corporate career? I was now seeking a depth of understanding that when theoretically interrogated would provide a set of themes that could be used to provide insight into what attracts (motivation, values and drivers) and retains women in executive positions in Western corporate organisations. Using inductive reasoning I identified some of the unconscious patterns in the lived experiences of the research participants. Taking their stories and subjecting them to deliberate analysis enabled the illumination of a different story
that unfolded in multiple layers of meaning that allowed the emergence of patterns that were invisible and once identified, demonstrated that something else could be possible for women seeking corporate executive positions.

With this more empowering focus I moved to the field a second time and this time I held conversations (organised as coherent conversations and individual interviews) with twelve women who held executive positions. The narratives from these conversations provide the key data from which the thematic interpretations are made in this study.

The coherent conversation phases are organised in separate sections. I will now present in detail a description of the participant demographics and the sample sizes for each of the coherent conversation phases.

3.2.1 Coherent conversations Phase One: Why are women missing from executive leadership?

With a burning question and a problem lens I went to the field. With the particular purpose of discussing women’s corporate career development in mind, a non-random sample was selected (O'Leary, 2010). The participant sample had to have the characteristics of senior or middle managers and participants had to be working in or with a corporate organisation within the financial services industry. Each individual identified was given an information letter and consent form (see Appendix A) and were invited to volunteer to take part in the research. Each participant was given the choice to participate and withdraw from the project at any time.

As discussed above, this study began with five coherent conversations (held as a form of focus group). These conversations were between myself and senior and middle managers across a broad range of ages and included three conversations made up of women only and two mixed conversations of males and females. Each of the conversations consisted of eight to ten people and lasted between one to two hours. The conversations took place face-to-face in the training room of a corporate organisation as agreed with the participants and myself. Four were held in Sydney and one was held in Melbourne.
Focusing on the original research question (Why are there are so few women in executive positions in corporate organisations?) these conversations provided an opportunity to observe a large amount of interaction (Morgan, 1998). The interaction among the participants led to quality dialogue that was free flowing and allowed the participants to express their stories and experiences of women’s careers within corporate organisations. I recorded on multiple tapes and the participants were offered the opportunity to review the themes from the transcripts.

The key themes identified in these conversations provide an additional layer of comment and observation to enrich the findings I made from interviewing the twelve women in Phase Two of the research.

3.2.2 Coherent conversations Phase Two: Leading Ladies

The ‘leading ladies’ who were invited to participate in this inquiry were actively ‘doing’ or ‘being’ executive leadership. The research participants for the individual interviews were required to hold an executive position as a CEO, Director or an executive position that reported to a CEO or Managing Director. This requirement meant that the participants were flowing against the statistical direction of women’s underrepresentation in executive positions. Twelve individual interviews were held lasting between one and two hours. Five of the women were experienced executives who held major positions of influence at CEO or Director level and eight were key executives holding executive positions reporting to a CEO or Managing Director.

Of the women interviewed seven were Australian born and could be described as having a middle class Anglo Saxon background, two were from a working class British background and three had European back grounds that were described by the participants as having strong cultural effects on their career choices. Despite being randomly selected it was interesting to note that eleven of the twelve participants had children.

A distinctive factor was the educational levels of the participants, six held Masters degrees, one was completing a Masters, four held a bachelor degree and one held a graduate certificate. Among those interviewed three were in the age range 30-39, five
were in the age range 40-49, three were in the age range 50-59 and one was over 60. Although the numbers were small it is a significant result that 67% of the participants were under 50. All the participants expressed having witnessed major changes in the gender composition of their organisations.

Introduction to individuals meeting the study’s required demographic were sought through the Industry body ICA (Insurance Council of Australia), networking and personal introduction. An intermediary (who did not later have access to any research information) made initial contact. The benefit of this method of introduction was to provide legitimacy through a shared relationship on both sides whilst reducing the risk of interacting with unknown persons for both the interviewer and interview. This also facilitated rapport building through the shared mutual association of the intermediary who provided the introduction. It provided an opportunity to choose interviewees who were knowledgeable and interested in the area of research, across a distribution of functions.

Initial contact was made via an introduction and followed with a phone call or email enclosing the information sheet and a consent form (see Appendix A).

An email confirmation detailing the date, venues and time of interview was sent to the participant. These details were mutually agreed upon by both parties and facilitated the confidentiality of the individuals participating in the research.

The individual coherent conversations took place face-to-face in a convenient location mutually agreed by the participant and myself. The conversations centered on the participant’s experience of their career journey and how they felt about their career experience in corporate organisations, as well as what influenced their career decisions. Through paying attention to what the participant said and the language they used to describe their experience, as well as observing how they are feeling, the participant’s construct of their corporate career experience was revealed.

The benefit of the open-ended guided questions and conversational style is that it provides a high level of response (Lofland, 1971) from which the researcher is able to explore emergent issues. Additionally, the major benefit of the face-to-face
interview is that the researcher has the opportunity to build rapport quickly, it supports the study by requiring the interviewer to listen carefully to what the women say, asking further guiding questions in response to their answers, and simultaneously observing their body language. This approach enabled me to focus on the individual women and the importance they placed on the events in their lives. It also allowed me to delve into their richly layered stories assumptions, and practices through which they constructed the very realities of their everyday (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997) experience in the corporate organisational context.

The conversations involved a stream of narrative consisting of an intricate braiding of stories. Individuals, in telling stories about themselves in relation to others, reconstitute themselves. As the researcher I am not merely a passive observer in all this, even though it is primarily the individual’s life, which is under scrutiny. The goal of finding out about people through conversation is best achieved when there is a non-hierarchical relationship and when the researcher is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship (Oakley, 1981:41). I encouraged these women to speak freely and to describe their reflective experience of their career development, their understanding of its meaning and their feelings about it. This process supported my aim to work with these women as a partner, not as objects of research.

Each conversation began with the guiding question: Would you please tell me about your career journey? Further questioning resulted, building on the flow and direction of the conversation. It included guiding questions such as: What factors do you believe influenced your career? Did being a woman affect your career experience? What factors do you believe influenced your career? What support or constraints did you encounter in your career journey? What is career success to you? How do you perceive you get things done? Using guiding questions allowed the opportunity to tease out themes and issues, explicit and implicit, themes that emerged from the discourse of each story told. Some may call this story telling, but I call this ‘lived experience remembered and articulated’.
The narratives contained in this research evolved out of the coherent conversations between the participants as the storytellers, and myself as the listener and questioner. In my role as researcher I created and held a space for a new story to evolve in a new time. Through my reflection on the text, and reflection about the findings, I have attempted to provide deeper understanding and new ways of seeing what is embedded in their experience stories on a day-to-day basis within the corporate organisation. This process of reflection led to deeper questions, which in turn led to new clarity around the issues. This research assumes that the energy for change is generated in the communication of new information synthesised from that which is already known.

However else we might characterise the interview, most would agree that it is a means of finding out more about people’s understanding of their lives. Our conversations comprised accounts of events together with attempts to interpret them. Rather than facts (which are assumed to have an existence independent of the means of their discovery), such conversations precipitate narratives that are emergent and purposeful.

The conversations were exciting for me in that they were like night-vision goggles, permitting us me to see that which is not ordinarily on view and examine that which is often looked at but seldom seen (Rubin and Rubin, 2005:vii). I was given the opportunity to meet with these amazing women and I was careful not to see this process as a kind of smash and grab opportunity in which I accosted and relieved the participants of whatever useful 'data' they may have. They were not a source of data. These women were more than that, and the event could best be understood as a mutually constructed social event, a dynamic social interaction wherein multiple dialogues were conducted between multiple selves. The participants and I, as the researcher, together through communication and joint action (Griffin, 2002), built a story. The story that emerged was recorded on tape and transcribed. I made lengthy journal notes after each interview in an attempt to record the things that I noticed which were not relayed in voice, their manner, or their expressions. I made the transcript of all the tapes available to every participant so they could check the transcript of their personal narratives. I also kept a research journal of my own reflections and experience.
It became clear that each woman’s story was similar, despite being shaped by a different journey. Each story formed part of the larger story around women and their career choices, and with each of the participants stories came the possibility of a new and more empowering story around women and the taking of executive positions in corporate organisations. I have attempted to put on paper a representation of these women’s corporate career experiences as they lived it. I aimed to make sensitive observations, listen to all the voices, accurately record, interpret and reflect the themes and patterns, which began to arise from the individual stories. Details of the analysis process I used to bring these women’s stories to life follows.

3.3 Approach to analysis

Using Complexity based inquiry methods of coherent conversations, attractor and fractal narrative analysis, I reviewed, analysed and synthesised the narratives through many iterative cycles. It was through this review process that patterns of the participants’ experiences were recognised, and explanatory themes began to emerge. Then I made thematic interpretations that provide insight into women’s experience and the taking of executive positions in corporate organisations. It is my aim that these insights will provide impetus for others to continue exploring new ways of organising work in corporate organisations that will provide opportunity for organisations to become more inclusive and rewarding for women.

I use illustrative analytical descriptions for the fractal fragments to demonstrate how applied Complexity based pattern analysis identifies underlying patterns of order together with possible future emergence. Understanding such underlying patterns provides an effective way of identifying what is involved in determining how organisations self organise to get things done.

The analysis involved an initial reading of the transcripts of each interview to get a sense of the content. The transcripts were read numerous times before analysis. I wanted to make sure that I was not reading what I thought I had heard, or seeing what I wanted to see. The postmodern discourse has brought our attention to the importance of language in how we understand and interpret our worlds and the
relationship of language to both knowledge and power which, Foucault (1980) argues cannot be separated. I paid particular attention to the words used and the type of language that was used by the participants. Was the language assertive, hopeful, submissive or apologetic? How did their words reflect their actions and their thinking? I focused on the language and the symbols they used to try and capture the subtleties of the text.

It is my interpretation of their lives that is finally fixed in print. This remains true regardless of the extent to which they are involved with my writing up the interviews. It is naive to think that these interviews consist entirely of collecting data rather in the manner of shelling peas. Lives do not consist of data; they consist of stories and stories are negotiated during social interaction. The stories (along with the selves they constitute) continue long after the writing is finished; it is important to me that their story is told so that history holds a ‘hopeful’ story to influence and shape the future of women’s careers in corporate organisations.

The Complexity metaphors used in this Complexity-based inquiry have previously been described; they will now be discussed in terms of how they have been used in this research.

### 3.3.1 Fractal narrative analysis

As highlighted previously the notion of fractals is used in this study to explore self-similarity in regard to the dynamic career actions that emerged for the women who participated in this study.

The presence of recurrent patterns of behavioural variation in the women’s different levels of activity is suggestive of self-similarity, where the same aspects appear across all scales. I propose that the behaviour of these professional women in the social context of the corporate organisation can constitute a system exhibiting self-organisation and that the global patterns are a natural consequence of the local interactions independently of any central control.
There are many stories told in corporations around women and their careers and this inquiry uses fractality as a way of examining those stories to identify the behaviour patterned by women in executive positions. Each woman’s story is a fractal, which is replicated across a range of organisations and across multiple industries.

Fractal narrative analysis is a method that places emphasis on patterning. I purposefully searched for a process that could be applied to interview text in a way that made it transparent to the reader. I believe fractal narrative analysis provides a way of giving life to the study of narrative.

Viewing complex systems as fractally constructed means looking for similarities that are apparent across different scales. Identifying any views or concerns that were similarly expressed across all the individual conversations, I then recorded them on individual worksheets (see example, Appendix B). From a Complexity perspective the study of one fractal we can glimpse the macrocosm. Smaller scale fractals remain equally complex microcosms of the whole. (For example, we can make inferences across for all corporations, or industry sectors). The capacity for self-organisation and emergence in one fractal represents the dynamics and capacity for emergence of the whole system (Kuhn, 2009:87). This was made apparent as I compared the women’s stories with one another and with themes previously indentified in the literature.

3.3.2 Attractor narrative analysis

Attractor analysis enables us to make sense of narratives without overly simplifying them. Having identified the major ways of explaining women’s experience in fractal patterns I then identified how these behaviours were organised around a number of attractors of meaning. From these attractors (motivators, values, issues of concern) that shape attitudes and influence behaviours, I was then able to make inferences about form, function and processes that have and may continue to occur (Kuhn and Woog, 2006) in relation to the self-organising, dynamic and emergent nature of these women’s careers.
3.3.3 Fractal fragments

In discussing my findings I have used the concept of fractal fragments (Kuhn, 2009) to illustrate the participants’ perceptions and experiences of career. *These fragments are fractal as they indicate simultaneously similar experiences across multiple sites* (Kuhn, 2009:83). The fractal fragments (vignettes or narrative accounts) represent only a minute proportion of the narratives relating to women’s stories within corporate organisations.

3.3.4 Communicative connectedness

It has been identified in chapter two that relationships and the quality of communication really matters to the development of women’s careers. I looked for indications of communicative connectedness in the women’s narratives. The metaphor of communicative connectedness is used to describe the nature and quality of interconnectedness (Woog, 2004) between women and their key relationships at work (for example, with their manager; peers; team and networks internally and externally).

3.3.5 Sensitive dependence on initial conditions

The metaphor is used to identify the initial conditions of the interactional and communal contexts that are recognised as influencing women’s engagement with the corporate organisation and the way the women manage their executive careers. Initial conditions continue to influence the actions women take in relation to their careers even after many years. Slightly different initial conditions can produce very different outcomes (Kuhn, 2009). Identifying and understanding initial conditions will allow for the prediction of influence, small changes in conditions that shape women’s engagement with the corporation and the emergence of women’s corporate carers.

3.3.6 Phase space – phrase space

Social behaviour within organisations, in terms of the actions, the organisational work process and activities, is complex. The metaphor of phase space is used to support our understanding of social behaviour by drawing our attention to the realisation that ways of knowing and doing represent limited, habitual and socially
supported frameworks within a space of infinite possibly (Kuhn, 2009:52). There are many possibilities … an entity occupies only a minute proportion of its possible phase space (Kuhn 2009:48). Phrase space is used in this research to describe the way that our ideas and our ways of living are strongly shaped by the communities and contexts of which we are a part and that paying attention to the expressed attitudes, aspirations and criticisms of the participants is crucial in creating optimal conditions (Kuhn, 2009) and preferred habits of thought in the future.

3.4 Integrity in the research process

Integrity and responsibility were paramount considerations throughout this research process (O’Leary, 2009). It was important to me that I upheld the highest standards of ethical and professional behaviour in the production of the knowledge and in my relationships with the research participants. As the researcher I attempted to build open sharing relationships with those participating in the inquiry. I believe collaborative and trusting relationships were fostered between the participants and myself by building rapport, empathetically listening and reflecting within a transparent and open inquiry process. I was committed to an ethic that stresses personal accountability, caring, the values of the individual expressiveness, the capacity for empathy, and sharing of emotionality (Collins, 1990:216, in Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). Through this approach I attempted to make sure that my research findings were:

- dependable (that the research methods are systematic and well documented)
- transferable (the findings lead to lessons learned that may be germane to larger group (O’Leary, 2009))
- relevant (useful and have credible conclusions)
- justified through quality observations and coherent discourse and that I observe what I am supposed to observe, while attempting to be self-reflective, self correcting and self limiting (Dimitrov and Woog, 1997).

I will now discuss how each of these key indicators has been met in my research.
3.4.1 Dependability

The two indicators that are most often used to assess consistency are dependability and reliability (O’Leary, 2009). This research establishes dependability by ensuring that complete records of all stages of the research processes are kept and are accessible. This means that the research methods are, developed in ways that are consistent, systematic, well documented and designed to account for research subjectivities (O’Leary, 2009:74).

3.4.2 Transferability

According to O’Leary (2009) transferability refers to whether findings and/or conclusions from a sample, setting, or group lead to lessons learned that may be germane to a larger population, a different setting, or to another group (p.75). This research achieves transferability through providing a detailed description of the research setting and methods so that applicability can be determined by those reading the research account.

3.4.3 Relevant findings

Producing findings that will be considered useful by relevant stakeholders was particularly relevant to this research as it has a change intent. Making relevant and appropriate arguments is about being able to attest to the credibility of your data and the trustworthiness of the results (O’Leary, 2009). This research establishes relevance and credibility by making the transcript of the coherent conversations available to all the participants for review. Furthermore, relevance is achieved through the use of coherent conversations; the informal and open-ended structure of coherent conversations allows the participants to feel comfortable in their surroundings creating a working relationship that supports the building of trust and rapport. This then supports the free flowing expression of the participant’s experience.

I was conscious of the trust and power issues implicit in what I was doing. The interpretative practice of making sense of one’s findings is both artful and political. As a novice researcher I paid particular attention to the way I synthesised
the text and I was concerned that it would be useful; able to make practical and relevant contribution to organisations and women’s career development.

3.4.4 Reflexivity

I am aware that my own values, social and cultural past shape my perception of the data and its meaning to some degree and that as the researcher I cannot be completely separated from the research (Guba, 1990). The interpretive paradigm views the interviewer as part of the process and is sensitive to how personal biography may shape the study (Marshall and Rossman, 1999:2-3). Coming to know myself more within the process of the research itself, I consciously practiced reflexivity (self-awareness) as reflexivity forces us to come to terms with not only the research problem, but also all the multiple selves we bring to the research. Reinharz (1997) argues that we not only bring ourselves to the field... we also create the self in the field (p.3). Reinharz further suggests that we bring many selves with us, and those selves fall into three categories: ...research based selves, brought selves (the selves that historically, socially, and personally create our standpoints) and situationally created selves (1997:5). Each of the selves comes into play in the research and each has a distinctive voice. Reflexivity, along with postmodern sensibilities, demands that we interrogate each of the selves regarding the ways in which our research efforts are shaped and staged around binaries, contradictions, and paradoxes that form our own lives. We must not only question ourselves, but our writing and our interactions with the research participants.

At numerous points, I stood back and scrutinised the relationship between my methodology and the information it had enabled me to collect. I then took a second step back and considered how the relation between methodology and the kind of information I had collected determined the eventual form of my account.

I am attempting to represent reality as it is experienced and lived by the women who participated in the research. However with interpretation comes the question: Are we interpretively rigorous? Can our co-created construction be trusted to represent reality? Stanley and Wise (1993) suggest the best alternative is that we present accounts of how and why we think we know what we do about the research
situations and the people in them, and that is what I have attempted to do in this section of the thesis.

### 3.4.5 Ethical considerations

Full disclosure of the purpose and method of the research was provided to the participants. Their informed consent was gained prior to prepare them for the potential risk involved. Withdrawal at any time enabled the participants to maintain control at all times. Permission was sought from individuals to record interviews on audiotape. All participants have access to their transcripts on request.

Privacy of the individuals and the organisations they work for has been maintained at all times. Pseudonyms have been allocated to all parties involved to protect anonymity. Documentation and interviews will be maintained in a secure filing cabinet for the required period of retention (6 years).

I will now move on to describe the industry context in which the participants worked.

### 3.5 Background of the Australian financial services industry

In a study with such wide subject matter and applicability there is always an issue for the researcher about how much data to collect. That is why I set the boundary conditions for Phase Two to include only women who worked or had worked in the financial services industry at the time of the interviewing. It is noted that some of the women have since left the industry, as have I. Following is a description of the financial service industry.

#### 3.5.1 Australian Financial Services Sector - an overview

The Australian financial services sector is sophisticated, stable, vibrant and diverse. As one of the most advanced financial services industries in the world, household and business customers can expect an efficiently regulated world-class industry that has an unparalleled economic record (Australian Trade Commission, [http://www.austrade.gov.au](http://www.austrade.gov.au)) as the 4th largest wealth management sector in the world, Australia can and should be considered as a centre of excellence in financial
services (Financial Services Council/PricewaterhouseCoopers CEO Survey 2010:15). The strength of the Australian financial sector was evidenced by the resilience of the Australian economy throughout the recent financial crisis. The Australian economy was ranked the most resilient in the Asia-Pacific region in 2009 and as one of the four most resilient globally (Source: IMD World Competitiveness Online 1995-2009 (Updated: May 2009)).

The industry accounted for 8.1 per cent of real gross value added in 2008, or $81 billion and it has expanded 6.6% over the last two decades (Australian Bureau of Statistics 5206. National Income, Expenditure and Product, Time Series Workbook (released 2 September 2009)).

Ranked against other industries such as manufacturing or mining, the finance sector has been one of the most dynamic and is almost as big as the mining sector, the industry traditionally associated with Australia’s economic prosperity (Australian Trade Commission, 2011). The finance sector has been one of the country’s highest performing industries, achieving an average annual growth rate of 4.8% a year between 1987 and 2007. This growth rate is well above the combined average for all industries (3.5%) and reflects the strength of the Australian service-based economy, with assets of more than A$4.5 trillion, which is equivalent to almost four times GDP (Australian Trade Commission, 2011).

The Australian finance industry employs 208,900 people, making up 1.83% of the employed labour force in Australia as at November 2010. Of the industry divisions for which ABS release data, the finance and insurance industry ranks as one of the highest for participation of females. Data for November 2010 shows that 52.5% of employees in the finance industry are female and 47.5% are male. The finance and insurance industry ranks as one of the highest for participation of females. Furthermore, the industry has a significantly higher female participation rate than for the overall employed labour force (being 52.5% versus 47.5% in November 2010) (Australian Bankers Association Inc., 2011).
As at November 2010, the majority of employees in the finance and insurance industry were *clerical and administrative workers* making up 166,000 or 43.7% of employment in the finance and insurance industry. Clerical and administrative workers have made up the largest proportion of finance and insurance industry employment over the past decade but the proportion has been falling, from 53.9% in 2000 to 43.7% in 2010 (Australian Bankers Association Inc., 2011).

The proportion of males and females having an occupation of manager is 20.3% of males to 12.4% of females. For males, the proportion that is classified as professionals in the finance and insurance industry 42.8%. For females, the proportion of professionals is 24.7% (Australian Bankers Association Inc., 2011).

Average weekly earnings in the finance and insurance industry are 21% higher than the national average; as at November 2010 and the Industry has had strong productivity growth in the past five years. However, ABS figures show that the industry’s productivity growth has not been reflected in addressing the gender wage gap. The finance industry has a 31% wage gap between men and women; in fact the pay gap between men and women in finance industry grew from 24% to 28% in 2008 (Australian Centre for Leadership for Women, 2009).

Australia has a sound financial system based on a considered approach by Government to prudential supervision. A world-class regulatory environment supports financial services industry growth. In October 2008, the World Economic Forum assessed Australia as having the third best regulation of securities exchanges and the fourth soundest banking system in the world (Source: World Economic Forum, The Global Competitiveness Report 2008-09).

### 3.5.2 Business reputation and probity

The World Economic Forum rates Australia as one of the world’s best performing global financial centres. It’s ranked number one in Asia and number two in the world - above places like Hong Kong and Singapore. This is in large part due to our performance, efficiency, stability and low-risk profile (Source: World Economic Forum, The Global Competitiveness Report 2008-09).
Australia's long history of probity provides a beneficial environment for financial businesses.

The 2006 IMD World Competitiveness Yearbook ranked Australia eighth in the World for the efficiency in the delivery of banking and financial services to support business. Australia also ranked in the top 10 countries for:

- stock markets providing adequate financing to companies (4th)
- shareholders' rights are sufficiently protected (3rd)
- finance education meets the needs of enterprises (5th)
- transparency of financial institutions (7th)
- flow of credit from banks to businesses (7th)
- central bank policy is a positive impact on economic development (3rd).

In addition, the soundness of the Australian financial system, as measured by Moody's Bank Financial Strength Index, is rated as one of the highest in the world. (Sources used in this Fact Sheet: RBA, ABS, ASX, Axis).

The Australian financial services industry has a lot to be proud of. The industry is strong, particularly measured against countries still struggling from the global financial crisis. The World Economic Forum ranked Australia second among the world’s financial centres as a place to do business, behind only the United Kingdom (World Economic Forum’s second annual Financial Development Report, 2009). It is appropriate that this research be carried out into the participation of women in this sophisticated and hugely influential arm of corporate life. Typically the financial services industry is thought of as a male dominated industry. When Gail Kelly took over as the first ever-female chief executive of an Australian Big Four bank in 2008, there was considerable speculation on whether she would become involved in issues around the promotion of women in the workforce. Mrs Kelly carried with her a massive weight of public expectations as a successful woman in such a top role in the male-dominated ranks of top Australian CEOs. I suggest that her appointment was so obvious, and the public expectations placed on her were so high, because she
is such a novelty within the executive ranks of the industry. Speaking at a joint Chief Executive Women and Westpac lunch (March 2010) Mrs Kelly said, *Women have a long way to go*, we need to take action to support women’s progress and *remove the barriers preventing women from achieving their full potential.*
Chapter 4 - Analysis and discussion of the findings

4.1 Introduction

The empirical findings of this inquiry are presented in this chapter. As discussed previously the fieldwork, which provides the empirical evidence, was derived from coherent conversations that were conducted in two phases. The findings from the two phases shape the structure of this section. Coherent conversation Phase One: Why are women missing from executive positions? consists of five conversations. Phase Two: Leading Ladies consists of twelve individual conversations with women holding executive positions in corporate organisations. The identification of attractors through analysing the patterning of the fractal fragments derived from the narratives recorded in Phase Two show there are four sets of attractors: Passion, Identity, Freedom and Connection which influence these women’s taking of executive positions within the corporate organisations.

Following undertaking a fractal narrative analysis the findings from Phase One are presented as a cumulative list of fractal themes, indicative of the themes derived from each of the five coherent conversations. I have constructed a single composite narrative that represents a broad description of the responses. This narrative is presented to provide an additional layer of insight and understanding about what the participants expressed in relation to women’s experience of a corporate career and can be viewed in conjunction with the findings that emerged from Phase Two, adding a deeper level of understanding to the complex story around women’s corporate careers.

A desire to explore new ground and develop a richer more in-depth analysis of women’s career journeys provided the impetus for conducting coherent conversation Phase Two. Phase Two represents the primary source of the empirical findings and the basis of the emergent contribution to knowledge of this thesis. Coherent conversations were used to explore how twelve women, who held or had held executive positions in corporate organisations, constructed and made sense of their everyday career experience. The narratives generated were analyzed and synthesised
(through fractal narrative analysis and attractor analysis) to identify patterns of similarity. The findings are firstly organised and presented as fractal fragments based on the narratives collected through the research inquiry in relation to seven key guiding questions:

1. Please tell me the story of your career journey?
2. What factors do you believe influenced your career?
3. What support or constraints did you encounter in your career journey?
4. What was your career development experience?
5. How do you perceive that you get things done?
6. Did being a woman affect your career experience in the corporate organisation?
7. What is career success to you?

In the analysis, I have used a selection of fractal fragments, which are indicative of a range of practical lived experiences from each of the participants. The nature of a fractal is that the ‘fragment’ you are looking at is representative not of a part but of a whole; each fractal is always the ‘whole’ but at a different scale of detail (Kuhn and Woog, 2006:15). I propose that the fractal fragments used in this study are indicative of other executive women’s corporate career experience across many different organisations and industries. Firstly I will demonstrate that there is something to be learned from these women’s reflections that is useful for other women seeking to take executive positions within corporate organisations. Secondly I will argue that this learning provides valuable insight for organisations that are seeking a way to proactively engage, develop and retain women in executive positions within their organisations.

This analysis concludes with the identification of the major themes and four attractor sets from which I make inference about what has guided and shaped these women’s behaviors and attitudes towards their corporate career and their experience within the corporate organisation.
4.2 Coherent conversation Phase One: Why are women missing from executive leadership?

4.2.1 Fractal themes identified in Phase One

Looking at the totality of responses from the five coherent conversations thirteen fractal themes were identified that relate to the group’s view on why women were missing from executive positions. These are:

1. Women’s construct of corporate career changes, depending on where they are in their life cycle.
2. Societal pressures influence women’s career and family choices.
3. A ‘boys club’ continues to impede women’s career aspirations within the corporate organisation.
4. Stereotypical family roles persist within our culture: male as the breadwinner, female as the family care-giver.
5. Women’s support for one another in the workplace is inconsistent versus men’s support and promotion of one another.
6. Women’s corporate careers are constrained by family commitments.
7. Pushing through a metaphorical ‘pain barrier’ provides the tipping point for a woman’s career and acceptance in the industry market.
8. Women’s career development is heavily dependant on the manager they report to.
9. Most women do not want to take on executive positions: a corporate career means different things to different people.
10. The spouse with the capacity to earn the largest income is more likely to have the career and support the family.
11. Gendered organisational practices constrain women’s career development.
12. Flexible work policies often do not benefit women’s life work balance.
13. Male leadership styles are the corporate organisational norm.

Below I have set out each theme with evidence in the form of fractal fragments drawn from the conversations (in italics). These fragments are broadly indicative of those responses from the five coherent conversations and are included to add clarity and depth to explain the themes.
1. Women’s construct of corporate career changes, depending on where they are in their life cycle.

Career means doing something you enjoy. Trying to find the job you like the most and getting paid for it. Job satisfaction and choosing the best skills you have for the right job … to some people it means more money and status. Sometimes I think there are too many choices. (B)

The average women nowadays, who possess a university degree, is around 22 or 23 years of age. So therefore if you want to work after your university studies it takes longer to settle down and raise a family. (D)

I find there are different types of women; there are the ones who are married with children that are career orientated and then there are the ones who choose a job, it's not a career choice its more for money and what fits in with their lifestyle. My friends work for many different reasons: money, status, development and learning it’s quite a personal thing. (B)

After having had a child I am happy to sit where I am for now, I am not searching for that next career move but I still want to be part of it. I still want to get there; it will just take a bit longer. (E)

Thirty years ago we were not expected to reach great heights on the employment hierarchy. Most women held support or secretarial positions or like my mum worked on the production line in factories. As a middle-aged woman I would love to have had the opportunity to be in my mid twenties and taste the workplace today. There are so many more choices out there for women; you can choose to be anything you want. (A)

It’s not what you can do, but who you are, if you go out drinking that gets you a higher position. Being a mother you get excluded… before I became a mother it didn’t matter what state I was in before I got home, whereas now
I would not do that. My priorities have changed, I don’t need to spend that much time at work, I am not as career orientated. My view of the world did change after I had my daughter, I said it wouldn't but it did. Now I organise my time to maximize my time with my daughter. (E)

2. Societal pressures influence women’s career and family choices.

There is pressure today to have everything - to travel, to have a good career, an education, children, a nice house, etc. Universities today seem to have thousands of courses to choose from and this can sometimes confuse people. As technology has developed, a lot of manual jobs have been taken away and the jobs created are becoming more and more technical and require a much higher level of education. (C)

I find there is a lot of financial and social pressure placed on people today, so much more nowadays, as opposed to before. I, like a lot of Australians, have the dream of owning my own home with all the trimmings and to acquire this, people have little choice but to work longer. This was a huge factor and probably the main reason why as a couple we choose to have a smaller family and at a more mature age. (D)

3. A ‘boys club’ continues to impede women’s career aspirations within the corporate organisation.

My promotion rate was so much slower in my last company, little shifts here and there. I was there two years and did not get a real promotion, no matter how hard I worked. I would apply for roles and they would say, we need you doing what you are doing. A guy came in and within seven months he was promoted and he had less experience and skills, but he was one of the boys. I left and moved to this company and I have already been promoted within six months … I think it has a lot to do with the culture and the leadership of the company. In my last company it was a real boys club and in this company they have a lot of women in top management and it’s different you get more opportunity, it’s a change in leadership and culture. (E)
The boys club exists in the Insurance industry – they bring in younger ones and make them feel important. Whoever goes to the pub and goes to lunch and gathers together gets looked after. It’s the footy club mentality. If a job comes up and if they are in the boys club one of them will get it, they get the tap on the back. No interviews, no advertisements are involved; they just go straight to the boys club and women are covertly left out. I stood up and said hey I have the quantifications and am probably more qualified than Joe why weren’t the positions advertised? And their response was, we already have the person. (E)

I have been excluded from client events e.g. rugby and golf – the males’ perception was that I couldn’t play golf, didn’t like it or I could not play well. Therefore it was assumed that I wouldn’t entertain the clients well. (D)

4. Stereotypical roles persist within our culture: male as the breadwinner, female as the family caregiver.

Social expectation is still very much that the woman’s place is in the home, therefore … there is always going to be a degree of guilt from mothers who hold full time positions even after we have made the decision to work. (A)

While it is much more accepted now that the primary care giver can be either male or female, society still judges you. My husband and I were at the airport and I ran into a friend and she asked where we were going and I said I was going away for work and then she asked who was looking after the children? My husband stepped in and said ‘Whom I am. I am their dad; I can look after them fine’. I still feel guilty some times when I am travelling. (E)

5. Women’s support for one another in the workplace is inconsistent versus men’s support and promotion of one another.

I think women could be more supportive of one another. I find women tend to have a more competitive nature in the workforce against each other, rather than encouraging and promoting each other like men do. They can be a little bit more critical at times and maybe lack a little self-confidence. (A)
Women are not necessarily supportive of other women in the corporate industry. In the Facultative underwriting area, I find we are very supportive of each other. However, we find older women in the market are a problem (in other organisations) they can be very hard to deal with. They don’t mentor and I have the feeling they don’t think they have to mentor younger women because if they weren’t supported when they first entered the workforce why should they do it now. (B)

I think networking with other women helps you feel more confident. Internally an executive woman leader, who showed me how to use my power in an effective way, has supported me. It was so beneficial at the time because I was feeling powerless, and unfortunately this does not always happen. (E)

6. Women’s corporate careers are constrained by family commitments

There is a simple answer to why there are so few women in executive positions: motherhood. I still have the ambition to excel but there are other things that are personal to me so I am not willing to sacrifice both. The higher up the ladder you go, the more the demands on your time with your role. Maybe more travel, which many of us choose against over looking after the family, my children come first. (D)

If a woman chooses to work and have a family, sometimes she is discriminated against in the work place in terms of developing her career. Mothers who work part-time are forgotten and women themselves fear a little about what others think of them when they return to work part time – people think you lose some of your intelligence or something. (A)

There is a clear choice that you have to make, you either have children and your career will be slightly affected or you choose not to have children if you want to excel in your career. (D)
7. Pushing through a metaphorical ‘pain barrier’ provides the tipping point for a woman’s career and their acceptance in the market.

There is a real pain barrier to cross in terms of your career as a woman. As your market presence gets bigger, your credibility builds with the clients; you move through the barrier and it becomes easier. The boys club starts to drop away, I guess you become part of the boys club. I think many women are not able to push through the barrier. It does get easier or you get to know the people or the company and you know who to network with and if they are not respectful to me as a woman I don’t go there. (E)

8. Women’s career development is heavily dependant on the manager they report to.

Managers from the ‘old school’ don’t seem to encourage women employees as much to progress with their career as young managers do. Younger managers from the ‘new school’ tend to accept change and adapt better. If women show their employers they are enthusiastic about something and can demonstrate this to them, males feel more confident about giving women the opportunity to progress. (D)

It is good to point out that for a management team, it is great to have both genders to see through the different coloured glasses- different approaches towards the running of the business and it filters down… In my new company there are a lot of women in top management and we get more opportunity. (E)

9. Most women do not want to take on executive positions: a corporate career means different things to different people.

Do women really want senior roles? My experience is that some women think it is too much hard work to hold senior positions. (A)
Why aren’t there more women on boards? The majority of women I know...enjoy working within a team as opposed to being a decision maker within a high profile role. It may be because women choose to stay out of the office politics that a leader cops from employees at times. (B)

Career does not have to be defined as progressive. (B)

A lot has to do with the personality of the worker as well as the nature of the job. Some women feel perfectly happy to stay in the positions they have for the rest of their working career. A lot of it comes down to each individual making his or her own decisions. A lot of the time it is up to the women to put her hand up and make her self noticed as a suitable candidate for developing their role. The job opportunity is not going to come to the individual unless they show interest. (A)

10. The spouse with the capacity to earn the largest income is more likely to have the career and support the family.

As a couple we worked out between us that we would like to have someone fulltime at home to bring up the children and therefore the spouse with the biggest income is the one to support the family by continuing to work full time. (C)

11. Gendered organisational practices constrain women’s career development

The senior management women tend to be in positions that are more on the non-technical side of the industry, for example office management, marketing or communications. These roles are more sociable and more suited maybe to women’s material makeup. This could contribute to the reason why many women are less likely to move into operations roles. (D)
I have spoken to my team members about preferring to have a client lunch rather than dinner; they listened but didn’t seem to understand. I think as a woman you bond differently with children, it’s a different bond to men; it doesn’t seem to bother men if they get home late and do not see their child. It’s more special to a woman to get home and feed their child. (E)

Some people think [the changing gender balance in the industry] is a youth thing. The young managers coming in think differently. A lot of people working within the Insurance industry are aging and those employers still think the old-world way. That is probably why it is getting better for women due to those people starting to retire. (D)

12. Flexible work policies often do not benefit women’s life work balance.

I work in the corporate environment as these hours suit me better with balancing my family life. I seek flexibility. This has its issues; some work colleagues treat you as if you are full time even when you are only working four days a week and therefore there are times when you have to work back on the fourth day to try and get the tasks completed by the end of the week. (B)

It’s not so much the company that puts pressure on workers with family commitments. A lot of the time it is the individual themselves who puts the pressure on themselves to perform at the same level as their colleagues who don’t have family responsibilities. (B)

I am the first manager who has been allowed to come back to work on a part time basis, three days a week. I made the proposal to the General Manager and he agreed with it. My manager was not very happy about it, as she was not involved in the decision. Everything I do in the three days has to be very well organised and I always put the team’s needs first. (E)

Build Insurance company is a fairly woman friendly company, they have good maternity leave options compared to other companies. It is why I stay with the company and returned to work. (A)
13. Male leadership styles are the corporate organisational norm.

Men and women have different discussion styles, what is seen as a negative trait for women is seen as an positive trait for men. I was coached by a male coach to change the ‘we’ to ‘I’ [in my conversations] so it would be seen as my idea not a general view. After changing the language, I received feedback that I was becoming more assertive and the perception of my ability changed. Its funny I thought I had to be like ice; the only women I had seen were quite cold, like ice, but that just wasn’t me. (E)

Some males still find it difficult to adjust to me as a woman being their manager, but the majority is getting use to it. (A)

4.2.2 The composite narrative of the participants’ corporate career experience

From the fractal themes identified above I have composed the following composite narrative. Written as one person’s story this fractal narrative contains all the fractal themes and issues relating to a woman’s total corporate career experience through her life stages that were identified in Phase One.

As a well-educated and independent young woman in her early twenties, securing a graduate position with a blue chip corporate organisation within the financial services industry was an exciting prospect for me. After my first corporate interview I was convinced that everything and anything was possible for me from a corporate career perspective. I never anticipated that anything would hold me back from what I wanted to achieve, I just had to work hard and reach for the stars. I was offered the first role I went for and not long into the role I remember thinking to myself, what were those gender study lecturers talking about, there are no gender barriers or limitations for women’s careers in this corporate organisation. Everyone treated me so well, I was just like one of the boys. I guess all that old school feminist stuff you read about corporations being boys clubs is long dead. Those hidden threads of concern
attached to gender, the corporate system or societal norms were invisible in my eyes. At the time I would have strongly suggested they do not exist and to all intents and purposes they did not for me, because as yet I had not tested them.

The first few years things were a little slow from a career promotion perspective, but I worked very hard and watched and learned. I applied for a few roles and the HR lady said they really needed me to stay where I was for a while because I was doing such a great job. I must admit I was surprised when the new guy got his promotion ahead of me. It was so quick, we all knew he was not up to the job, but the boss said he was a good bloke. Apparently they went to the same school and his son played rugby with him. I am not sure what that had to do with the job, but apparently it was an indicator that he would do well. I was very disappointed and spoke to one of the very few ladies that worked in a senior role in another department. She suggested that it was all about networking with the right people and that there was a kind of a metaphorical pain barrier that we women had to go through to prove we were worthy of respect. Frankly I was starting to get annoyed at this kind of treatment. I was building a good reputation in the market place, getting great feedback from the clients and I was working really hard. So I didn’t understand why I had to go through some crazy pain barrier just because I did not play football.

This was not how I thought my career would happen; I was ambitious and really wanted to do well and I could not understand why I did not appear to be taken seriously. I decided to get a coach. He suggested that women are often not taken seriously because of their communication style; they are either too collaborative or too aggressive and seem to fall into a career-less void. He helped me changed my communication style, and I was amazed to find that just by changing my language could change the way people perceived my ability. For example, instead of saying ‘we’ did this’, I had to use more ‘I did this’. It did make a difference as I was given feedback that I was seen as much more assertive: this resulted in a few small projects to manage but nothing worthwhile.
Finally, after a couple of years I decided I had to leave to get ahead; I just wasn’t going anywhere, all that study and hard work didn’t seem to mean anything when it came to getting a promotion. I was beginning to see that it was my gender that was holding me back in this organisation: the boys’ club culture was so strong, and I felt powerless to do anything about it. I chose my next organisation carefully and moved to an organisation that had won an Equal Employment Opportunity award and the Employer of Choice award for two years in a row. I noted that they had a lot more women in their leadership team and their policies looked more progressive and inclusive; they offered lots of development opportunities and they promoted a good work life balance.

I was climbing the corporate ladder; my career was going well and then my husband and I decided we would like to have a family. I had just turned thirty and we did not want to leave it much later. My parents were putting a lot of pressure on me to leave work when I had children but I was going to do both - have a family and a career. The company said they were supportive of women having a family and a career, and there was a great maternity leave policy, so I was not worried about my career or managing the family. I believed I just needed to be organised. My husband and I agreed we would share the home responsibilities and given I was the one with the capacity to make the largest income, I would only take a few months off and go back to work part time then ease my way back to fulltime work. I was very shocked when my manager told me that the company could not accommodate my request for part time work; they said they needed someone fulltime and so I was offered a lesser role in another department. What sort of career support was that? It was not fair.

That was the beginning of my realisation that the organisation was not as supportive of women’s career and family commitments as I initially thought. I had started to push the boundaries of the system by having a family and wanting to do something different. That was when I came up against all those same old societal norms and corporate system boundaries that the lecturer had been talking about many years ago. I was so surprised that the company would not accommodate my request, as I thought they valued my career and me. In reality they were far less flexible than the manual said they would be.
What surprised me even more was that my colleagues were not very supportive of me working part time either. I watched one of the other women who was working three days a week and she had to work extra hours on her days in the office just to get through the work load, it was as if she was expected to do five days' work in three days. I thought this was very unfair; the corporate policies were not implemented as flexibly as they read.

I began to get very anxious about what to do and that made me question whether I really wanted a corporate career: Did I really want to work full time and leave my child in day care? Should I set up my own business? Perhaps I really could not have it all at once. My mother and friends thought I should give it all away and stay at home and look after my child, just like they did. I got lots of well-intended advice from everyone. They all had a story and a personal view of what I should do. They identified every minute difficulty for me: the cost of childcare, the time and logistics issues, the guilt and the loss of work life balance. I call this time my ‘mind chatter’ period: I went over and over the possible scenarios in my mind. I loved working and financially we needed my income, but I did want to be a good mum and I really did not need the pressure of a full time job. This was the time in my life when all those societal and corporate norms were really tested.

When I looked around I found that some of my friends had focused entirely on their careers and they had made tough choices, which often included not having children. Others decided to have children and outsourced the child minding to a significant other or a helper. Some friends left the corporate world and set up their own business so they could have more flexibility. My husband and I chose to work our way around the corporate maze together; he was very supportive of me continuing my career but I had to sacrifice my career for a while. I worked part-time and I could not attend all those client dinners. When I travelled he would mind the children. It was a slow climb up the corporate ladder, but my child was my priority.
I have worked really hard to maintain my corporate career and be where I am today. I have not progressed up the ladder as fast as I thought but progression is not always vertical for me. At this stage of my life I am happy. I love what I do and I am good at it; I am well rewarded and the role keeps me intellectually challenged. I have a great team and lots of flexibility in my role.

I try to support or mentor other women when I can, because the corporate career journey can be a tough road to navigate in our industry. There are very few female role models at the top to learn from, unlike our male colleagues who are very supportive of one another and seem to bring one another along; women do not seem to use their networks well. In the early stages of my career I found the older women were not very helpful. Perhaps this was because they had to do it on their own, so they probably wondered why they should help the young ones. I really valued the little bit of help I did get along the way. So today I share my own experiences with other women hoping this will make their journeys a little lighter and that more women will be able to have a satisfying corporate career. Ultimately I hope that will enable more women to stay and take up executive positions. At least I hope so!

The thirteen identified fractal themes, and the indicative narrative, depict the phrase space of the corporate organisation (within the context of women’s career). The phrase space contains and constrains the way organisational dynamics affect women’s career development and behaviour and their attitude towards their corporate career. Paying attention to the phrase space of corporate organisations provides a better understanding of the way women’s carers are managed in corporate organisations. On the one hand, women are reportedly encouraged to pursue a corporate career, and on the other hand, complying with organisational policies and practices repeatedly constrains their ability to access the flexibility they require to do so.
4.3 Coherent conversation Phase Two: Leading Ladies

The women participating in this study are part of a minority that hold or have held executive positions in corporate organisations within the Australian financial services industry. Career occupies a central position in the lives of these women. They have managed their corporate careers within the same life contexts, dealt with social expectations, socio biological timelines (i.e. timelines associated with marriage, childbearing, family formation, labour market entry and exit), organisational work structures and work cultures as other women who pursue corporate careers. What do these women do that enables them to take executive positions? I will now outline the themes that have emerged from this study. I have organised these in relation to the seven guiding questions that were asked of them.

4.3.1 Question 1: Please tell me the story of your career journey?

In response to this question, I identified sub themes in the narratives of the participants. These are:

1. Their careers emerged almost serendipitously
2. They expressed passion and love for what they did
3. A corporate executive career was not necessarily what they set out to do

Below I have set out each sub theme with evidence in the form of fractal fragments (in italics) to add clarity and depth to explain the sub-themes

1. **Their careers emerged almost serendipitously**

These women’s careers appeared almost serendipitous in nature as they traversed the corporate landscape. Opting in and out of corporations they created their own career model to support their life style choices and what they loved doing. Participants 5 and 10 (below) describe a nonlinear career path:

*I didn’t follow a nice little path working from this job to this job to that… I did lots of things, like working in recruitment and I went back to insurance and by the age of 24 I was running a small insurance brokerage.* (5)
Running your own business… I loved it and it also gave me the freedom to do things, to do some more study at university. I did another degree in tourism and management, I wrote a book, a travel book. I had a baby, fell in love, got married and was able to work from home when I wanted to or go to the office when I wanted to. (10)

Career moves were described as emerging opportunistically or by coincidence as reflected by comments from participants 6, 9, 4 and 12:

People ask me to describe what my work life has been like and in a lot of ways it has been quite opportunistic. Finding things and just chasing them down holes… If I find something that looks interesting I will chase it down… not because its got a really big goal at the end, even if it’s just interesting. (6)

I just continued my career in another way. I started in Insurance. I finished up my education and then actually a lot of things happened by the early eighties, I think they happened by coincidence, I call it coincidence. (9)

My career was more accidental in that I thought I wanted to become a clinical psychologist or go into the health profession… I ended up in marketing when someone said they thought I would be good at it! … I really loved marketing it was kind of like I stumbled across it. (4)

On reflection I did not plan my career, I just worked hard as I had a personal work ethic/belief that if I did I would be rewarded. (12)

2. They expressed passion and love for what they did.
Describing their work in an intensely personal way, these women were passionate about what they did. They loved what they were doing, as the following fragments show:

I am proud of what I do … and I am passionate about making a difference in the organisation. (7)
My whole career … has been based on coaching and developing people. Developing people is really a passion, it is what I really love doing. (10)

I really love this. (4)

It's great stuff, I just love it. (5)

I focused on what I enjoyed rather than what was good for my career. (12)

Additionally, their passion was more than an expressed emotion. Passion for these women was visionary. Like night vision goggles, passion drove them forward, enabling them to see through the haze of everyday activity and focus on what they loved doing. This kept them moving forward to opportunities that allowed them to keep doing what they loved as described below:

Because I have a passion … passion leads to a vision and doing what you love. (9)

I think the success of each move I have made has been through networks, through taking risks, thinking strategically and …wanting to do what I really love doing. (10)

If you're curious, if you are passionate about what you do, if you are self-driven I think a certain level of career comes automatically. (9)

The courage to leave an organisation when a role no longer fulfilled their passion was overtly expressed by participants 11 and 12:

I have had a good career; I have always changed companies when I thought I was being blatantly stopped from doing what I wanted because I was a woman. (11)
You know change attempts are usually shaped by the dominant values and the basic assumptions in the organisation and as we have discussed they are predominately male ways of thinking, which I often did not think were the most effective way forward. You can only argue for so many things till some one pass you by or you move on and I guess I just moved on. (12)

3. **A corporate executive position was not necessarily what they set out to do.**
A general theme that was expressed by ten of the women was that they did not explicitly set out to take a corporate executive position as indicated in the following fragments.

*No I didn’t have any ambitions to be in a senior position.* (2)

*I guess when I started I never woke up in the morning and said I’m going to be become a Chief Financial Officer, it was a coincidence certainly an element of it.* (9)

*When I finished school I did not know what I wanted to do, I was school captain and I knew I wanted to work with people. All sorts of professions came up but the one with people fascinated me so I started in the corporate environment.* (7)

*A career running a company was never on the horizon.* (6)

*I didn’t have any ambition to be in a senior position, and in fact I was offered my first role … and I thought okay I’d give it a go.* (2)

The exception was one woman who stated that at 10 years old she wanted to be the CEO of BHP: an age where she really did not have much idea about what that meant:

*Always been ambitious, as a 10 year old I wanted to run BHP, so that was my philosophy to go and work in an office.* (5)
Whilst running an organisation was not the focus of their career all the participants expressed a strong achievement orientation that was coupled with ambition to achieve in whatever they did. As expressed by participant 10 who started her career in something she hated, despite her dislike for the role, once she was committed to it she did extraordinary well.

My career probably started unexpectedly. My parents said they would never ever fund me or allow me to go to university. So [they] convinced me to sign up for an apprenticeship, and from day one I hated it, but I had signed my life away to it for four years …I got apprentice of the year every year. (10)

4.3.2 Question 2: What factors do you believe influenced your career?

In response to this question, I identified sub themes in the narratives of the participants. These are:

1. Strong parental influences
2. Open to continual learning
3. Relationships really matter
4. Family is a priority

Below I have set out each sub theme with evidence in the form of fractal fragments based on the conversations with the study participants.

1. Strong parental influence

The influence of initial family conditions shaped these women’s career journeys in many different ways. Specifically articulated was the affect of parental role modeling on how they approached their work and their educational expectations. Participants 6, 5 and 3 highlight below the influence of their mothers’ educational attainment and career experience on their personal expectations:

I did grow up in an environment where my mother was one of the few women that went to university, so there was always conversation in our house around an expectation that we finish school and go to university and do something. (6)
Successful women cope … they juggle things work, family, relationships. I try not to miss a beat. That does not make me superwoman for doing it. I didn’t ever grow up with the idea of balance. My mother was a single mother; she raised my sister and I on her own. She worked three jobs to do it. Now she never ever missed a beat at home with my sister and I. She managed to make it happen, but did she have a good work life balance? No, she didn’t, by any stretch of imagination. She couldn’t have. So I didn’t grow up expecting to have work life balance. (5)

I was encouraged as a child, ever since I was young, from my parents to have a career … My mother was divorced and a single mum and back in those days it was not acceptable, she was a teacher, her career was everything, which made her independent. I’m one of three siblings and we all worked together went to university and were always encouraged. I was encouraged as a child, ever since I was young, from my parents to have a career. (3)

The ongoing effect of initial conditions from a different time and place were noted in the expressed views of the parents around women’s education and role in the family. The parents of participants 7, 8 and 10 expressed strong gendered cultural expectations for their daughters as described in the following fragments:

Coming from an Italian background we were taught that the most important thing in life was to get married and be a good domestic women and mother, was very important. So that was the way I was brought up, but in my heart I thought there was supposed to be something more. (7)

There was always a very strong feeling around education and it was linked up with being Jewish. Education is the way it was. Proving that your better and that you will get educated … money and getting better were all aligned with success. (8)

My parents said they would never ever fund me or allow me to go to university. (10)
There was a point when dad definitely thought ...that I would not get my undergraduate degree because I was too small to be a leader. (8)

Education was fostered at a young age, often in spite of the parent’s financial situation or educational attainment as highlighted by participants 12 and 1 below.

My family went broke when I was young but they gave me a good education and I pursued it with much zeal. (12)

Although my parents were born in the early 1930’s and left school as teenagers they had a really modern approach to education. I came from a family of three girls and we were never hindered in any way ...we all did really well in our careers. Although our parents were not loaded we never went without anything we needed for school, uniforms, sports equipment, books etc and dad worked lots of overtime to make sure that happened. (1)

Sometimes we do not consciously notice the subtle effects of initial conditions. Participant 4 suggests that her family did not influence her career choice. Both her parents were teachers and she avoided teaching as her first career choice. However, it was noted that she has since taken up postgraduate teaching and described the experience as:

Whilst my family environment did not influence my career choice it made me not want to go into education – although I lecture now...I ended up loving that part later in life! (4)

I suggest that the parents of participant 4 did influence her career choice. Initially it was motivation in reaction against their career choice. However she has since taken up the role of a teacher. Initial conditions are almost insidious in the way they appear in our life as participants 8 and 9 describe below:

My parents ...they almost had a strategy to keep you hungry, by not telling you were too good so that you actually tried harder, that is how it felt. (8)
I was one of three children all born really close together and I learnt to fight a bit your way through and to be a self starter. My father had his own business … and you learn to have focus and connectivity that is given to you early on in your education, they have had to work very hard to get where they are. (9)

2. Open to continual learning

Education and continual learning were common threads in these women’s lives. Highly educated, eleven of the participants had undergraduate degrees and nine had postgraduate masters degrees. Continual reference was made to learning new things, whether on the job or through formal programs:

This is a completely new learning experience; I can’t tell you how much fun I have had, even though I have never dealt with these things. I never thought I would have to … it so stimulating to be in a completely new environment, to be learning completely new things. (6)

I would listen and I would learn. (5)

I did university part time as soon as I could afford it myself. (10)

Working with a product is very different to working with someone and that’s what I was missing, so I started to do some study in coaching … working as a coach and developing people is really a passion. (10)

I started doing a masters in HR at NSW University so it was time to bring it all together. (8)

I went back to work 3 days a week after my second child … I did post graduate study at home while I was there and then I gradually increased my days as the children went to school. (3)

I think I always have to learn more and every time I’ve always done some sort of education the longer stuff or even if it is a small course, I find it stimulating
and I like to be stimulated. I like to learn new things I am curious probably by nature. (9)

Success was getting postgraduate qualifications. (4)

3. Relationships really matter
Relationships were identified as integral to the women’s career journey, specifically the relationship with their immediate managers and peers. The relationship with their immediate manager was critically important in relation to where they worked and how long they stayed working in a particular organisation.

I think it’s getting the right boss or somebody who totally understands the flexibility and what you are after and also understanding from an output perspective that you don’t necessarily have to be in the office to do a role … I think it’s the person you work for, the head person and how they respond. (4)

I have a great job now. I have a wonderful working relationship with my MD and it is a challenge being an executive reporting into a board, if you need time away from work. I decided to work part time three days a week and its created some challenges because people expect you to be there fulltime in such a role …… however he is supportive and it works. (7)

John was really delightful [boss] I absolutely adored him, and he totally understood life work balance, my work dropped down considerably. I had so much time for him … there was a really strong trust between us … he trusted me and I trusted him. (4)

It was all about communication; it was all about building relationships. (10)

I have been lucky having an excellent manager, superb. I don’t think I was his first choice for the role but I know he was totally supportive of me getting the job and from the beginning. (1)
At [company] even though we worked phenomenally long hours there, it wasn’t. I mean if you wanted to go to the gym for two hours in the middle of the day you could, if you wanted to work from home there was a lot of trust there and I actually had a good relationship with my boss which was a woman who was very empowering. (4)

In participant 4’s example below she describes the culture as very male dominated but absolutely loved the company because she worked really well with her boss. The relationship with her boss was so good that even when organisational cultural or systemic issues were going on around her she still loved working in the organisation. You could infer from this that local relationships are more important to women’s retention than organisational policy or structure.

I absolutely loved it at [X] Insurance Company, a bit of a glass ceiling there, very, very male dominated again at the higher levels. However I worked really well with my boss. (4)

You know if George goes I might go because that depends on who takes over, if George was to go it would probably be a signal to me that I should go, as we work well as a team. (5)

I think I have had a boss who has been really very, very good to me. He has respected me, I’ve been on maternity leave and he has been really supportive of family issues and any training, absolutely flexible, gave support in anything I wanted. (3)

Peer and team relationship were described as being very important. There was a strong desire expressed for affiliation and a motivation to maintain strong positive emotional relationships with other colleagues at work:

Our strategies may not have worked but this was the lowest risk in my view because we worked well together as a team pulling in the same direction… being a member of a team where there is absolute trust and mutual respect for every team member. (1)
I sometimes tell the hotel or restaurant that I’m the host when I arrive. So it sorts all that out so that there is no chance of embarrassment. I don’t think I’ve had any really bad experiences you just have to be sensitive. (1)

I was always driven by the work and I guess the relationships of the people I worked with. I might add though I was often vulnerable because of this. Because I was not playing for the hierarchy positions I was often not in the decision-making roles and therefore if my relationship was not as strong with the decision makers I was vulnerable. (11)

When family was compromised or sexual harassment was an issue personal values were the priority and leaving was often the result, regardless of relationships:

I believe that certain generations of older men do not know how to handle women… I have had a range of bosses, some have been really good fun, and good mates and we had a fantastic relationship. I have had others that you know developed into sexual harassment and I just don’t tolerate that, I want to be professional and interesting. The result they try to push you out the door. You know its very often the EEO system on paper is there but it doesn’t work in practice. You never want to go through that it's humiliating going through that whole process and what you end up with is the same situation that you were in before and you have spent a lot of goodwill and bad things spread in the market. So why go through it and I think that is what happens to a lot of other women as well. They just take the consequences and move on and you actually never know why. (9)

The lady I actually went to work with, [was] the reason why I actually moved there … I had a lot of respect for her, I sort of learnt from her and her attitude was really strong around life balance, but she left and the whole culture changed and what happened is a male came along and you know it was, what are you leaving now? … burn out was rife … I was not happy there … [she moved on]. (4)
4. **Family is a priority**

Family was expressed as an integral part of their lives and they accordingly made it a priority. Eleven of the women in this study had chosen to have a family and children. The ability to prioritize their time to maximize output and time with the family was expressed by participants 3, 8, and 4:

> My priority is my family, so to me that’s my priority and importance. I can easily juggle what I need to, and I think after having children and being the primary breadwinner, I came back to work with a very clear focus of what I needed to do each day and in a limited time frame. So I was not one of those people who was prepared to spend hours and hours in the office perhaps not fully focused in the time I was there. So my goal was to be there a limited amount of time and maximize my output and be completely focused when I was there and I was able to kind of switch off and on as I needed. (3)

> When it comes to her having something at school I am always there. Like if she has a carnival or she has a concert. I always go. So yeah I still work really long hours and she does want me to pick her up but I cannot do it all. (8)

> I started my own business. I had flexibility ... I did it all from home. So I could take June to school. I could do reading with her when I wanted to. I could juggle everything around what I felt like doing, I was in control not out of control. (4)

> I could not pursue a career without any regard for my young children. I think it’s detrimental to your health, work and your family to give everything to an organisation. You have to have some flexibility because otherwise you’re not going to contribute to anything in a valuable way because you are only going to get awfully stressed ... you have to do the second shift when you get home. (3)

> He [boss] lets me go to school to read on Wednesdays, I think it’s having the feeling that I’m still a mum but I’ve got a career going as well but I’m there for her. My husband then goes and picks her up those days. (4)
Whilst family was expressed as a priority today, this has not always been the case for participants 5 and 1 who explained that early in their career they sacrificed time with the family for work. Today family is the priority, but often at an inconvenience to them personally:

*I sacrificed a lot in my early career … I was a single mum and I was away a lot. Now I ‘m never away for birthdays, I’m never away for speech nights or concerts, I never do that. I will travel outside things not to miss one of those things. I’ll travel inconveniently to me in order to meet those needs.* (5)

*I missed his first steps, his first haircut, and so many firsts that I wasn’t there for. I’d been away on birthdays, which I have never done again since doing it once. And I was on a trip on mothers’ day and I will never do that again. So it felt very bad at first. Now I don’t because he and his father have a good relationship and I learnt those lessons early on; that you never miss a birthday. [His birthday] is in December, so we organise the Christmas client function around it. I never miss mothers’ day or what ever I have to do.* (1)

One woman [who was older] chose not to have children because she felt she could not have a family and a career at the time. Reflecting on that decision she commented:

*Today things are different and women do appear to be able to have a family and a career and I may have chosen differently now.* (12)

4.3.3 Question 3: What support or constraints did you encounter in your career journey?

In response to this question, I identified sub themes in the narratives of the participants. These are:

1. Supportive partners
2. Strong Networks
3. Mentoring
4. Support for and from other women
5. Balancing work and family

Below I have set out each sub theme with evidence in the form of fractal fragments based on the conversations with the study participants.

1. Supportive partners

Ten of the women were married and there was almost an ambivalence around any conflict over career and family. They cited the support of a significant other as the critical factor in their ability to manage their desired career and any dilemmas that arose from the home-work nexus of family and career. It was interesting to observe that they appeared to solve any dual career tensions (i.e. for both partners) such as: negotiation of roles, career progression, career orientation, mobility through conversation and compromise and working together as suggested by participants 6, 7, 4, 2, 9, 10, 1 and 5:

We worked it out together, and we made lots of trade offs – we always negotiated, we always talked about the options. (6)

With my husband’s support I am where I am today. And I do give him total credit for allowing it to happen, maybe not allowing it but supporting it to happen. We talked about things my husband and I; he was always behind me. (7)

I have no family here except for my husband. Many of my friends have given up their careers so their husbands can have the career … My husband has his own business. He is in construction; he is up early and home early so from that perspective I have always had some one as a backstop at night. (4)

I was fortunate to have great support at home. (2)

We both had a career and we supported one another. Then we talked about a baby and I needed his commitment to support this decision and we had a nanny and when they grew out of that nanny stage and really needed a parent and my
husband chose to step back a bit and he looked after the kids. People judged him you could tell by their body language. (9)

One of the things that I was very lucky is that my partner, my husband when our daughter started school he was working full time as an architect working long hours and when I wanted to change careers we sat down and talked about what was the right direction for both of us to go … he made the decision that he would stay at home because it meant he would be able to manage at home and work better than ever having to get time off working in a corporation. (10)

He allowed that I could do what I wanted and he gave me that time which was really wonderful … it is so hard if you do not have a lot of support. (10)

I do not even have to do shopping or ironing. So I don’t have that housework pressure, I only have family pressure. Making time to be at home and helping with the homework. I think anyone who is working has that. I don’t think that it is necessarily a female thing. (1)

I think you both can have a career only with paid help. I can’t see any other way of doing it because travelling is one thing, so when you are away picking up and dropping off at school is impossible. You have to have paid help or parents or really good friends. My sister and her husband both work and they have to have three sets of child minders. Before school, after school, and then till late in the evening. (1)

I guess I earn my promotions in the same way that anybody would that doesn’t have a family and I guess that’s what you are saying like a man he’s got a wife taking care of him at home. (1)

I travelled a lot and he was at home with the kids a lot on his own. He did all the domestic chores… I’d come home and he would have done the ironing. He would be standing there doing the ironing and I would feel inadequate. Instead of being incredibly grateful I’d go: Oh, look he’s done this, oh my god I am such a terrible mother, where was I? In hindsight it seems so easy but at
the time it was terrible … he left me and we talked about it and I realised I didn’t have to do any of the housework things to be a good mum to my kids. I just needed to talk to them and be there and now I do that. I’m home early and I wait til the youngest goes to bed and then I finish my work. It’s the sacrifice I make. (5)

I observed that a number of the participants in acknowledging their husbands/partners support for their career choice described their husbands/partners support in terms of being ‘allowed’ to do what they want. It could be said that this language points to an ingrained assumption that a women’s career is in the home. How many husband say she ‘allowed’ me to have career?

2. **Strong networks**

Contrary to the literature that suggests woman are poor networkers these women were connected. They valued strong networks seeing them as beneficial, personally and professionally. As the following fragments suggest, they found networks helpful in their career and life cycle:

> My advice to women is build networks and relationships because through your life different things happen and by building relationships you can link that to your work, your friendships, charity work, things that you feel are important to the different cycles in your life. So by reaching out and connecting to other people you build relationships that really help you in all aspects of your life. (10)

> Since I have started work, I have always made friends with the Pas [personal assistants] because I’ve always understood how important they are. They are the gatekeepers and secondly they are regular folk that nobody even notices. Everyone knows them, but they don’t, if that makes sense. Such little things make a difference in that [organisational] environment. (6)

> In hindsight I learnt how to network and how to market from those slimy spin-doctors of the early 80’s who were the best Insurance guys around. I learnt how to do it from them. (5)
I network all the time, I network inside the organisation and into the organisation. (6)

I have learnt, as I have got older, that things are not good for other women and we could learn from one another. I think women need to actively use our networks and why don’t we do that? Either we are too busy and don’t take the time out to do it or they think of networking as work. But actually we would be helping one another. I think what men do is they actually throw into each others laps and this is how they help one another, they move up together. I don’t think females do that well. (8)

There is something about the fact that until you actually start to talk to people you don’t know what they are actually like. Often people disregard people because of conditions, economics, or interests. But you have to find something in people, it is really enriching. There is usually something about everyone that you can get on with, if you find an interest, we probably rush it. We do not spend enough time getting to know people because we are a rushed society. (10)

Everywhere I work I go down into the organisation, you network in organisations to get support, so you either find your own team, and all the times I have found that my own team has been fantastic, you find one or two allies. For example, the executive team in the [bank]. I always found one ally, and that is all I needed. (6)

I think she built some really good bridges for me in the organisation with the CEO. He really had a lot of respect for me and visa versa. So that was a really good and so I had a good network going there. (4)

I am good at building alliances. I actually, I look for alliances because I think that you only need one or two good alliances like that and then there is two against the group, you are not alone. I see that if somebody speaks up for you as well, when you are not there it is helpful. (6)
The thing I have learned as a woman as I have got older and more experienced, probably more mature, I think we can learn from our male colleagues they take blokes the way they are. They don’t look what lipstick or nail polish they have got on and I think we females need to really actively use our networks to help one another. (9)

3. Mentoring
Mentoring either informally or professionally was seen as valuable to their career development by participants 4, 2, 10, 1, 5, and 6.

Elizabeth was an amazing lady and she … came and took me under her wing and said she wanted to give me a lot of responsibility and kept pushing more and more my way … she was very open about what was happening at a senior level from a career path perspective where she could see me going. She left the organisation and she built some really good bridges for me with the CEO. (4)

I mentor others, and informally I was mentored. (2)

I have always had a mentor and I always work best if someone is doing something at a superior level and I wanted to get to that level. I valued what they were contributing so I could watch and learn … I recommend a female and male mentor; you learn different things from different people. (10)

The chairman was a female and supportive. Once I was appointed as CEO she said in her introduction ‘we must catch up’ and her advice to me was specifically with any awkward difficulties like flirting. (1)

When I got back to the real world I didn’t lose anything because I had a mentor, which is something women do not to do really well. (5)

Male mentors: I had a minimum of two. Personally I think coaching and mentoring is an important thing to do. It has got to be a relationship that works. (5)
I have a couple of great [mentor] examples. I got on really well with Henry. He needed me in a way more than I needed him because he struggled in that environment... Actually, he and I shared a values base that was quite similar. Then there was Joe; he needed me, as I am good at building alliances. (6)

4. **Support for and from other women**

The power of connecting with other women is acknowledged. Although the literature reports a lot of stories around women getting to the top and taking the ladder up after them this was not the case for these women. They talked of supporting other women in a way that was supportive, enriching and rewarding:

> She was an amazing lady who took me under her wing and said she wanted me to take on a lot more responsibility and kept pushing more my way. (4)

> I mentor a lot of women and align with a couple of charities where they could not afford executive coaching. (10)

> I look after my next generation girls; I could be mentoring them, I do not know. I do share what I know and pass that knowledge on to them. (8)

> Networking breakfasts, I love those women, there’s energy and there’s passion and there’s participation and there is hope. Those networking breakfasts I don’t need to go to those things any more but I do go because I like it. Yeah it fills me up and off I go. I think if they still have the energy I should get my arse into gear. Great energy. (6)

For some of the women this was not always the case as suggested by participant 7:

> I had to lean the hard way … I guide a lot of women now on helpful hints on how to do things. (7)
5. **Balancing work and family**

A common constraint with a young family was the ability to find a balance between the family priorities and work commitments, such as travel. The art of balancing work and family has not always been easy for a number of these women who said they had been burnout and sick at various stages of their career:

> I worked part-time when they were little but I got divorced and the sacrifices came later on because I found with travel and things I would always have a nanny and it nearly killed me all that travel. The owners were pretty good. I had to come back twice for piano recitals and things, then I had to say I am not going there I have kids. But it really took a toll. It was a big strain emotionally and physically on me and I left and took twelve months off. I was sick of corporate life, so I left and I earned a quarter of what I was earning and had the best life style. (5)

> I was trying to have another baby doing IVF. It was really hard. I actually became really sick. I nearly died from a blood clot. …. I was working seven days in four and I was really sick. Then they said I couldn’t sit at general manager level if I was only going to have four or five people reporting to me and working part time and I said happy with that. (4)

Additionally, participants 2, 8, 4, 7, and 6 described their juggling and struggling with their time and energy:

> I was very clear about what I needed to do. My goal was to maximise my output and to be completely focused when I was at work. (2)

> I actually remember as soon as I put [baby] in my arms for the first time I thought I’m never ever going back to work, that is it. I was totally besotted and just wanted to totally care for my baby and I was almost like I immediately swapped, transferred all that energy I gave to work into her, so it was like a complete turn around. (8)

> I got head hunted and I did not want to work fulltime, I wanted four days a week at that stage and I was saying I’m sorry I want a better work life balance.
I am happy to run for a long time on four days but I want that time with my daughter … It sounded like a dream job and as soon as started I knew it was not what they said. The way they structured it all the rest of the senior management team were on the top floor, I was on the bottom floor by myself. The management team were extremely dysfunctional. The boss was very autocratic. (4)

I have a wonderful working relationship with my current boss but the challenge of being an executive, one that reports into the board. I put that I could work three days a week and that created challenges in itself and people expected me to work full time … I am compromising on all sorts of things and it’s a bit political with some expressing interest in my role from outside the work area. That created a challenge in itself. (7)

I have a son with a disability, I was a married young and I am quite tough and had to deal with issues most people do not have to deal with. It steeled me and gave me an incredible sense of fairness and incredible strength. (6)

I have a very strong relationship with my husband. We did make choices. We did have an agreement at different points in time so when I was at university he worked, and when he was at university, I worked. We thrashed it out and made lots of different trade offs. He probably has given up a lot in a way on traditional grounds because the opportunities for me became greater. … We have always negotiated, we have always talked about it. We never made any big choices without agreeing. (6)

4.3.4 Question 4: What was your career development experience?

In response to this question, I identified sub themes in the narratives of the participants. These are:

1. Self–directed
2. Counter suggestive
3. Manage your own career
4. Took risks
Below I have set out each sub theme with evidence in the form of fractal fragments based on the conversations with the study participants.

1. **Self-directed**

These women were self-directed and responsible in their actions. They expressed determination and confidence in their actions, doing what needed to be done to achieve their commitments:

> Very self-directed, very determined the whole way through that I was going to study and be very, very focused. I look back now and I think I was very arrogant. I cannot believe how driven I was; I do not know what it was, I was confident and just doing it. (8)

> I came in on the weekend to do it, I knew it had to be done, it was about ownership. It wasn’t to help me climb the corporate ladder, it was more about, it had to be done and I’ll do it. It’s my responsibility. I think it comes from within. I do not think that behaviour is something that is forced upon you. (7)

> Tenacity and probably a bit of ambition would come with it – self-driven yeah? (9)

> They thought by throwing me a bone every now and then I would be happy and I was for a while. But of course at some point you go, oh where am I going to go now? I have learnt a lot but where am I going to go. So subsequently I left and did lots of things, like working in recruitment and I went back to insurance and by the age of 24 I was running a small insurance brokerage. (5)

> I have a lot of self-motivation. (3)
They expressed a strong sense of their own identity; they knew who they were as participants 5 and 6 demonstrate below:

*I’ve always felt like I’ve been myself, I never felt like I’ve compromised who I am to achieve what I have. I’ve never felt in that position, I think I am very lucky.* (5)

*I have no illusion that at some point in my life I will stop working and everything disappears. You know it’s transitory really. In the end you do what you can do to make an impact, and if you’re lucky, you do make an impact on the place and the people you work with. It doesn’t matter how many times you appear in the paper or how much imagery you’ve got or all that other blah, blah. Unless you have got something core [that drives you] that is true, the rest of its nonsense and will pass and will be fish and chip wrapper in a minute.* (6)

2. Counter suggestive

There was a strong theme that suggested a counter suggestive nature. This was often expressed, as a determination not to be locked into some ones else’s view of what was possible for them. This drove them to prove the suggestion/person wrong or that there was another way to do it, as demonstrated by participants 9, 6, 2, 10, 8, and 7:

*‘We don’t hire girls because they get married and leave work’ … I’ll prove you wrong. I never saw that man again but he probably triggered the last bit of energy in me to prove him wrong.* (9)

*I am quite counter suggestive as well so if someone says this is what you should be doing, this is your golden egg, its like, I don’t think so. I am sure there is another golden egg out there somewhere. Let me show you where it is. You know there is a piece of that which as soon as people try to block me in, then I sort of rally against that.* (6)

*They thought it could not be done … I returned to work full time and I continued to breast feed for nine and six months. That was a real challenge in time management and balancing the personal and professional aspects of your*
life … I regard that as one of my proudest things. I know its really odd and you probably could not say that to everyone out there. (2)

You know there was a bet going that I wouldn’t pass my drivers licence and only one guy said I would. But I had already set him up and we made a lot of money; we had a lot of fun. (10)

I remember a comment he made when I was going through my undergraduate degree. He said that I would not get it and I did… I sort of felt like [the comment] it was related to the fact that he said I was too small to be a leader. (8)

The recruitment consultant she realised I was married, which should not have had anything to do it with it, but it was 1986, and on the way out she stopped me and said ‘By the way are you planning to have children?’ I said, ‘I wouldn’t be here if I was planning to have children’. She said, ‘Good comment and good response,’ and I walked away. Of course I would have children and I got the job. (7)

I was talking to the Chairman of the Board a few weeks ago and he was disappointed that there was only one woman on the Board of Directors and I think they searched for more and I’m kind of like maybe that is too contrived. I think, just let it happen. Don’t be, you know, searching for a particular gender or nationality. I think get the right person the best people for the job. (2)

3. **Manage your own career**

The women all spoke of proactively managing their own careers to follow their passion and desire to do what they loved doing. These women differentiated themselves through education and action. Generally they were too impatient and curious to wait patiently at the bottom of a metaphorical ladder for someone to ask them to step up. They managed their own opportunities with foresight as demonstrated by the comments below.
Early on I had a drive to go overseas. So I sort of, I think planned out some sort of career for me and I thought how’s the world going to look in the future. I’ve got to know languages, I’ve got to have international experience, I have got to have an international degree and worked towards that. I moved to Geneva, became fluent in French, moved to the US out of my own initiative for a year and studied over there. Got an international degree and moved back to Switzerland and I think that was a really good foundation. I differentiated myself not just on energy but also on education. (9)

Very self directed, very determined the whole way through that I was going to have to study and be very, very focused. (8)

Control your own destiny … actually before I went on maternity leave, I didn’t wait for my mangers to work out the solution to cover my 6 weeks leave. I just gave them the presented solution and said ‘Here’s what we are going to do,’ and made it easy. (2)

They didn’t think about my career. Sure they gave me promotions from time to time but they didn’t plan my career … no one ever sat down with me and said ‘where do you want to go Georgia what do you want to do?’ (5)

Large companies always had issues with promoting women and so to be part of it … I would ask to be part of what ever was being offered to my male colleagues. (5)

The more senior positions I’ve got into the more I started to realise that there are more detractors than supporters, and I think it comes back to having confidence in yourself and knowing what is right and wrong and what you’re comfortable with and not comfortable with, and just being true to yourself. (2)

Self-directed they trusted in their own ability. However this personal self-direction did not equate to doing it on their own. Connecting with other like minded women played an important part in their career journey as participant 10 details below:
I think you have to trust yourself and manage yourself. Trust that we can manage our selves and you are probably going to get there, rather than wait for luck. So manage it in a way that works for you and if possible, surround yourself with strong passionate, caring women if you can, whether working in an all male environment or not. Connect yourself with women on some level to support you in what you are doing. Work out how you need support [and] surround yourself with the right people to help you through changes because I think women do that really well. They whisper well with each other. So don’t think you have to do it on your own. (10)

4. **Took risks**

This group of women were not afraid to take risks. The literature suggested that many women do not take enough risks in their careers because they are not confident that they can do it. This was not the case with these women. They managed risk; they had a strong voice about the things that were important to them, even when it was unpopular:

> I managed that office: basically all the staff. I felt very compromised ethically there; they had no scruples about what they did with the staff. That was my first experience working for a female. So I basically put the award on the table and said this is what we need to do … and the husband said, ‘Do not tell me what to do with my business,’ and I said ‘Okay here is my resignation.’ (3)

> I put my head down and worked hard but when the need arose I would speak … I think I have always been a bit outspoken but not inappropriately, but maybe a bit cheeky, very from the heart stuff. (7)

> Take some risks and don’t be afraid to put some comments forward. (10)

> I was back at work in three weeks after my baby and then they made the comment that you can’t be away from your child and I looked at them so clear and I said ‘I should be able to say what I want to do its not you that should make the decision. You let me know if you want me to continue to work at the
company or not and I’ll make a decision on that as well’ and I continued on and they never questioned me again. (9)

I absolutely took risks when I became CEO. I was very concerned that we should succeed and not put the company into a loss again. My biggest dread was that someone might say ‘Typical, you give the job to a woman and look what happens’. To be fair, no one ever gave me anything other than help and encouragement so I don’t know why I felt this way. I was also concerned that the other managers would not respect me because I did not have an obvious CEO profile for example, the right qualifications on paper. I could not say that I had been to a highly regarded public school, followed by a well respected university, lived in the right suburb etc, etc. So I wasn’t the usual stereotype. (1)

I have been a risk taker in my career in that I moved around a lot to get ahead and gone into a few start up roles. I put my hand up for redundancy at [X]

Insurance Company, as I was confident I’d get a new role. I also did the same at another company when I decided I wanted some time off to reflect and be with my daughter before she went to school. Then I turned down corporate roles to set up my own business. (4)

4.3.5 Question 5: How do you perceive that you get things done?

In response to this question, I identified sub themes in the narratives of the participants. These are:

1. Had a ‘can do’ attitude
2. Opportunistic attitude
3. Women want to solve the problem
Below I have set out each sub theme with evidence in the form of fractal fragments based on the conversations with the study participants.

The literature review indicated that women generally only put up their hands to do a new job when they are 80% confident that they can do the work. Contrary to this view these women expressed a very high ‘I can do it’ attitude proactively seeking out new opportunities to be in action.

1. **Had a ‘can do’ attitude**

   ‘I can do that; I can help with that’ … I was always volunteering and trying things, taking a risk putting my hand up … [early on] I was not accredited, so I did all the work behind the scenes. (7)

   Yeah I learnt from a couple of blokes who said ‘oh yeah I can do that’ and I literally sat at this interview and said ‘how hard can that be’? Well I learnt, but you know if you are the right sort of person you’ll make it happen. (5)

   People would say we are going to do this and I would say, ‘Can I do that, can I be part of that’. I didn’t even think not too. (5)

   Because I was naturally ambitious I would go up and say, ‘Could I do the next job now please? …I can do that; I can help with that’. (7)

   If it was within my reach I took it. (6)

   Having a family overseas is a juggling act because of the system. It was never a question for myself because I loved my job. A Swiss woman would have stopped working and it was a decision I was not prepared to make either way. You know choose to work or choose to have a family and not work. Having travelled so broadly I knew it worked in other countries so why couldn’t it work in Switzerland. It’s not that different and it’s not a developing country so clearly there is infrastructure, so I thought this is do-able and we’ll just see how it goes. (9)
I put my hand up to be the lunch girl and made a lot of money from that, more than I did on my income … because I never gave back their change unless they asked for it. (10)

I think it works both ways. I think I was able to put my hand up and bring something to put on the table to let people know that I can be a success at it. (8)

I can’t understand why women are not being picked or selected for those executive positions because they certainly do have the education and the ability to do it and again whether its coming back to self promotion aspect or whether I don’t know it comes back to the politics and power aspect. Some women are very good at the power and politics side of things but I would think on the whole most women just don’t want a bar of that stuff. They just want to get on and get the job done, whereas guys are very conscious of that power struggle. You know I think guys are more willing to play the game and have that competitiveness whereas women I don’t think have that natural competitiveness. (2)

I was asked to put together a program and I knew nothing about it. It looked hard initially. Then I went and asked the head of the program and she sat down with me and she said ‘It’s not that hard’. So we went back and did the entire program and put it in place. (7)

2. Opportunistic positive attitudes
This group of women saw possibility, looking for and taking opportunities which provided new learning and a chance to step up and take a challenge. Participants 5 and 1 turned situations that some may have seen as undesirable into positives for them:

There was an international directive from overseas to say that there were not enough women working in the field … I got tapped on the shoulder: ‘June you’re a pretty out there girl and you get a long well with people. We were
wondering if you wouldn’t mind being the token female for us? We’ve been given a directive. We promise it will not interfere with your work, you just have to come to the lunches and boardroom drinks with the clients and go to a few client meetings. We don’t expect you say anything. Just sit there, but would you mind? It would be really great and we could write back to overseas and say we have done it’ … I saw it as a fantastic opportunity to put myself in front of clients. (5)

I think they may have offered it to other women, I am not really terribly sure but I was the only one who obviously said ‘Yes … you are going to give me this terrific opportunity to put myself in front of clients’. Like this is sensational so I grabbed it. (1)

3. **Women want to solve the problem**

It was repeatedly discussed that within the workplace women and men lead differently. Participant 7 talked at length about how she was more interested in openly discussing an issue to solve a problem than her male colleagues:

> We often talk about the difference between male and female leaders. The difference is when an issue comes up we want to talk about it, while we are busy trying to resolve it and give a fair outlook. You fix it, just get on with it, and fix it. For example I go in there with, here are some concerns, where my male colleagues go in there with the marketing about how wonderful everything is and how they have everything under control and systematically in order. (7)

Participants 9 and 7 argued that women do not like playing politics because it is just too inefficient and a waste of time. Participant 4 expressed shock at the lack of cohesion she found in a male dominated senior executive team:

> My own theory is that women are more professional; especially at my age … they do not want to put up with nonsense. I think they cannot stand politics going on in the boardroom and I think that is why many women think it is a waste of time because they are the jack-of-all-trades. They have got the
household; they have got the school and enough to juggle. They need to be efficient and that’s how they are born, that is how they are raised and hanging around the boardroom going what for, seems to me they are tired of that. (9)

It’s the politics that kills me. I know what is happening; I can articulate what is happening to myself. I find it very hard to articulate it to the MD without appearing, what is the word, paranoid. (7)

I suppose I had a very different picture of what senior management level would look like. I thought we would all work together cohesively and we would all be working to a common goal. I had a shock when it was not like that. There were probably three of us who just wanted to do a good job, we would talk to one another and share things but the amount of back stabbing from the others was a shock to me. (4)

4.3.6 Question 6: Did being a woman affect your career experience in the corporate organisation?

In response to this question, I identified sub themes in the narratives of the participants. These are:

1. The dynamic created in a predominately male environment
2. Ways of dealing with discriminatory cultures and colleagues.
3. The invisible ‘metaphoric glass ceiling’

Below I have set out each sub theme with evidence in the form of fractal fragments based on the conversations with the study participants.

1. The dynamic created in a predominately male environment

A strong male dominated industry culture was indentified. Gendered stereotypical responses appeared prevalent in these male dominated environments:

I think everyone’s underestimated how strong cultures are in organisations and how strongly driven they are by a very long-standing male view of success,
power, self and some ego … The dynamic created in a predominately all male environment is dysfunctional. (6)

I do not like to working in all male teams, even though I have done a lot of it, for a couple of reasons. Men ascribe motivation to women particularly if there is only one woman in the team, they ascribe motivation that relate to their world. And that often creates conflict, so I use the example before of actually people believing that I, me personally that I went out and sort publicity in the way that somehow that was a competitive plea, that I was positioning myself against them. Because their (male) world is very competitive, they are much more competitive … I see them as colleagues they see everyone as a competitor which is why they do not challenge one another, because if I do not challenge you, you will not challenge me and they are the ground rules the status quo. (6)

There were twelve people on the board and I kind of chaired the committee, a mainly male orientated committee, but really they were quite condescending, basically you look after the marketing, we’ll look after the finances. (4)

The power of the male norm, for example, influenced many of my early women colleagues in management to try and prove they were the same as men in order to gain equality. I think they successfully showed in the right context women in similar roles to men had the same career aspirations, leadership styles and motivation for working. But as women they were not automatically accepted as legitimate managers. (12)

Discrimination was treated as an obstacle that had to be managed. However once their values were challenged these women were willing to move on rather than compromise. Participant 4 valued trust and expressed a strong sense of honesty and integrity:

*He wanted to slap a lawsuit on and I said no we have to work with these guys; a lawsuit would damage our brand. I said let’s see what impact it has on the brand for both of us. It was as if they both wanted to create issues … it was
just not on my agenda. This was a whole new level of politics. I felt out of my depth. I was used to straight talking and no bullshit, where you knew exactly what was happening. In this relationship I had no idea from one day to the next what was really going on. (4)

Teams with a gender mix were seen as making a difference in the way management teams worked. Participant 6 expressed in detail the strongly held view of the group:

It was an all male team when I came in and I have changed that … they spoke to women rudely and didn’t use peoples names, … I think civility somehow was lacking. We did an employee survey and they said they loved the business they loved the product they hated the management team. I could see that straight away… Yes I have a mix now. (6)

I do I think three things make a difference [in management teams]. I think diversity of views makes a difference, so different industries, different experiences coming in. I think the male and female mix makes a difference as well. I have seen people’s behaviour change, so the reinforcing almost testosterone behaviour has stopped. (6)

I always ask questions because I want to know, I am interested in what happens. Why did you do that? Is there anything learnt from that? My experience of that was that people would always say, ‘I will send it to you so you can have a look at it’, But nothing ever came because at the meeting it was seen to be done somehow. It was seen as if it had been settled. So the dynamic of an all male or predominantly male environment, has really dysfunctional dynamics in it in my experience and it doesn’t matter if it was government or in various parts of the banks that I have worked, the dynamic is actually the same. So they would give lip service to being cooperative but never were, always describe motives that were about what they would do if they were in the same position … there is actually no personal engagement, or very little personal engagement, with a couple of exceptions. (6)
I think the more females you have in the room the more accepted you are individually as a female. (4)

Men compete, women ask questions, they challenge and they want to know what is going on. Male female mix makes a difference to the team dynamic. (9)

2. Ways of dealing with discriminatory cultures and colleagues

All the women identified discrimination at various stages of their career. They each managed it in various ways as shown in the following fragments:

A lot of discrimination [in the junior role] went on in my first role. They had a thing called the oven and when you’re putting screen printing with the big posters that come out of the oven and you usually only allowed to spend two hours in that section a day and I would have a whole shift and you know things like that, you know they were just out to break me. (10)

You always have barriers or people whose interest is that you do not succeed. People who talk you down, the world are full of naysayers. I just block it out. I draw on the things I know to be true. Know who you are. It is noise block it out. (6)

I remember early on in my career I was the personnel manager and everything was great. Within six months I had been given a salary increase everything was amazing, until I fell pregnant. I was the first person in that company to fall pregnant in thirteen years and I was the groundbreaker. As soon as I was pregnant I remember the managing director seeing past me… and I had never had that before. Being pregnant was the first time I actually felt discrimination. I remember getting up one morning and I knew I was not at peace and I left. (7)

There were things, like there was no ladies toilet on the management floor of head office. So you had to go down another floor. They never expected to have a woman in the management team. So there was quite obviously discrimination I’d say. I just thought it was funny really, I didn’t feel offended by it because
that was just the way it was. In fact I would have felt really bad if they had of rushed and rigged up a ladies toilet. (1)

I cannot think of any overt discrimination. I have been winked at; one issue is the kissing issue. I now know who kisses me and who does not. And if I were a man any clients would not kiss me at all. (1)
The other thing is paying for meals. When I first got the role, or when I first started to take out clients, I used to excuse myself, go to the loo and pay the bill and then say ‘right everybody ready we can go now’ because I noticed a couple of the older men in particular found it embarrassing when they were given the bill … waiting staff tend to give the bill to the oldest man on the table. You have to be sensitive so you do not embarrass your customer and I am sure men would not have to worry about that. (1)

The investment banks have all had women in them at the top positions at various points in time and ultimately they have been squeezed out. I wanted to change that, however it is very complex because it was supported outside the organisations. (6)

There was no place for me there … I knew in my heart but as soon as I got there I knew physically it was just get me out of here. (6)

Leading an all female team was much harder from a leadership perspective. They wanted more than has ever been demanded, they wanted me to protect them, develop them, coach them, and promote them. It took a lot of energy leading that group because they came to the team because they wanted that, and they had not been getting it anywhere else. It was a safe place, it was fun and the work was stimulating as well … All of them have gone on to do fantastic things. At the time though all we really were really looking for was more than they were getting anywhere else. (6)

The recruitment consultant, she realised I was married the week before, stopped me as I was walking out ‘by the way are you planning to have children?’ It was 1986, I turned around and said ‘I wouldn’t be here for the
interview with you if I was planning to have children’ and I thought I would not get the job. However she said ‘good comment and good response’. They pushed me forward and I got the job. (7)

[re a female chairperson] On the downside, she has a really forceful personality and the guys put that down to her being a woman. Rather than it being a thorough thing … they perceived it as a nagging and overkill and worse than that I think they were trying to bring her directorship to an end. The way it was briefed to me was as if she was causing a problem. I personally thought she was asking a very valid question. (1)

… company conferences there are few if any women and you get the spotlight put on you … and it happens a lot when you are the only woman. As I go on more and more senior courses there have been less and less women. It’s harder if you are running a home as well. (1)

The brokers would not deal with me because I was a female. They wouldn’t even talk or if they did they would say ‘Right, I want to speak to your male counterpart’. Literally those words, then I would listen to the conversation and they would say exactly the same as I had said. (2)

I was once told I was not suitable for a strategy role as I was too collaborative and the strategy role required a strong person to drive shaping the initiatives. I challenged this and I was told to leave the strategy role to men as they do well at it because they were less emotional. They wanted me to take the manager’s role as women are good at collaboration and therefore good at building teams. The irony being I did not like working in teams. (12)

Male as the norm, is still pervasive and an insidious influence on who is valued and selected to lead organisation. (11)
Whilst the discrimination was experienced within the financial services industry, not all industries were experienced in the same way. For example:

*There were no gender issues in publishing. Women were promoted; men were promoted. The industry attracted good, passionate people who were interested in the industry. So there was equal male and female sales force and publishers.*

(10)

3. **The metaphoric ‘glass ceiling’**

The ‘metaphorical glass ceiling’ was not seen as an issue for these women. Not expecting one they did not push up against it, they went by, leaped over or passed it, or if they did feel they were being stopped and were unsatisfied they went elsewhere:

*I have never seen a glass ceiling; but it’s because I do not expect to see one it’s what I have concluded. … I don’t look for it I don’t expect that there should be one. I know it’s there and I think subconsciously I picked my jobs not to experience it. I have generally worked for smaller companies.*

(5)

*There was bit of a glass ceiling there: very, very male dominated again at the high levels. I loved it there, but as a woman your opportunities were quite limited if you did not want to go overseas. It was a bit of a boy’s network and people who had been there for many, many years. And even though I sat on the panel to help them select candidates there was very much a leading towards, ‘Oh well he’s got the right experience, he’s been here for years and he’s going to do well overseas’. Even though it wasn’t mouthed about inequality to women, it was covert but it was totally obvious to me and I did not like it and got headhunted to go.*

(4)

*First of all it’s perception, if you see the glass ceiling you are not going to try and push. It’s not there, there is no such thing, so you do what is right for you.*

(9)

*Pushed through those barriers – have not taken too much notice … dealt with it.*

(2)
4.3.7  **Question 7: What is career success to you?**

In response to this question, I identified sub themes in the narratives of the participants. These are:

1. Doing what they loved
2. Self-fulfilment
3. Solving problems

Below I have set out each sub theme with evidence in the form of fractal fragments based on the conversations with the study participants.

**1. Doing what I love**

A common theme for success with all these women was doing what they love to do:

*I think the success ... wanting to do what I really love doing, really feeling that you know. When I was in that publishing space I was doing what I loved. When I was in communications marketing/PR I was doing what I loved and then now, again now I am doing what I love.* (10)

*Success ... I think the passion for something I just loved.* (10)

*I like to do a good job and like to be recognised for it and I like to finish things and I like to see the conclusions and I like to dot the I's and the T's. It's got to be about the job as much as the career.* (3)

*I am passionate about making a difference. My personal success comes from creating a plan for growth and achieving it and being recognised for it.* (7)

*Success is very personal. For me it means being accepted, as I was very lucky to be, for what I was and not what people thought I should be. Being a member of a team where there was absolute trust and mutual respect for every team member. Treating people fairly and recognising that everyone’s contribution matters. I think if this situation exists then any business will be a success.* (1)
Success in my career has meant different things for me at different life stages. Earlier on it was about moving up the corporate ladder, getting post grad qualifications and being part of the senior management team ie getting a place at the table and a healthy salary. However once I achieved that I redefined what success was as I wasn’t happy in a high powered corporate role, had no time in my life for anything other than work and felt totally out of kilter – on a constant merry go around and exhausted. Decided success in my career was about a whole of life approach, having flexibility to do things that I enjoyed, a mixed range of activities that I found fulfilling without burning out and being able to have time with my family and me, being in control, and setting my own pace even though that meant a big drop in dollars and responsibility. Success in my career now means being able to do the things I enjoy, with the people I like and feel I can make a difference. (4)

Success is not the money or status. I like to sort out problems I like the idea of showing that you can do amazing things in a place where people least expect it. (6)

2. Self-fulfilment

I have been offered other roles eg the MD position I opted out … I enjoy my seniority and leadership positions [where there is a] broader role where all the elements come together. I was always looking for self-fulfilment having joy at what I am doing … success was not because of the money or status. (9)

3. Solving problems

It’s interesting. I think it doesn’t matter if I am dealing with [an] organisation or dealing with a family, it always comes up, but I feel responsible to fix it or to build together. (6)

It’s got everything to do with the fact that if you need something solved I’m going to give you a solution. I’m going to work through a solution and solve the problem. (5)

I’d say come on okay I’ll sort it out. (4)
4.4 Identification of attractor sets

The identification of attractors through analysing the patterns of the fractal fragments shows that the women’s comments can be grouped according to four attractor sets: Passion (achievement, doing what they loved, learning and passion leaps); Identity (confidence, courageous, values and differentiated – optimistic attitude); Freedom (counter suggestive, opportunistic, managed risks and self-directed) and Connection (family, networks, relationship mutuality and support).

I will now elaborate on each attractor set, beginning with Passion, followed by Identity, Freedom and Connection. There is no specific sequence or order required to explain the four attractor sets. It is however, important to note that the attractor sets do have an interrelationship and co-dependence, and together they influence the dynamic, self-organising and emergent behaviour that evolves. This relationship is represented in Figure 2.

**Figure 2: The four inter-relating attractor sets.**
4.4.1 Passion

To say a person has a passionate life or is passionate about their career is nebulous. What do we mean by passionate? The Cambridge dictionary describes passion as an emotion applied to a very strong feeling, a feeling of unusual excitement, enthusiasm or compelling emotion towards a subject, idea, person, or object. A person is said to have a passion for something when she/he has a strong positive affinity for it. A love for something and a passion for something are often used synonymously.

The women who participated in this study talked frequently about doing what they loved to do with energy and optimism. They expressed a strong desire to achieve and that desire was fuelled by a passion that supported the expression of their personal values and varying expectations of career success. Additionally, they were passionate about learning and, in a number of cases, supporting others to learn.

In this thesis the passion attractor is used to describe the strong and powerful motivation that compelled these women to do what they loved to do. Moving forward often required them to make what I have termed ‘passion leaps’. A ‘passion leap’ is a career leap that is made out of a genuine passion to do something. Strongly intuitive in nature it admits no impediment and cannot go backwards. The randomness of a number of these women’s career leaps often resembled a spider’s web, that crisscrossed in and around contexts: families, industries, corporations, businesses and roles.

4.4.2 Identity

Identity can be described as *that constructed image into which the human entity is born, wants to be seen and by which it seeks distinction from others* (Levick, Woog and Knox 2007:258). As the product of conscious action and the outcome of self-reflection, identity is much more than inherited characteristics (Melucci, 1996). The identity attractor can be understood as the continual process of self-organising, dynamic and emergent identity construction, which comprises three essential features. Continuity of the individual’s self image (or organisational image) over time and across changing circumstances and contexts. How an individual differentiates themselves from others, as a specific unity, with her/his own thoughts...
and feelings, values and beliefs, together with the different roles and relationships one takes in various interactions. Finally, it is the ability to recognise others or be recognised by others. I recognise myself as unique and different or, by using the idea of sameness, I recognise myself as similar or dissimilar to others (Kuhn, 2009; Melucci, 1996).

As an attractor, identity strongly influenced the behaviour, dynamics and decisions that these women made in relation to their careers. The first aspect of identity was concerned with the continuity of their self image and how they maintained their sense of identity, over time and across the different roles and social contexts in which they participated. For example, as a female executive in a corporate organisation or as a mother/parent in a family. In whatever context, be it at work or at home, they expressed a confident positive self-identity that was strongly reflected in the way they described what they did. Their actions were consistently described in words such as: energetic, positive, present, opportunistic, determined or focused on what they were doing at the time.

The second form of identity relates to how these women differentiated themselves and placed themselves in relation to other women, male colleagues and teams within society, the corporate organisation and their family. These women did a number of things. They expressed being reflexive and responsible for continual learning and development. They managed their own risks and challenges; and solving problems was highlighted as something they sought out rather than avoided. They had a ‘voice’, which they trusted, and they had something to share. Speaking up in a proactive and positive way was a theme in all contexts.

As previously discussed, these women were passionate about learning and they were recognised as having high levels of education. They recognised themselves and were recognised by others as being their best and encouraging others to do their best, expressing high expectations of themselves and others. A review of the language used in the narratives showed that these women consistently use words like ‘being lucky’ or ‘it was a coincidence’. The use of this language could indicate a discounting of their ability; however I propose that this language was actually
reflective of their world view, and as a consequence the world they created was seen as opportunistic and lucky, a world that was filled with unexplained coincidences and self-created good fortune.

4.4.3 Freedom

Being motivated by a passion for doing what you love, having dreams and aspirations, means nothing if you do not have the freedom to pursue them. Freedom is generally understood as the power or right to act, speak, or think as one wants without hindrance or restraint. For example this research was conducted in Australia where we have freedom of speech; we are not subjected to the types of constraint that results from imposed restrictions on our freedom to participate in the social, political and economic life of the community.

It could be said that, with freedom of speech, expression and choice any educated woman with the appropriate skills and experience could have a corporate career. This is not the case. Many women feel restricted personally, socially and organisationally. Ghandi said that ‘freedom has to be taken’ and I propose that the women in this study did just that, they did something unique, they took their freedom. They created their own freedom through their thoughts and actions; they were self-directed, opportunistic, risk takers and counter suggestive. They chose freedom and their freedom drove their behaviour and decisions about their careers.

There is however something that had the ability to distract them into undervaluing their time and freedom – the corporate organisation. As a hierarchical system that controls the way things get done through entrenched rules and regulations, career freedom can be stifled. For example, the mandatory rules around the number of hours worked in a day or a week, positional hierarchies that support the knowledge and power relationships, the time served manner in which careers are progressed up a linear career ladder: all of these are potential barriers. This type of controlled career path can constrain women’s freedom; specifically women who choose to have a family and a career. Conforming to rigid time rules and career progression regulations restricts women’s freedom to follow other life cycle goals.
It is restrictive and often hard to achieve in a corporate organisation, the result of these restrictions for a number of women in this study was that they left the organisation.

What did these women do to differentiate themselves in such an environment? They had to make choices between conflicting freedoms at different times in their careers. For example, at different times in their life cycles they favoured certain freedoms over others, the freedom to have a corporate career or the freedom to have a child or a different career. The choice for freedom includes the restriction of freedom as well. This is a paradox and there is no simple balancing act. A couple of the participants tried to balance a fulltime career and motherhood without support and the result for them was burnout. The majority of the participants did not try to balance everything; they made a conscious choice to be out of balance by focusing their energy on one thing at a time. I propose that if you do not consciously make the choice yourself, about where you will focus your energy, someone else will unconsciously make it for you. Trying to do it all at once facilitated untenable burnout for a number of the women in this study; this state is unsustainable, unrewarding and disempowering.

In order to be content and flourish within the corporate organisation, the participants sought out positions and relationships that supported their way of working and enabled them the freedom to manage their own careers according to their life cycles. Self directed and curious, they followed their own internal compass seeking out positions and possibilities to develop and learn. They described how they worked best in a social environment that encouraged and supported them in a way that did not involve any serious negative consequences. Their inner confidence guided and defined them, enabling them to express themselves openly and freely. I suggest that the freedom to express themselves strengthened their inner freedom.

4.4.4 Connection

The participants in this study were connected: they contributed and belonged to families, networks and organisations. Being connected does not rise out of nowhere. Each of the women talked about the influence of their historical and present
relationships and the nature and quality (communicative connectedness) of those relationships on their career choices. I propose that their career actions emerged out of these connections. Within a family context, twelve of the participants had a family, eleven had children, and nine of the participants described the support, encouragement and a mutually empowering relationship with their partners as an integral part of their ability to follow their passion and take a corporate executive position.

They discussed relationships built on a mutuality that involved mutual respect and a mutual openness and responsiveness to change (Jordan, 2004); relationships that supported their career changes. Jordan (2004) suggests that we should always remember that strength and competence grow in context with ongoing encouragement and support. We generate resilience and courage in community (p.24). I have spoken previously in this chapter about the resilience of these women to follow their passion and the courage they demonstrated in speaking up and challenging the assumptions of a corporate system that has entrenched stereotypes around women’s leadership and the way women’s careers progress. I propose that the attractor of connection motivated the way these women socially and professionally interacted and formed relationships with the people who influenced and supported their careers.

4.5 Conclusion

The patterning of fractal narratives around the four attractor sets indicates that these women were connected and accepting of themselves and others, having a healthy sense of their own needs and abilities, they confidently and collaboratively formed strong personal relationships with family and built powerful networks. They valued the personal freedom to follow their passion and do what they loved to do; they chose at certain times in their life cycle to make freedom choices, to have a family, to take a career change or to express their work identity within the context of the corporate organisation by choosing to take an executive corporate position. Their career formed an important part of their identity, providing the opportunity to participate in and express themselves through corporate executive positions.
Chapter 5 - Conclusions that lead to new beginnings

5.1 Introduction

As stated in the introduction, this research aims to contribute to emergent and ongoing thought about the nature of women’s career development in today’s corporate organisation. In Chapter I argued that the benefits of gender diversity for organisations and society make it paramount that we understand why women are still underrepresented in executive positions within corporate organisations. This chapter sets out a thematic interpretation of the research findings and offers new understanding around women’s taking of executive careers positions within the corporate organisation. I propose that this new understanding transcends the current thinking around women’s taking of executive positions in corporate organisations and illuminates the possibilities for new ways of thinking about corporate careers and the way work is organised.

Complexity based inquiry methods have supported an investigation that transverses the terrain between ‘why there are so few women in executive positions’ and ‘why these women are in executive positions’. I stated in the introduction to this thesis that an additional aim of this research was to further our understanding of the application of Complexity theory to social behaviour within complex systems (corporate organisations). I believe the inquiry demonstrates the usefulness of Complexity metaphors in illuminating new understanding.

The chapter begins with an explanation of how the attractor sets, introduced in Chapter 4 (see Figure 2) provide insight into the research questions explored in the coherent conversations. I then outline three explanatory principles that have emerged from this research. The introduction of the principles has been managed in the following way. Firstly, I introduce the concept of potentiality found in the face of complexity and discuss in more detail the four attractor sets in relation to this principle. Secondly, I explain the attractor interface and the simple rules that were identified in the self-organising behaviour of the women in the creation of their careers. Finally I outline the co-evolutionary matches that were identified for
achievement and success. I conclude the chapter by illuminating the emergent implications of this study for women’s executive careers and for corporate organisations that seek to enhance their development, engagement and retention of women in executive positions.

5.2 Attractor sets provide insight into the research questions

Each of the coherent conversations was guided by a set of questions (outlined in Chapter 4) to which the participants provided narrative accounts; from these narrative accounts, fractal patterns and themes were identified. In Phase Two a further step was taken: attractors of meaning were identified in order to gain a deeper understanding of the thoughts and feelings which guided and shaped the participants’ career actions. The identification of the participants’ actions (behavioural patterns) was situated in context (Weick, 1995) and this provided a glimpse of the day-to-day strategies (sequence of internal and external processes that consistently produce a particular result) which the participants used to get things done, and how they produced the organisational career outcomes that emerged.

The attractor sets of meaning, Passion, Identity, Freedom and Connection have been introduced and discussed in the preceding chapter. To reiterate, attractors of meaning emerge out of the dynamics of human thought and feeling, which is constantly swarming in the mental space of each individual (Dimitrov and Woog, 2000). The dynamic patterning exists only in the actions it informs: its emergence is its own proof (Dimitrov and Woog, 2000:2). Attractors of meaning are real, but not material. They are states, which are characterised by the dominance of a specific attractor, which urges, exhorts or persuades human action.

This study found that these women’s individual career actions skipped around almost serendipitously, and whilst their career behaviour appeared unpredictable, their behaviour did relate to the attractors of meaning that propelled them into action. For example, the women in Phase Two made unpredictable ‘passion leaps’ in and out of executive positions and in many cases these leaps took them in and out of the corporate environment. This action suggests that they were not slaves to the idea that the corporate environment was the only place to have a career. However, having said
that, the corporate environment was described as alluring and often hard to leave for a number of reasons: financial stability, the empowering freedom to work in an environment that enabled them to do what they loved, the opportunity to work with like minded people and to be part of something that enabled them to learn and develop themselves and others. Alluring as the environment was, when changes occurred in the environment that were not coherent with their identity, these things were not enough to retain them in a position. Wheatley (1999) suggests that when any system changes in response to its environment, it will always change in a self referencing way, that is; in a way that it remains consistent with itself (p.85).

The women in this study were happy to make small changes to fit in to the organisational environment however, when the environment no longer had meaning for them or it became incoherent with their values, they moved to another position or environment. Dimitrov and Woog (2000) suggest that:

If there is no attractor of meanings behind one’s actions, the actions are simply meaningless; they are running at a physical level only. The lack of intelligent support, be it mental, emotional or spiritual, is incompatible with one’s own growth as an holistic individuality (p.27).

They further suggest that the energy, which propels the attractors of meaning in the virtual reality of our thoughts and feelings, needs to be transduced into energy that propels the attractor of actions (2000:29). For example, the strong desire for connection that drove these women to take an executive position within a corporate organisation revolved around an intention to interact and build networks in an environment that supported mutuality in relationships (specifically with their immediate manager). If their local relationships were good they would stay in the organisations, often regardless of any gendered or unhealthy corporate cultures. I suggest that rather than a commitment to a particular organisation, they were committed to the relationships around them.

Earlier four attractor sets were identified: Passion (achievement, doing what they love, learning, and passion leaps); Identity (confidence, courageous, values and differentiated – optimistic attitude); Freedom (counter suggestive, opportunistic, managed risks and self-directed); and Connection (family, networked, relationship
mutuality, and support). I will now explain in more detail how these attractor sets provide insight into the research questions, while making inferences about the form and dynamics of the way these women self organised their own careers. These forms of self-organising may or may not continue to occur in the future.

5.2.1 Coherent conversation Phase One: Why are women missing from executive leadership?

A Complexity analysis of the fractal fragments based on the five coherent conversations in Phase One indicated patterns of similarity across each of the groups and an indicative narrative was composed (see Chapter 4). The indicative narrative, when compared with the fractal fragment narratives from Phase Two, demonstrated that there was a number of consistent themes related to corporate culture and gender stereotyping. These are discussed below. However, while a number of organisational themes appeared common across the two coherent conversations, the participants’ comments in Phase One indicated that from where they sat (middle to executive management) in the organisational hierarchy, their experience of women’s career possibilities and experiences looked very different from the participants in Phase Two. For example: many of the respondents in Phase One expressed a lack of freedom in their ability to progress their corporate careers because of stereotypical gendered organisational and societal constraints. Rules emanating from inflexible work practices or rigid and outdated organisational HR policies often did not benefit these women’s careers or life work balance. They spoke of how the policies were often applied inflexibly or randomly, as their manager saw fit. They expressed an inability to make a difference at this level and often resorted to apathetic compliance, surrendering any expectations of things being done differently.

Generally their experience of women’s support for one another, especially from older more experienced women in the industry, was seen as competitive and inconsistent at their level. Women’s corporate careers were consistently described as being constrained by family commitments and women’s career development was seen as heavily dependant on the generosity of the manager they reported to, not on their
personal ability to drive their own career. The male partner with the capacity to earn the largest financial income was more likely to have the permanent career, with the other female partner caring for the family and supporting the family economically through part time work.

Confidence and executive career identity were shown to be supportively interconnected by the Phase Two participants, however with the Phase One participants there did not appear to be a strong link between personal confidence and their career progression. The theme of gendered organisational practices constraining women’s career development was often referred to, along with a lack of opportunity, and the need to ‘stick with it’ to get past what was described as a metaphorical ‘pain barrier’, before their ability was accepted within their industry market. The participants in Phase One did see a ‘glass ceiling’; a ceiling that they perceived had to be pushed through if they were to ever get ahead in their male dominated industry.

Passion did not appear as a strong attractor for the participants in Phase One. Career was often sighted as an economic necessity or an activity that kept their brain active; it was suggested that most women do not want to take on executive positions, because such positions are too problematic. This reinforced a theme that was consistent in all the conversations: a corporate career means different things to different people.

The ‘passion leaps’ so prominently identified in the careers of the Phase Two participants were not evidenced in the career moves of the Phase One participants: they were more likely to follow a career ladder. The commonly held view in the Phase One group was that career progression had to be sequential. This group appeared to be held in an attractor that suggested working life has to be organised along the predetermined stereotypical ideas of a women’s role as carer and supporter, corporate careers based on a linear ‘9 to 5’ work model, and that men will always be in the leadership roles.
As alluded to above there, are common fractal themes identified in both groups (Phase One and Phase Two) these are:

14. Women’s construct of corporate career changes depending on where they are in their life cycle.
15. Societal pressures influence women’s career and family choices.
16. Male leadership styles are still the corporate organisational norm.
17. A ‘boys club’ continues to impede some women’s career aspirations within the corporate organisation.
18. Stereotypical family roles persist within our culture: male as the breadwinner, female as the family care-giver.

The participants in Phase One strongly indicated that for them to have a corporate career they required more flexibility and a breaking down of the boys club, so that women (at their level) could have the opportunity to compete for positions fairly, on skill and competence. The self-determination to drive their own career was not evident, partially it seemed from being stuck in an industry that encouraged and supported male ways of working and being, to the exclusion of women who did not take on that male career model, and partly because of a lack of confidence (self-belief) in how to be themselves and drive their own career in such an environment. They spoke of a need for more female role models and women’s networks to support their confidence and career development.

5.2.2 Coherent conversation Phase Two: Leading ladies: what can be learned from women who take executive positions in corporate organisations?

In the women’s responses to the guiding questions asked in Phase Two, the participants described a number of similar actions and work practices. From their responses I identified the four attractor sets: Passion, Identity, Freedom and Connection. These attractors were useful in illuminating what the participants’ thought about their career experience and provided new understanding and learning about why these women take executive positions in corporate organisations.
The following section lists each attractor set and describes the motivators, values and issues of concern, which guided and shaped the women’s attitudes and behaviours toward their careers.

5.2.3 Passion

Passion includes achievement, doing what they loved, learning and making life cycle ‘passion leaps’. The passion for doing what they love to do created a vision that compelled them into an often dynamic and unpredictable future. They took risks, almost as if they thrived on the non-established order or unpredictability of the next move. They often moved positions knowing their career may disintegrate into instability or that a ‘passion leap’ to a new level of organisation may require a new career form or even another career direction. Trusting what would emerge, they leaped anyway. Making ‘passion leaps’ generally meant a different and dynamic route to the top. I suggest that, by taking ‘passion leaps’, they did not have to climb any ladders and this enabled them to bypass much of the traffic jam and resistance that many women report coming up against in the middle of the corporate career ladder.

Nine of the women reflected on more than one occasion that they did not expect to see a glass ceiling and they did not. With no expectation of seeing or being held back by a ‘glass ceiling’ the participants in Phase Two adapted to what ever came along. They frequently reported that they would treat any resistance to the way they worked or their career like any other problem: a problem that would be mutually resolved and if not, they would adapt accordingly. Confident in their ability to choose other options, adaption often required them to make another leap.

Additionally, their passion fuelled a strong curiosity for learning. Listening and learning were expressed with passion throughout their narratives. Eleven of the women spoke about their passion for developing others and how sharing their knowledge and experience with other women, their team or their colleagues, was important to them. Finding ways to lead and develop others by encouraging their development was an important part of their leadership.
Finally, these women valued achievement. Passion compelled them forward to achieve and deliver what they had committed to do. Seven of the participants explicitly expressed a desire to leave their mark, whether it was to make a small difference in what they loved doing or to leave a legacy. This was not always an altruistic drive. They had a strong desire to be the best they could be and to reach their full potential by growing and using their abilities. This high expectation flowed to those around them. They played the game ‘full out’; wherever they were they were committed and present in all their actions.

5.2.4 Identity

The identity (confidence; courage, values and differentiated – optimistic attitude) attractor for these women can be seen as strongly based on their confidence. A strong self-belief was evident in the way they created their opportunities and the actions they took in their careers. They had a voice and they used it confidently, challenging ideas or decisions to find mutually suitable solutions. They talked consistently about achievement and doing the things they loved with energy and optimism and when their identity was perceived to be under threat, they took action. As discussed previously, if the requirements of a position or the relationships within the company were no longer coherent with their values they took responsibility for whatever action was required to gain coherence. If a mutually suitable resolution did not evolve then they were prepared to, and many cases, did, leave the organisation.

Generally, these participants were clear about their values and life priorities. They demonstrated personal responsibility for managing their own careers; they prioritised their time so they could fulfil their family commitments in a way that was aligned with their values and committed priorities. Their capacity to manage their identity and their corporate careers was sustained when they could maintain their passionate participation in doing what they loved to do at work and by being part of an environment that was conducive to maintaining good, trusting relationships.
The identity attractor influenced these women to follow their passion. Their identity formed around their career progression, following their passion, taking risks and making career leaps which resulted in their careers emerging through adaptive passion leaps across many alternative environments and careers.

As discussed in Chapter 2 and reinforced by the participants in Phase One, gender stereotyping is one of the key deterrents to women’s corporate career progression. The meaning and significance of gender roles is a social construction that varies across contexts. The participants in this group did not assume that leadership distinctions based on gender were always present in similar ways for all women. As a group they did not see gender as an issue that would stop them having a corporate executive career; they consistently cited organisational leadership and the relationships with their immediate manager as being more influential in their career success, together with how gender issues were managed within an organisational context.

I suggest that, for these women, actively managing their own career identities was strongly influenced by their counter suggestive nature, in that they wanted to ensure that any societal and cultural views of women’s roles and the taking of executive positions were not forced upon them. Melucci (1996) suggests something more than will and determination is required to overcome the socially constructed identities placed upon people, groups and nations. He proposes that without access to resources it becomes very difficult to overcome these social constructions. Kuhn (2009) supports this view, adding that to maintain the integrity of our identity as well as our difference from others we require access to resources (p.110). It could be said that the women in this study were able to create their own corporate executive identity because of their access to resources. Having their hygiene (Maslow, (1954)) needs of connection, food, shelter and safety met, they were able to access the additional resources that their socioeconomic status provided: freedom of choice, access to education, networks and relational support. All of these encouraged their growth and identification as professional women who could follow their passion, a passion that led them to an executive position within a corporate organisation.
As each of the participants passed through the various stages of their life cycles they acknowledged that they had different needs that often conflicted with the corporate environment and therefore required different contexts for expression. As women with a strong sense of confidence (self-belief) they expressed an ability to create new contextual identities by integrating the past and the choices available in the present.

The women’s individual group membership did shape their perspective and experience within the corporate organisations. Six of the women explicitly expressed their strong desire to be part of a team where there was absolute trust and mutual respect for every team member. Treating people fairly and recognising that everyone’s contribution matters, was sighted as one of the key elements to business success.

5.2.5 Freedom

Behaviour under the sway of the freedom (counter suggestive, opportunistic, managed risks and self-directed) attractor resulted in these participants strongly pursuing freedom of thought and action in their careers. From a career perspective they expressed their desire for freedom in the way they approached their work and in the decisions they made, where they worked and, most importantly for these women, with whom they worked. There was an overall behaviour pattern and shape to their careers, however specific concrete behaviour at a particular time could not always be predicted. The degree of freedom they sought decreased their ability to predict or rigidly stick to a long-term career plan. The variety and irregularity of such a career, whilst enabling their satisfaction for freedom, did pose constraints and challenges: the ambiguity of financial tenure, and the need to quickly rebuild their credibility in a new environment, while building new alliances and a supportive network of relationships. These constraints and challenges required resilience and creativity and I suggest their ability to adapt was supported by their highly counter suggestive nature. They expressed on more than one occasion love for solving problems and excitement about achieving a challenge that someone suggested that they could not do. I propose that their ability to survive and grow in such environment was energised by constraint and enabled by their passion for learning. Learning enabled them to change and adapt their behaviour according to the changing circumstances.
Generally the participants orchestrated their own career opportunities. Their conversations revealed that they sought the freedom and the power to make their own decisions; self directed and curious they followed their own compass, which appeared to serendipitously lead them to an executive leadership position. What I think is interesting and different about these women was how comfortable they were in making their choices around the opportunities they created. Their life cycle priorities and values had a strong influence on their career priorities and the career positions they took within and outside the organisations they worked for. Regardless of context, their counter suggestive nature often found them rubbing up against something or someone who said they could not or should not do something differently. This did not deter them. I suggest that the challenge and the friction actually spurred them on, to prove they could do it, whilst proving the alternative suggestion less effective, and the friction created an opportunity for something new and unpredictable to emerge. They appeared to thrive on the competitive nature of the challenge.

The issue of women taking time out of the corporate workplace to have a child is often seen as a lack of commitment to a corporate career, the implications being that it made it exceedingly difficult to rejoin. This was not the case for the participants in this study. They chose to leave the corporate environment for a myriad of reasons, yet they were still clearly committed to their workplace leadership and exercising their power constructively, when they were in those positions. Going against the trend found in other research (Hewlett, 2007), I found no significant detrimental issues were highlighted as a result of them leaping in and out of their corporate positions. Perhaps this occurred because they were comfortable exercising the power to move in and out of the corporate environment, or perhaps because of their optimistic attitude they did not expect to be faced with any issues and therefore did not see any. Being comfortable about their actions did not imply that they did not face challenges or problems in the workplace. They did. Having the capacity and willingness to solve problems, they did solve them and they then supported the decisions that emerged.
Well educated, they differentiated themselves through education. The usefulness of education not only lies in the learning, it lies in the freedom it gives us. As well-educated women with a passion for learning, they had learned how to think and work independently. This ability supported them to positively adapt themselves to progress and change, thus providing a range of work and social opportunities. It was not enough to wait patiently for someone or something to give them a career: they took the action to create and grow their own careers. They demonstrated that with adequate social opportunities individuals can effectively shape their own destiny.

5.2.6 Connection

We turn now to the complexity of their connections to understand the fundamental contribution of connection: (family, networked, relationship mutuality, support) to their career development. Family was expressed as a priority for eleven of the participants. Nine of the women expressed a high level of coherence within their family unit; they spoke of togetherness and interdependence (friendship) within the family unit as integral to their ability to manage a corporate career.

Their careers, whilst often appearing to progress through chance, coincidence or serendipity, were always a result of the connections they made. They regularly referred to tapping into their internal resources (self-direction and determination) to get things done or their external connections (such as the networks that they created from many different origins) that validated, supported and encouraged them. Moreover, they repeatedly discussed how growth-fostering work relationships were central to their career actions.

The centrality of relationships in women's lives has been explored by many writers (Belenky et al., 1986; Gilligan, 1982; Jordan et al., 1991; Miller, 1976). Miller (1976) suggests the primary motivation for women throughout their life is toward establishing a basic sense of connection to others. The data in this thesis reflected this also. These women sought positive support and encouragement in their careers through meaningful relationships. Their one on one relationship with their immediate manager played an integral part in their decision to stay or leave a corporation or position.
There are a number of studies that draw attention to women’s exclusion from networks (EOWA) and to women’s own resistance to networking and how this is perceived as holding them back from career progression within corporate organisations. Forrest and Dougherty (2004) highlight how involvement in networking behaviour is more beneficial for career progress of men than women. McGuire’s (2000) study ‘With a Little Help From My Friends? Gender, Social Closure, and Network Support,’ found that women form relationships at work but not the networks to get ahead. Women she suggests may be adept at socialising, but when it comes to networking skills, they fail miserably (McGuire, 2000). Contrary to what these studies suggest, these women networked, actively participating in women’s networks. Women’s networks were actively fostered by several of the women because they found them to be engaging, hopeful, rewarding and mutually beneficial. Participant ten used the phrase ‘women whispers’, to express what women do well, but many do not do enough of. ‘Women whispers’ are like-minded women who build collaborative networks of relationships across all contexts that support, encourage, share knowledge and have fun with one another. According to Fedele and Harrington (1990) where women gather together, there exists a potentially rich relational context to foster growth (p.10). Growth and learning relationships were identified as important to these women’s career choices, so it is not surprising that these participants chose to network.

Additionally, their corporate connections and relationships were dynamic; they were formed, broken and reformed over time, within a web of social and cultural contexts. Their career journeys were filled with disconnection as they moved away from corporate life to pursue other life goals or move toward different connections and career experiences. They disconnected and reconnected to relationships and networks, as they needed. They did not suffer from the wanting of career opportunity; they had the personal drive, freedom, socioeconomic status and relational support to enable them to create their own career opportunities. For these women connection was a key self-organising factor in their career creation.
5.3 Attractor sets and the concept of potentiality

Viewing the world and experience as complex enables a different engagement with possibility. *Personal, social and material aspects may be conceived of and related to differently. There can be more space for the ‘other’. This way of viewing allows greater richness of experience and freedom for conceiving of future possibilities* (Kuhn, 2005:12).

Paying attention to the participant’s communication of their narrative and the discourse (phrase space) around their career actions provided useful insight into how these women made sense of and construed meaning (Kelly, 1955; Freire, 1970) in relation to their corporate career experience, while at the same time evolving and shaping themselves in a contextual coupling with the organisation to create their career identity. The attractors, which were identified, help us understand the phase space of the women. For these women their phase space construed a world where taking an executive position in a corporate organisation was contextual and negotiated around life cycle choices, it was self-directed, opportunistic and almost always emergent.

The Complexity based pattern analysis, which was used, identified underlying patterns of order together with indications (because long term behaviour cannot be predicted with any precision) of possible future emergences.

The potentiality that unfolds out of small actions and choices can have major, although unpredictable, effects in determining what comes next. The attractors illustrated the potentiality of achievement in the complexity that is women’s taking of executive positions within the corporate organisation. However the attractors did not explain everything; what made the difference in their corporate career was a result of the interaction of their local relationships around the attractors. Relationships really mattered to these women; they affected the potentiality of their actions: when they worked, where they worked, whom they worked with and how they worked.
Looking closely at these relationships and the recurrent rules that guide and influence their relationships provides useful information about how these women created their executive careers and took an executive position within the corporate organisation.

5.4 Explaining the attractor interface

It is only possible to know what the attractor looks like by watching where the initial states go. Complex systems do not ‘know in advance’ where they are going, rather they seem to be pushed or pulled around in accordance with certain rules. The existence of attractors does not imply that complex systems are goal seekers; on the contrary they are goal finders, which only recognise the goal when they have found it. The women in this study reflected on how they did not set out with a specific goal to take an executive position within a corporate organisation; they did however have an intention to actively seek out opportunities to do what they loved to do. Doing what they loved to do often required them to take an executive position within a corporate organisation.

The self–organisation, dynamism and emergence of their taking of an executive position evolved out of their passion and the dynamics of their communicative connectedness in and out of the corporate organisations in which they worked. The exchanges that occurred between themselves and the simple recurrent rules led to the complex behaviour and emergent career outcomes. The emergent outcomes in this study are women who are successful. They successfully achieved the ability to follow their passion, which led them to hold or to have held, an executive position within a corporate organisation. It is very important at this point to reiterate that it was the participants themselves who defined this as success. Success in their terms was doing what they loved to do, and holding an executive position in a corporate organisation enabled them to do this. Often this success was described by the participants as coincidental, accidental or serendipitous, however there is more than coincidence and serendipity here, there is the ability to nudge (influence) the attractor. Actively or intuitively, they had the ability to observe and nudge their attractors of meaning towards success. They made a choice to adapt and succeed in the corporate environment and the underlying rules that guided their actions supported their success. Context and time dependent, their success did not always
emerge in the corporate organisation, there were times when their life cycle passions or priorities led them to make ‘passion leaps’, that took them out of the corporate organisation to pursue their passions and priorities in other environments.

The simple recurrent rules (behaviours) of interaction that governed their success behaviour were: they were present and focused on what ever they were doing; they continually networked; and they actively sought positive mutual relationships. They proactively sort out opportunities to learn, solve problems and lead; challenges and risks were managed with self-belief and an optimistic ‘can do’ attitude. I would like to draw specific attention to the way they managed their risks by focusing on the positive. The following fragment from participant 6 aptly demonstrates this below:

> There is always a risk reward trade-off, I don’t think people consider the upside enough, they focus on the down side… There will always be barriers and people who are more interested that you do not succeed, the world is full of naysayers. I just block it out and draw on the things I know to be true for me. I learned very young, there is no downside. Sometimes things just do not work out.

### 5.5 Co-evolutionary matches for achievement and success

Despite having the intention of success as well as confident and competent delivery of action, there was no guarantee of success. These women kept looking for success; they looked for positive matches and ways to fit in. They survived by continually filtering for positive outcomes. Unpredictable events occurred, issues emerged and they managed them; their reflective ability to seek alternative forms of action when previous actions failed was enhanced by a continual learning mindset.

Being autonomous and self-directed they were not independent and self-sufficient. Their careers did not emerge in isolation. They co-evolved. From a Complexity perspective small co-evolutionary matches determine fitness. It was Kauffman (1995) who developed the term fitness landscape (the topographical map of evolution of a species, showing its adaptive moves to reach a ‘higher fitness peak’). The nature and the quality of these women’s local relationships and interactions drove them towards their ideal position (peak fitness) (Kauffman, 1995). Women who fail to reach the higher peaks in their landscape indicate they had become
outpaced by their competitors (which tend to be their male colleagues at this level). The dynamic that emerges in this social environment is the cooperative and competitive relating that exists between people (Stacey, Griffin, Shaw, 2000): the state of cooperation required in fostering relationships versus the state of competition required to gain access to the power and freedom of an executive position. Elias (1989) adds that in forming these competitive and cooperative relationships power relations are being co-created. The view of power relations being co-created differs markedly from the view that corporations are run along white male power structures where men hold the positions of power over women.

Evolving together, the women changed the organisation and the organisation changed them. The co-evolutionary outcomes that emerge are not always positive. That is, some outcomes and risks were successful, some were not. For example, in managing her corporate career and a family, participant 4 described collaboration and fostering trade offs that led to negotiating part time work and an executive career, which appeared on the surface to be a successful outcome. However there was an underlying expectation that she would conform and do the job no matter how long it took. With no lessening of the work load and fewer resources she actually ended up doing a full time role in less days. It was not successful; the effect of the arrangement for her was burnout:

I came back and said its not working for me. I’m sick. I’m working really long hours. I was literally working 7 days into 4 days and the 6 hours working at home, working at home on the weekend and not getting home til 11 or 12 at night. It was fanatic … they asked me what I wanted and I said I was hired to work four days and they said you can not sit at General Manager level working 4 days a week and I said happy with that.

Participant 12 also experienced the negative effects of being excluded from networks, as she describes below her experience of not taking an executive position:
Not playing for the hierarchy positions often had the effect of you being left out of the decision making roles and therefore if my relationships were not strong with the decision makers I felt vulnerable. You can only argue for so many things, till someone passes by you and I guess I just moved on.

Exclusion from peer networks can reduce women’s access to information, which is crucial to advancement in the corporate organisation (Woody and Weis, 1994).

These women’s careers were dynamic and self-organising; there were many possible career trajectories, which arose for them. Consequently they were constantly organising and reorganising their careers through a clash of mutual collaboration and mutual competition. The participants proved their fitness when a certain landscape was embodied: that is, when their passion and relationships matched, resulting in a positive co-evolutionary outcome. The landscape (organisation) became the place they wanted to work. Those that are able to adapt to the change dynamics of the organisation persist the longest, as these women have demonstrated. In complex systems, small co-evolutionary matches determine fitness [however] there needs to be a continuing coherence between the self-organising evolution of the system and its landscape (Kuhn, 2009:40). A major event or a change in the organisational environment (landscape) may produce a negative outcome as highlighted above. If a local manager is not sensitive to local conditions and fails to build communicative connectedness with the women this may lead to a mismatch with what the women value (good relationships and good communication) resulting for them in a lack of coherence with their identity. The relationships then dissipate and something else emerges from the chaos.

No dynamic patterns emerging at the edge of chaos can be fixed or forced to change or improve. Too much control changes the attractor interaction and causes the system to adapt and change (Dimitrov and Woog, 2002). The way towards harnessing positive self-organisation is through understanding it, being aware of its dynamics, and knowing how to remove the obstacles from the way of its manifestation.
The relationship between these women’s careers and context was dynamic, self-organising and interrelated as represented in Figure 3 below. This figure is useful in providing an understanding of the dynamic interplay between their careers in context over time. As an observer we fragment the whole by the interpretation we bring to the analysis, and there is always more to deal with, as no one can deal with the whole all at once. This figure provides an opportunity to explore, at different points of observation, an interpretative fragment (snapshot) of the interplay between all the dynamics. By deliberately fragmenting the interrelatedness for the purpose of interpretive analysis, an opportunity exists to freeze a moment and concentrate on something specific. For example: when we stop and take a glimpse of the dynamic that exists at the nexus between family and the organisation we see how these women managed the interplay between family and the organisation. We can see how they managed their relationships and prioritised their time based on family values; this provided valuable insight into what shaped their career actions.

**Figure 3: Frame of reference - sensemaking**
We have the capacity to alter our surroundings to fit our model of the world and to make them more exciting, challenging or safer. These women interpreted their careers and managed their actions towards success. They are active participants in the career process that occurs in historical and cultural contexts. What these women positively achieved was influenced by the economic opportunities and enabling conditions of education, support and encouragement. This enabled them to exercise their freedom to participate in social choice, making choices that drove the progress of their opportunities.

5.6 Future possibilities: the implications for women’s executive careers and corporate organisations who are seeking to develop, engage and retain women in executive positions

Contrary to conventional wisdom, this research identified that the women who participated in this study do want to lead and hold an executive position within a corporate organisation. What makes these women’s stories interesting is their motivation for taking executive positions within the corporate space and their ability to handle the paradoxical nature of organisational life. The majority of participants were not motivated by position or the status attributed to an executive position. Only four of the participants reported status and money as a motivating factor early in their careers, however this motivation had changed over their career life cycle. Moreover, they were not motivated by the financial rewards of an executive position. Nine of the women reported that it was more important for them to make a difference, by developing and growing people and successful business. By being part of the corporate system and taking an executive position they were able to do this. However, they were not slaves to the idea that the corporate organisation was the only place for them to achieve. These women were just as comfortable taking leading roles outside the corporate organisation.

In terms of success, they took a whole of life approach. They were motivated by a strong values driven identity, the freedom to follow their passion, be themselves, and the opportunity to connect and build mutual relationships. It was their interactions and freedom of action that decided where they worked and focused their productive energy.
This finding provides new understanding about how the notions of the basic organising principles that govern workplaces, including the implicit rules about success, are not retaining and attracting women in executive positions. In general the corporate executive career model is not gender specific. However, if we examine the corporate career model through a gender lens, the current model designed by men for men is likely to be representative and supportive of men’s career experience. Our western organisations are focused on individual personal traits, movement toward autonomy and independent success accomplished through competitive achievement. They under emphasise the importance of growth-fostering relationships and the need to participate in the growth of the organisational community. The career models that are derived from these traditional development and organisational models typically over emphasise internal traits and linear corporate career models that reflect the dominant culture of separation and power over. The concepts of separation, individualisation and self-development characterise the corporate career model and women are expected to fit into it. Some women do adapt, as the women in this research showed. However as the statistics (in Chapter 1) show, many women do not.

This research shows that, generally, women’s careers develop in fundamentally different ways from the traditional model of career development, which created a climate of competition for the next position through a time served, status driven hierarchy. The typical corporate career path for a profession is generally outlined and based on the preference of arriving at a given position as soon as possible; the preferred path is then derived from information about how long each of the possible stages of the continuous path will take. A career planner can do this. If a person’s path is more complex such as involving leaping in and out of the career path, then cognition and feeling are more intertwined, and the choice is less easy to delegate to someone else (such as a career planner).

These women’s career journeys could not be delegated to someone else to manage, characterised by a dynamic and forward moving process, they were full of connections and relationships, where changes occurred through mutual influence, impact and responsiveness. Their careers broke down when the relationship within the organisation broke down. Lack of recognition, isolation or failure of the
relational context to validate and respond to a women’s experience or her attempts for connection encouraged the breakdown.

I propose that if organisations wish to retain and attract women into executive positions they have to change their career model. Whilst this research does not extend to the design of such a model I do recommend further research into reimagining the corporate career model. I further suggest that if corporate organisations seriously want to attract and retain women in their organisations the following factors must be considered in the career model design:

- The emergent, dynamic and self-organising nature of behaviour.
- The importance of a non-linear structure where non-authoritarian mutuality is emphasised.
- Women’s strengths and the potentiality and power of connection and relationships.
- That careers occur in a social context.
- For women the way work is organised needs to be is redefined (on output not time served).
- The importance of relational, cultural, and socio-political factors in fostering careers.
- That for women life style choices is valued for the transferable skills obtained in the experiences.
- The notion of leadership competence expanded. (For example, from a view where the notion of the expert who gains their experience in time served to the one that takes into consideration the importance of relational contexts, transferable skills and the valuing of healthy mutual relationships).

For this kind of organisational career model change to occur a number of things need to happen. Firstly, I suggest that women must be open to change themselves, to be able to think differently and act differently. The women in this study chose to take on new information and to speak differently. What we have learned from these women is that women who want to take executive leadership positions must believe that it is possible, be prepared to manage their own careers, be adaptive, take risks, and have the capacity to reflect on and learn from their experiences, to find their voice and
have the courage to use it in challenging the status quo when they see a need for things to be done differently. Further, they need to build mutual relationships and networks, become ‘women whispers’ and support other women, be vigilant about what they value and what they say and do.

Language guides the construction (and reconstruction) of our ideologies and interactions and therefore attention needs to be given to our narratives. Organisational constructs get reinforced by the repeated narratives of people’s lives and I suggest ‘the opt out’ (Belkin, 2003) rhetoric that is bandied around about well educated women opting out of high powered jobs is detrimental to the majority of women – mothers or not. The women in this research demonstrated a willingness to actively offer constructive leadership in their workplaces and I suggest that the ‘opt out’ narrative is devaluing them. Moreover, this story is taking the focus off the need for organisations to do things differently. Organisations could take a more pragmatic balance between present concerns and the future potentialities. Many organisations have not altered their expectations of employee’s career development and the way career success is defined. Women are expected to fit into organisational cultures that do not enable women to contribute in their unique way.

Finally, these complex times are rich with possibilities. Raising awareness of new career possibilities and new ways of looking at a corporate career are paramount if organisations want to attract and retain women in executive positions. Why would women engage in an organisation that is defeating and limiting when there are so many other opportunities? Organisations and their managers need to catch up if they want to attract and retain women. Managers need to pay attention to what happens on a basic level with how things get done, the communicative connectedness of day-to-day actions and the relationships between people day-to-day. They will need to rethink the way work is done to become more focused on output rather than time worked, thus enabling the creation of a career model that becomes an ‘attractor’ rather than a detractor. The most powerful attractors are the ones that respond to
people’s basic needs for survival and for their desire for connection and meaning; when attractors resonate people respond and shift. The research of this thesis indicates that organisations that are able to differentiate themselves with a different career model will lead the way in retaining and attracting women.

My findings suggest that women do want to lead and have a corporate career; they just need and want to do it differently. They are turning away from the traditional corporate career model and its hierarchical, time bound linear approach to create their own career patterns. Moreover, these women are leading in a more collaborative and inclusive way that establishes communicative connectedness to achieve business success. I recommend that those corporate organisations that wish to retain and attract more women to executive positions will need to re-imagine the way they define success and the way career progression and work is organised. A different approach is needed, one that enables, values and supports women’s ways of working and being.

5.7 Conclusion
This empirical study culminated in the exploration of the context dependent thought and behaviour patterns of twelve women who held or had held executive positions within the Australian financial services industry. Creating a conversation about the deeper issues that motivated these women to ‘get things done’ in relation to their careers and the taking of executive positions within the corporate organisational context provided new understanding about women’s career drivers and the patterns that emerged. These findings open up new possibilities for women pursuing executive positions and those corporate organisations that wish to retain and attract women into executive positions.

The women who participated in this study chose success and they successfully demonstrated their commitment to corporate organisational leadership by holding executive positions throughout their careers. Their careers were serendipitous in nature; dynamic, self-organised and emergent and they adapted and produced survival strategies that did not follow a long-term plan. Their career identities and actions were relational and context dependant. They demonstrated an ability to move
back and forth between contexts, almost effortlessly. It was as if they operate from a pivotal point that enabled them to continually change their view of the whole. Viewing things from this pivotal point of view they could see many different possibilities and opportunities for action; changing in and out of the macro and micro supported their ability to make small adaptations to their environment and this enabled them to manage the paradoxes of organisational life and survive to follow their passion.

The women’s narratives and actions suggest that these women had a strong self belief and they viewed themselves as having agency; they valued themselves as people who could make informed choices and decisions personally and within their social, organisational and family contexts. Their participation in, and the holding of, an executive position within a corporate organisation contributed to these women’s autonomy of agency and identity.

Gough (1992) argues that an element of basic human need is that of ‘autonomy of agency ‘ – the capacity to make informed choices about what should be done and how to go about doing it’ (1992:9) He further suggests that ‘participation in the social roles of production, reproduction, cultural transmission and political authority is necessary if people are to develop critical autonomy – the ability to situate, criticise and, if necessary to challenge the rules and practices of ones society’ (1992:10) and I would add, in all contextual environments.

Describing themselves as successful on their own terms, these women lived passionately and powerfully and, like many other western women, they live and work in a dynamic society, which is full of societal expectation and contradictory behaviours towards women holding executive positions. This research found, as others also have (Merrill-Sands, Kickul and Ingols, 2005), that the lack of women at the top of the corporate organisation has little to do with their lack of ability or interest in holding executive leadership positions in corporate organisations. Nor does it have to do with their choices to leap out of the corporate organisation for other life priorities, such as parenting. I propose that it has more to do with the way
work is organised, the relationships that are formed together with the subtle, but deeply held gender assumptions that continue to shape models of the corporate career, leadership and leaders.

The women who participated in this study are among the few women who hold executive positions within the corporate organisation. So what can we learn from these women’s experiences and perspectives that will help us understand women’s career motivation and taking of executive positions? Four attractor sets Passion, Freedom, Identity and Connection were identified as motivating factors that drove these women’s career behaviour. From these attractors sets I have identified 15 key learning’s which provide new and important insight into how these women get things done:

1. They made ‘passion leaps’ to follow their passion and do what they loved to do.
2. Relationships really mattered.
3. They chose success and achieved results.
4. They orchestrated their own career opportunities.
5. Their careers were relational and context dependant.
6. They managed and took risks.
7. They were in action – had a ‘can do attitude’.
8. Connected - they were supported.
9. Learning was reflexive and continual.
10. Networked – they were ‘Women whispers’.
11. The way they perceived the world influenced the results they got.
12. Careers were dynamic – serendipitous.
15. They adapted to the paradoxical aspects of a corporate environment.

These women’s engagement in the corporate organisations was internally motivated. In other words their success had a lot to do with their attitude and personal effort to give ones best and to thrive in the environment they chose to work in. They were continually challenged to adjust to new contexts and new roles, yet these women survived. Taking and applying this knowledge will not automatically guarantee
success in a different time and in a different context. *Leaders emerge in a wide variety of circumstances and reflect a broad range of talent and personalities. There is no one pattern of behaviour or personality type most suitable for the leadership role ([Porter-O'Grady and Malloch], 2003: 37).* We can nudge (influence) in the right direction, but we have to walk the path ourselves. However understanding and being aware of the self-organisational dynamics of these women’s corporate careers does provide valuable insight on how to remove the obstacles for organisations and women seeking an executive position with a corporate organisation.

These women were not applying knowledge; they were knowledge generators, actively learning and taking the courage to question knowledge that grows out of human action and interaction. Their leadership careers emerged, from each one’s life journey, alive, dynamic and subject to adaption as change in a life long process.

It may well be argued that the above list of 15 key learning’s, about how the women in this research get things done, may relate also to persons of other gender. However, in keeping with the research conventions characterising rigorous and trustworthy research, it is inappropriate for me to make such claims here.

Finally, by providing a new way of looking at this phenomenon, I have built a bridge between what we thought we knew and what is actually happening. It is hoped that this new understanding will support the emergence of a different career model and ways of working in the corporate organisation. This difference may well support the inclusion of women and the valuing of what women have to offer; their ways of working and doing things so that they are engaged and retained in corporate organisations, thus enabling them to be involved in the decision making of corporate organisations.

In my introductory chapter I identified how there appears to be a lot of rhetoric about the transformation of the workplace to include women, but personally I do not see much change. There are more women in management but the model of acceptable leadership style and career patterns and working practice do not appear to have changed much. The idea that giant corporations construct most of reality today is not a new idea ([Korton], 1997). I have declared my desire for corporations to be run
differently, because we are not just talking about a ‘place’ within which people build careers, but a ‘place’ that impacts our everyday life, a ‘place’ that makes everyday decisions about how our world functions.

The contribution to knowledge of this thesis lies in the illumination of the key learnings from women who take executive positions within the corporate organisation. Additionally, the use of Complexity based inquiry methods to explore these women’s sense making and career actions has not been done before. Finally, I have demonstrated that Complexity offers new fresh descriptions, which include a framework that is useful for informing organisational practice.

The women who participated in this research were ordinary women: ordinary women doing what they loved and doing it successfully. They faced the every day challenges of society, organisations, family and the personal domain with a strong belief in their own capacity to influence and achieve the important aspects of their life. They worked in corporate organisations that were systematically dysfunctional and experienced work cultures that were not terribly inclusive or supportive of gender diversity. However they chose success and with that intention created a life full of opportunities and possibilities that supported their taking of executive positions. They wanted to lead, they believed they could lead, and they did lead, passionately and differently from many other men and women.

We are what we think having become what we thought.

Pavithva


Dissent 22 (spring), pp.169-179.


Tate, R. W. and White J. (2008) People Leave Managers...Not Organizations!: Action Based Leadership, New York: iUniverse, Corp.


In keeping with the guidelines of the ethics committee, this information sheet should be read in conjunction with the consent form attached prior to participation in the research. A copy will be given to you for your records.

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research, my name is Kerry Baxter and I have a career background in Human Relations and People Development. I am currently undertaking research towards a Doctor of Philosophy. My research topic: Women and Executive Leadership Roles in Corporations – A Study into the Career Choices made by Women in the Financial Services Industry.

The aims of the study are to:

- Contribute to emergent and on-going theorising about the way different discourses affect women’s career development and choices;
- Facilitate further dialogue about corporate career decisions between women and other women, men and women, women who hold and do not hold key positions of leadership;
- Contribute specifically to social change by conducting collaborative research that is designed to explore and contribute to organisational leadership.

The research will gather together and analyse women’s career related narratives. The research will comprise one on one interviews held with women who currently hold senior leadership roles within the Financial Services Industry. Two focus groups with male and female professionals, three women only focus groups with participants who currently hold corporate professional positions in the Australian Financial Services Industry. Each group will take between one to two hours and will consist of 8 – 10 participants. The participants will be volunteers and will be able to leave at any time.

An electronic copy of the findings will be made available to you on completion of the research. I look forward to bringing this research project to paper and enjoying the journey. I will produce a practical piece of communication that as an account may be flawed, but will be conducted ethically and to the best I can do.

Any questions you may have about the research can be directed to Kerry Baxter on 0411150333 or Dr Lesley Kuhn of the School of Management, UWS, Blacktown, NSW. Phone number (02) 98524172.

Kind regards

Kerry Baxter, BA, MapSc

This study has been approved by the University of Western Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Ethics Committee through the Research Ethics Officers (tel: 02 4570 1136). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.
Appendix B - Data analysis – Participant 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Complexity unfolds in Fractals –</th>
<th>How it is organised is the Attractor (What experiences) shaped women’s careers (How were things organised)</th>
<th>Iconic register – what images, events, symbols were present</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What were their major ways of explaining their experience in organisations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A career running a company was never on the horizon.</td>
<td>Family Expectations – education tended to get locked into what your parents wanted</td>
<td>Societal norm girls need a career just in case - If husband dies or run off or do things when you need capacity to support yourself</td>
<td>When I was going through school you tended to get locked into what your parents do if you had no idea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grew up in a family where it was expected that we, that education was important that we would finish school and go to university and do something.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The caveat around that was that we had something to fall back on and it was always about having careers not because we were destined to great things themselves but because it would be useful to be able to work if you needed to and also sometimes things don’t go so well, husbands die or run off or do other things when you need the capacity to support yourself</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I started in health area but the thing that has fortunately changed now for women is that sense of what is possible (for women) is better laid out …………</td>
<td>Competence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>when I was going through school you tended to get locked into what your parents do if you had no idea</td>
<td>Parental influence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Data analysis – Participant 6 - continues**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>Success in organisation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My life and work life have been quite opportunistic and finding things and just chasing them down. I still do that. If I find something that looks interesting I chase it. I am really clear about what I am doing</td>
<td>Opportunistic / curious</td>
<td>Hard to peg in an organisation because I wasn’t in it for the money even though I earned good money, the public accolade even though funnily enough I got a lot of that, I got a lot of attention and my colleagues struggled with that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am motivated and self actualised as well, and I don’t describe success in – hard to peg in an organisation because I wasn’t in it for the money even though I earned good money, the public accolade even though funnily enough I got a lot of that, I got a lot of attention and my colleagues struggled with that.</td>
<td>Self motivated</td>
<td>Market made the money and everyone took the credit for it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The challenge is actually that my journey is an intensely personal one, even though its played out publicly its actually y about what I feel in my heart what I want to do.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Success in organisation deemed to be how much money you earn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like to do amazing things in places where people least expect it</td>
<td>Competence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stimulating to be in a completely new environment</td>
<td>Learning ( completely new things )</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is something about “if you can touch more and do more then why wouldn’t you?“</td>
<td>Leave a legacy – recognition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data analysis – Participant 6 - continues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very male industry and actually some of the treatment of women at the next level and of course our support staff was terrible. I was shocked; they spoke to women so rudely. – we did a survey and they hated management (all male team) so now we have a mix of team</th>
<th>Treatment of the women on the next level down and of course our support staff was terrible Men spoke to women rudely they did not use peoples names,</th>
<th>Experienced male gendered environment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I think three things makes difference: diversity of view, difference in industry and different experiences, I think the male female mix makes a difference as well - so reinforcing the testosterone like behaviour has stopped , the women challenge much more and are prepared to say’ don’t speak to me like that, I didn’t like that, why do you do that?</td>
<td>Women don’t speak in a closed environment - unsafe</td>
<td>Diversity of thought</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t like working in an all male team. They have always seen me as competitive and each other as competitive which is why they don’t challenge each other because if I don’t challenge you then you don’t challenge me and then the ground rules, status quo rules, and I always ask questions because I want to know, I am interested in what happens. Men are much more competitive they see each other as competitors which is why they do not challenge each other Men thought I was positioning myself against t them -</td>
<td>Mixed gender teams preferred Collaborative Driven by what is happening - action</td>
<td>Men ascribe motivation to women that relates to their world and that often created conflict. Men are more competitive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Data analysis – Participant 6 - continues**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If you questioned something…………My experience is that people would say I will send it to you and nothing ever came of it cause at the meeting it was seen to be done somehow, it was seen to be settled, so the dynamic of an all male, predominately male, has a really dysfunctional dynamic in it ……</th>
<th>Cooperative – share</th>
<th>Men pay lip service to and say they will send it to you and it never comes  but at the meeting it was seen to be done settled at the meeting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very few of my male colleagues actually know anything about me – very little personal engagement</td>
<td>Connection</td>
<td>Connection important to her</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If it was within my reach I took it ….</td>
<td>Can do attitude</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I go down into organisations, you network in organisations to get support, so you either find your own team and all times I have found that my own team have been fantastic. You find one or two allies.</td>
<td>Networks – support</td>
<td>Mentor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.. needed me more than I needed him ……. He didn’t quite fit the macho build that everybody had of him and so we would spend a lot of time talking about how we did things, he was such a softy in some ways also he and I shared the same value base that was quite similar</td>
<td>Shared values – common ground</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have had a couple of really great mentors …</td>
<td>Mentors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data analysis – Participant 6 - continues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I look for alliances because I think that you only need one good alliance like that then there are two against I see that if somebody speaks up for you as well, when your note there. I network inside the organisation and into the organisation</th>
<th>Build alliances – support</th>
<th>Always know the PA’s understand how important they are. Everyone knows them but nobody notices them.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am quite counter suggestive as well so if someone says this is what you do, this is your golden egg, its like I don’t think so. I am sure there is another golden egg………</td>
<td>Counter suggestive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women in business networks I get something from it, I love those women , there’s energy and there’s passion and hope, those networking breakfasts I don’t need to go to them any more but I go because I like it . There is a sense of passion and commitment. It builds me up again and off I go.</td>
<td>Passion &amp; commitment – energy it builds me up and off I go</td>
<td>Women do not network well generally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working at the status of women I had an all women team ……………the management of that team was much harder from a leadership point of view , they want a lot more……………. They wanted me to protect them, develop them, coach them, promote them. … because they were operating in a part of the public service where they did not get any of it.</td>
<td>Critical mass – Numbers of other women</td>
<td>Women who survive appear to be able to network with other women gaining support – they did in and away they go</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“ All of them have gone on to do fantastic things, at the time thought all they were really looking for more than they were getting anywhere else”</td>
<td>Developed others</td>
<td>Women undervalued their own ability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Data analysis – Participant 6 - continues**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very strong relationships – in for the long haul</th>
<th>Sustainable relationship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Networking breakfasts I love those women, there energy and there is passion and there is participation and there is hope………</td>
<td>Women networks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Its interesting I think it doesn’t matter I deal with organisations, I deal with family, it always comes up and I don’t know whether that’s a women thing but its um I feel responsible to fix it or build together, we can make this work come on guys”</td>
<td>Contexts interrelated – behaviour the same</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fix things – can do attitude</td>
<td>Mother roles – responsibility to build</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We worked out what to do together. He did make a really big sacrifice he had the job of his life. So I could take a job and I offered to travel but earlier on we had decided we worked better as unit in the one place. You get into bad habits when you live on your own as well, Yeah we have done lots of different trade offs – we always negotiated, we always worked it out together</td>
<td>Collaboration - fairness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So in the end, he quit his job</td>
<td>Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unless you have got something core that’s true the rest of its nonsense and will pass and will be fish and chip wrapper in a minute. I am completely pragmatic about that. I am not in it for that as I said to you its almost despite it, its not my motivation, it is quite personal.</td>
<td>Driven by personal motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data analysis – Participant 6 - continues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I think everyone’s underestimated how strong cultures are in organisations and strongly their driven by a very long-standing male view of success, power, self and some ego.</th>
<th>Organisations strongly driven by a very long standing male view of leadership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I came back to the bank after 41/2 years and I was so disappointed with what happened organisationally and how dramatically the culture grown back. There was no place for me actually.</td>
<td>Culture fit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I sort of knew it in my heart but as son as I got there physically it was just like get me out of here,</td>
<td>Able to move on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Despite my capacity to influence things while I was there , before the capacity to change , by changing the CEO which was so dramatic - It grew back</td>
<td>Relationship with mgr.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEO change was so dramatic – Leadership makes a difference</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I always ask questions because I want t know, I am interested in what happens. Why did you do that, is there anything learnt from that, and people, ..................</td>
<td>Curious/ questions what is going on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The investment banks have all had women in them in top positions at various points of time, and ultimately they have squeezed women out. I wanted to change that .….It’s very complex. because it was supported outside the organisation , it goes through the definition of success in our society , it goes to the value in the material success over doing good deeds, there’s a whole lot in it and you’ve got to unpick it all</td>
<td>The status quo, the resistance to change is much, much stronger , it is really core its deep seated -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of success in our society</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Data analysis – Participant 6 - continues**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I can imagine a point in ten years time we’ll look around …they have gone.</th>
<th>Women come in an out of work</th>
<th>New role /challenge – learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This is a completely new learning experience, I cannot tell you how much fun I have had, even though I have never dealt with these things. I never thought I would have to ….it is so stimulating to be in a completely new environment, to be learning completely new things</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The status quo is: resistance to change …is really core, its deep-seated.</td>
<td></td>
<td>“Change is the new black”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You always have barriers and people whose interest is that you do not succeed. …..</td>
<td>Gender barriers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success is not money or status. I like to sort out problems I like the idea of showing you can do amazing things in a place where people least expect it…….</td>
<td>Success</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Look at America suddenly we may have the first female president or African American president and that has been driven by the community not the power brokers - ………. once they both would have been shot</td>
<td></td>
<td>Change driven by the community</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>