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**Directions for Catholic educational leadership in the 21st century:
the vision challenges and reality**

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Title

Career, Culture and Catholicism: An investigation into the career experience of women managers working in Catholic Sixth Form Colleges.

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Introduction

This paper gives an overview of research into women's experience of work and career in Catholic sixth form colleges in England and Wales using interviews and fictional narratives. It begins with some background details which explain the genesis of the research. It gives an overview of the issues connected with women and work; Catholicism, women and their relationship with the Church; and the Catholic education sector and the place women occupy within it. It continues in outlining the methodological approach taken and the issues which this approach generates. The research tools and issues around ethics and confidentiality are discussed and the issues which were raised in the interviews are considered. It concludes by suggesting some of the emerging findings of the study and the implications for the future.

As a teacher, interest in the development of the human potential is ingrained, but particularly the experience in witnessing the growth of children and young adults. It would appear that the learning process never stops. In the present, as a manager in education, having had responsibility for staff development in a number of institutions, I have a particular interest in the capacity of people to grow, learn and find challenges which will give them personal and professional satisfaction. As until recently Deputy Principal of a Catholic sixth form college (and now Principal of a non-denominational sixth form college), I have a privileged position from which to view the careers of the staff, particularly with responsibilities for human

resources and staff development. As a female, I bring to this perspective my own career experience and those of friends and colleagues. As a practising Catholic, having worked for the last twenty years in a Catholic setting, being a member of a church which could not be said to 'employ' its workforce within a framework of principles of equal opportunities, given that women and men do not have access to the same jobs (the fact that women cannot be ordained priests, is the obvious example) I bring my own thoughts and experiences of work and faith and the tensions which lie within them.

Women and work

This research looks at the situation of women in a particular workplace setting. While women and work is not a new topic, what is relatively new is research into women's work (commented on by Snyder, 1994) and my research sits within this field. Books on women and work exist from the first part of the twentieth century. In 1942 there were such things written as 'The Psychology of Supervising the Working Woman' where chapter titles such as 'Adjusting Work to Women's Brain Power' leave one laughing aloud in the 21st century. Since then there have been many research studies, Kanter's *Men and Women of the Corporation* (1977) being a landmark piece, tackling the big issues prevalent in American culture and beyond, which influence the composition of the workers in corporations and managers in particular. Since then, there has been a plethora of literature documenting women's under-representation in management posts. However, studies on leadership have primarily assumed a male model of leadership and even at the start of the 21st century there is much writing which assumes if not a male model of leadership, at least a gender-neutral one. However, the world of work is not a gender-neutral environment. Maddock and Parkin (1994) emphasise the fact that women tend to be more aware of gender culture at work, mainly because they are aware of how it restricts their behaviour and expression. Spencer (1987) comments on the notion that women who work in male-dominated professions find that their experiences are very different from those of their male colleagues. I would suggest that even in female-dominated professions, women find their experiences different from men, and in both contexts we see the examples which Spencer cites where women are channelled into low status, less rewarding work and rarely able to rise to the top of their profession. The world of work presents a discriminatory environment for women in which the careers of women are shaped by their gender and not their abilities.

Catholicism, Women and the Church

Because this research explores the experience of women working in a setting influenced by the Catholic Church I have looked at the role of women in the Catholic Church and the sort of values and experiences they have in relation to the formal structure of the Church as opposed to their personal faith. From the point of view of someone not in the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, perhaps the most significant point to make about the role of women concerns its limited nature. At the beginning of the 21st century, the Anglican Church has moved on to extend the ministry of women. While it has yet to sanction the appointment of women bishops, support is growing and in October 2004 the Trade and Industry Secretary, Patricia Hewitt, who is also the Minister for Women, waded into the argument stirred by Bishop Nazir-Ali's report on the position of women in the Anglican Church, to say that she thought women in the Church should not be constrained by a 'stained glass ceiling' and should be given equal chances as men for promotion within the Church. The Catholic Church, however, has remained firm and still refuses to accept the place of women in ordained life. The limitations in the role of women in the Church are nowhere more obvious than in the Church's denial of the opportunity for women to become ordained priests.

That women are a hugely significant group in terms of numbers in the Catholic Church is surely indisputable. Their significance in terms of power is by no means commensurate, however, and this lack of equity is a source of concern for many. In the same way that writers on women and the world of work wrote about the different roles women play, so the role of women in the Catholic Church is much debated. Zimmermann examines the limited and stereotyped roles of women in the church identifying only 'the temptress' and 'the immaculate woman' as finding grace only in suffering (as mother) or in denying herself (as virgin). It is only man, she argues who can act by identifying himself with the 'high priest' who restores the new order (1985 : 32). A leading article in *The Tablet* laments the images of women presented by the Catholic Church where 'Ideals are evident, too, in its list of feminine qualities – listening, faithfulness, humility, praise – but to many women this offers a romanticized version of womanhood which is not altogether convincing' (2004 : 3) diversity which exists within religions.' (King, 1988 : 8).

Many women feminists and theologians write of the patriarchal nature of the Church and of how today's struggle for women is the fight to change patriarchal society as opposed to previous struggles to seek access to the 'academy' or for 'equal rights for women'. It is a feature of the Church into which women are co-erced into accommodating themselves. Fiorenza documents what she sees as the supporters and promoters of patriarchal ecclesial structures, from Augustine, Thomas of Aquinas to modern day 'androcentric linguistic and

ideological systems of legitimisation that sustain and contribute to the double invisibility and multifaceted exploitation of Third World women oppressed by patriarchal racism, poverty, colonialism and hetero/sexism.’ (Fiorenza, 1985 : 7) She articulates with passion the impact of this oppression in the USA: ‘Roman Catholic women daily experience anger and pain because our Church is deformed by the structural and personal sin of patriarchal sexism.’ (Fiorenza, 1985 : 8) She argues that what is needed is a radical change in thinking, a shift from an androcentric world view and theology to a feminist conceptualisation of the world, human life and Christian religion. (Fiorenza, 1985 : 9)

Another key feature of women in the Catholic Church is their relative invisibility. Because men hold the positions of power in the Church, it is they who are seen and heard. Women are not allowed the same fora for expressing their views and sharing their faith in a public forum as men do. This lack of visibility goes back to the selection of texts which are found in the bible and lectionary. Proctor-Smith (1985 : 55) when analysing the Common Lectionary for its references to women, notes that only 21% of the total number of texts include references to women. Slee also argues that ‘the bible is very largely a record of women’s invisibility’ (2004 : 9) and that even where stories of women are told, they are ambiguous in their presentation, in that Eve has become the seductive Temptress, responsible for human sin; Mary the pure and sexless Madonna, Ideal Woman impossible to emulate; Mary Magdalene the Reformed Sinner, whose mission to be the first apostle has been overlaid by the romantic myth of her intimate relationship with Jesus. Is ironic that, despite their superior loyalty to religion than men, they are so invisible. Trevett points out this irony of the loyalty of women to the Church and their invisibility, in commenting on the findings of sociologists and psychologists who tell us that women are generally more loyal than men to the religions of their birth. Whilst they make up more than half of the world’s devotees and girls account for more Religious Studies exam candidates than boys, to judge from the syllabuses and school textbooks, women are of no significance (1988 : 7). In the introduction of a book on ‘New Catholic Women in Europe’ Brotherton (1992 : vii) both laments the state of the Catholic Church and draws attention to the spirit of those who stay loyal to it, despite its rejection of them. In my own research I find a similar loyalty, a tenacious hold on hope, where many of the women I have interviewed make a distinction between the elements of the Church they find unpalatable and the real roots of the Church in truth, justice and love.

The sort of disillusionment which is found in women in the Catholic Church in the UK can also be found across the seas. In Australia during the 1970s to 1990s there was a surge of feeling that the Church should hear the voices of women calling for their role and status to be considered and in 1996 the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference launched a research project, the focus of which was the participation of women in the Catholic Church in

Australia. This project was a major event for the Catholic community across Australia, and thousands of women and men participated. The process included written submissions, contextual papers, public hearings and meetings with targeted groups. The research project showed that the dominant feeling of participants was one of pain and alienation. Its major findings, listed in 'Healing Priesthood – Women's Voices Worldwide' (Perkins and Wright : 2003) were threefold; that the active involvement of women in the life of the Church, and in all aspects except for the ordained ministry, is considerable and significantly greater than that of lay men; that the roles they fill, however are secondary, ancillary, and even menial, resulting in feelings of deep pain, anger and alienation; and that both women and men are calling for women to have leadership roles and a real voice in the decision-making processes of the Church. Many were of the view that this is only achievable if women are admitted to the ordained ministry. The research revealed barriers experienced by women in endeavouring to participate in the life of the Church, the most significant being what was perceived as the patriarchal attitudes and traditions of the institution. The structures of the Church were experienced as male dominated and attitudes emanating from this domination were seen as the most powerful and obstructive barriers for women. The gender inequality observed was recognized to be in conflict with the tenet of the Church which offers a view of women and men to be created in the image and likeness of God. It is in this field that my own research lies, with a particular focus on women working in Catholic sixth form colleges.

It is not surprising that the experience of many women is that of alienation from the Church. How can they possibly feel fully recognized and valued if they are denied access to areas of service which men have as a right? Many women write of this feeling of alienation (for example, O'Regan, Saldhana and Samuriwo, 2003) and it is felt that this marginalization of women has prevented the Church from developing its notion of priesthood, in a way which recognizes what women have to offer. What is remarkable is the loyalty of women to a church which treats them so disdainfully. Soskice takes a post-feminist stance and decries the 'sock-scorching feminist theology of the late twentieth century' (The Tablet 24.1. 2004). She maintains that the vision of women in Mary Daly's 'Beyond God the Father', of rage, frustration and fury is only part of the picture and that while many women have left the Church 'then many stayed and now, paradoxically those writing on feminism and theology are overwhelmingly women who want to remain true to their faith and are eager to see how this can be.'

The Catholic Education Sector and Women

It is ironic that since the decline of women's religious orders, the number of women in management positions in Catholic schools and colleges has declined. When a women's

religious order ran a school or college, the Principal and senior staff were women. While they never held the same sway as Head Masters in boys' schools, nuns who ran girls' schools at one time enjoyed significant influence over the institutions they led; nuns or sisters who were teachers were powerful and girls grew up with strong female role models, of women who were in charge, gave orders and were answerable to their own gender within the sphere of their place of work. Now that lay Headteachers and Principals have taken over in leadership positions, those roles have often gone to men, as is the case in my own college.

Power questions why there is such a disproportionately low number of women principals in relation to women teachers in the schools of Australia and asserts strongly, 'The answer is 'gender bias', which is rampant across Australian Catholic schools and, if not addressed, will have indelible adverse effects.' (Power in Duncan, Riley (eds), 2002 : 87) She comments on the operation of patriarchy and hegemony in the Church and that while some women accept the authority of the Pope in the world and the parish priest in the parish, others will not. She argues that 'hegemony' is useful 'in explaining the situation in which lay women find themselves in Catholic schools where oppression is perpetuated in a male-dominated hierarchical organisation.' (2002 : 91). Her point, that in rather than seeing Jesus as a man as a historical option than an ontological necessity, the Church has constructed a significance in maleness which has diminished the significance of the female and pushed women to the margins, is made well. She discusses the difficulties which Catholic lay women encounter accessing the principalship and the barriers they face once they achieve that position. The traditional form of authority in the Catholic Church is, in Power's view legitimated as a consequence of the operation of the concepts of patriarchy and hegemony. She questions the assumptions of male traditional thinking and suggests that the embodiment of Jesus as male is virtually a choice made by those who 'wrote' the story of Jesus' day. Her name is appropriate. Power makes assertions forcefully and at times, without delineating the weight of evidence to support her claims. She discusses the association of authority with masculine rationality, though does not 'unpack' the notion of rationality, assuming a stereotype which is, arguably, in the most part true. Her claim that 'because emotions that men show are aligned with strength and aggression, men are advantaged' is broad though the reality of a Catholic Church dominated by males in the key hierarchical positions suggests that there is truth in her argument.

Power describes a situation in Australia which is similar to that in the UK in essence asserting that 'principalships, and the Catholic Church itself, [are seen] as highly gendered and typecast.' Power is embedded in authority that is rational and non-emotional. Many vacancies for principalship occur because religious sisters are being replaced as principals. Sisters who were principals had been trained not to show their emotions. With the 'conventional wisdom

(which) constructs both men and organisations as unemotional' (Blakemore 1996) lay women are disadvantaged as they are seen to be emotional while men are seen to be rational.'(2002 : 96)

Methodology

Because I am dealing with the personal and the subjective, the methodological approach I have adopted is set firmly in the tradition of qualitative research, that 'family of methods' (Padgett, 1998) which encompasses ethnography, grounded theory, narrative analysis, constructivism, phenomenology, cultural studies, and post-modernisation. Essentially, it is what Greenfield calls 'phenomenologically based research (which) aims at dealing with the direct experience of people in specific situations.' (1985: 71). I chose qualitative methods, because as Turnbull writes,

'Qualitative research, arguably, has the potential to add the richness and significance of individual experience in the theory-building research process.'
(2002 : 317)

In pursuing this type of research, whilst I have developed a framework with which to interpret the data in order to organise it in a relatively systematic way, I have looked at the data, in the tradition of Glaser and Strauss (1967) before attempting to generate theory , rather than conceptualising theory and then testing it with the data. There are many labels which could be applied to this research as it crosses research theory boundaries, blurred as they are. It could be labelled as a piece of inductive research as the concept of "inductive research" (Gill and Johnson, 1991: 33) suggests inquiry which moves from the observation of the empirical world to the construction of explanations, recommendations and interpretation of what has been observed as opposed to deductive research which starts with a theory and hypothesis and then tests it out. It could also be categorized as qualitative research, which sets out to explore the experiences of women managers in Catholic Sixth Form Colleges, with a view to looking at the implications for the training and recruitment of the leaders of the future in these establishments. Because of this study's interest in the complexities of women's careers, in what has contributed to their decision making and the influences which have impacted on their professional lives, it is inevitably involved in qualitative research. It could find its home in the area of grounded theory in that it builds up theory derived from data. (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). It could also be identified as 'post-positivist' in that, as in Marshall's *Women in Management* (1994 : 186) she and the author "do not believe that there is objective knowledge that I can discover, or that the researchers should maintain their distance from the

issue they study and the people they engage with”. The research is could also be labelled ‘relativistic’ (Johnson, 1994 : 57), in that it is not based on a theory or hypothesis as in the ‘positivistic’ tradition; rather the research is set in a qualitative context, particularly as it is about people, their opinions, experiences and attitudes which will all be mediated through their own subjective perspective. This ‘relativist’ form of research acknowledges that every individual brings their own unique experience to bear upon a situation and that the meaning of events and phenomena are subject to multiple exegesis. It also relates to biographical and autobiographical approaches examining teachers’ lives and careers, a tradition well developed over the last twenty years or so, Ball and Goodson (1985), and more recently the work on life history research in educational settings by Goodson and Sykes ((2001) which recognises the complexity of social life and the role of narrative in understanding stories of educational lives.

Developing a Typology of Issues

Discussion with women at my own college about their experiences of managing and leading in one college raised the following issues. A typology was developed to structure and inform interview design, encompassing the following areas and is found in Appendix A.

These common issues were identified on a coding frame with the intention of creating a number of fictional characters and stories (I have decided upon three stories) which embody and illustrate the key features and experiences of the career trajectories of the women who have been interviewed. There is a danger that these fictional characters are stereotypes; an intensified, distilled version of what women may (or may not) face throughout their careers. The issue of anonymity is a concern. Whilst wishing to ‘protect’ respondents as some stories may threaten institutions or accuse them of bias and sexist practices which could be counterproductive to women’s career aspirations, there is also an element of making public and celebrating the individual women’s achievements in a traditionally male dominated sector. Increasingly, there is debate about the anonymity of participants and rendering them invisible in reports of research projects . The women who read this research may not be able to identify their life stories as discrete portraits, but should recognize in the fictional women elements of their own experience which echo in their minds.

Stories and Analysis

My intention is to write fictional stories based on what women have told me about their career histories in order to expose the data I have gleaned in all its richness. As children, we learn

about the world through stories. We listen to fictional worlds which somehow correspond, albeit not exactly, with our notions of what life is like, either for ourselves or other people. As adults, we still enjoy a good narrative. In the research I have listened to the stories of women, and have found that they have been as keen to tell them as I was to hear them. Hardy (1986) called narrative 'a primary act of mind', giving 'storying' a central status in logical thinking and reminded us that the link between 'storying' and theorising is the process of imagination. In a discussion of the uses of fictional critical writing and the use of narrative in research, Winter (1988) acknowledges the difficulty of gaining new insights from research and argues that the use of the imagination and the introduction of the notion of 'play' injects research with a mode of 'innovative understanding' which allows the researcher to play with 'the actual and potential discontinuities within experience, using metaphorical processes of language to manipulate elements in a state of affairs'(1988 : 235).

While Bolton extols the value of stories, she adds the caveat that 'Stories are not reconstructions of chunks of real life, They cannot be.' (2001 : 107) Any teller has her interpretation of experience and overlays it with the lens of her own perception. Truth is multi-faceted and changes over time. It lives in more than one dimension and is changeable and unreliable. And while women may tell what they perceive to be their genuine stories, so much will remain in the gaps and omissions. Slee (2004) raises this notion of how I might uncover the 'unstories' and bring into visibility those aspects of women's lives which are kept in hidden and unacknowledged places. Connolly and Clandinin (1996) write about the ways in which stories, often through the medium of pen-portraits enable the telling of 'secret' and 'sacred' stories which might not be otherwise revealed by more traditional modes of collecting data.

Research through biography can be an effective way of revealing issues which are personal, such as issues of self esteem, personal aspiration, childhood role models and feelings about applying for promotion, going for interviews, taking on new roles. It has the potential to reveal more than a quantitative study can achieve, and in interviewing there is not only language, through which experience is conveyed, but also body language and other para-linguistic features. Facial expressions, nods, sighs, intonation, laughter, can convey subtleties of meaning and emotion which words out of context cannot, and it will be important to be mindful of observing such features during the interviews.

Ethical Issues

A significant issue for this research, once the relevant permissions were sought and the research explained, is that of anonymity. The world of Catholic Further Education is a small one and there is a risk of women being identified if the stories are not sufficiently 'fictional'. In choosing the research sample the following possibilities were in the frame:

- Only Catholic women
- Mixture of Catholic/Other religious backgrounds/ atheists
- Women who have always worked in Catholic schools and colleges
- Women who have worked in secular and Catholic schools/colleges

In selecting a sample of women managers for interview, the following 'criteria' were taken into account;

- As there are only two female principals in the sector, both would be interviewed, to ascertain the views and experiences of those who had made it 'to the top'.
- Women from different geographical areas in order to pick up any north/south differences.
- Twenty women to be interviewed to make the research manageable.

I made a decision to include women on three responsibility points or above. This would involve senior managers (Principal, Deputy Principal or Vice-Principal, Assistant Principal) and middle managers who either run a medium to large curriculum area or who have a cross college responsibility. In choosing managers, this excludes women who have not been promoted to the management scale, whether by choice, circumstances, or because of barriers placed in their way to prevent this from happening. Another study would be to look at women who have not taken on management responsibilities and examine the reasons why.

Emerging Findings

After interviewing twenty women managers from all the Catholic sixth form colleges in England and Wales, I have found that there are key realities about women's experience of working in Catholic sixth form colleges. They are:

- that women are very happy, on many levels, working in Catholic sixth form colleges
- that Catholic sixth form colleges support women with children in their role as mothers very strongly
- that women are mostly saddened by the way in which the Catholic Church offers them limited roles to play
- that women are cautious of, and sometimes fear, speaking out critically about the Catholic Church and its associated networks
- that women see limited possibilities for their promotion in Catholic sixth form colleges and see men as having preferential prospects
- that more Catholic colleges are led by male principals proportionately than in the sixth form sector as a whole

Whilst the Catholic Church is by no means solely responsible for the culture of these institutions and the climate of the workplace in England and Wales, it does have an ability to influence it. There are huge implications for the Church which espouses freedom, truth and justice, where the dignity and value of every human being is embedded in the teaching of the Church. It is true that there are Catholic women who are totally comfortable with the position the Church takes towards women, people who believe that the Pope's authority is final. There are others who rebel totally, rejecting the dogma of the Church, leaving it, feeling alienated and disenfranchised. And there are others in the middle, feeling completely at home in the family of the Church, participating in its traditions and rituals to varying degrees and questioning to varying degrees the messages and teachings it promulgates. Similarly, there is a range of feeling towards the educational institutions of the Church, though largely positive, as it is recognised that the position of women in a Catholic educational institution as a workplace is echoed elsewhere in the workplace arena. The extent to which Catholic institutions might lead the way in making equality and the value of the individual a priority is a challenge which faces it.

Conclusion

In embarking on the research questions arose. 'What do I want to know?' and 'Why do I want to know it?' I respond thus: I want to know what the career experience of women managers is like in Catholic sixth form colleges. I want to know it, in part because I would find it reassuring if their experience was anything like my experience, because I am interested in women and their lives generally and because I want to know if there is anything which might

be done which is not being done already to address inequalities for women. Through this research I would like to put women centre-stage, at the forefront of the agenda, and ensure that they are visible and audible.

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Typology

- Career history – the career path including career breaks
- Motivating factors – career anchors
- Barriers
- Opportunities
- Gender and sexuality
- Roles women play
- Women and power
- Isolation
- Visibility/invisibility of women at work and in the Church
- Confidence
- Critical incidents
- Staffroom culture
- Career planning
- Perceptions of the Catholic Church and its attitude towards women
- Personal qualities
- Future aspirations

The interviews were transcribed and a framework was developed for analyzing key features. The framework was built up around the issues and themes which the interviewees commented upon and involved a wide range of topics including:

- Acceptance/Challenge of Status Quo
- Barriers
- Career Breaks
- Career Expectations
- Career Planning
- Catholic Mafia/Networks
- Confidence
- Critical Incidents
- Different treatment of men and women
- Domestic circumstances
- Emotional Intensity
- Family Influence

- Fear of Getting Bored
- Football culture
- Glass cliff
- Governing Bodies
- Intimidation
- Influence of partner
- Isolation
- Luck
- Male culture/Staffroom culture
- Mentoring
- Mother as role model
- Motivation
- Needing a challenge
- Opportunities
- Parental influence
- Perceptions of impossibility of getting a job
- Personal development
- Personal qualities
- Pleas for confidentiality/Issues of Censorship
- Positives about working in a Catholic Sixth Form College
- Preference for/Privileging of Catholic Men
- Recognition
- Role Models
- Role of Mother
- Role of Women in the Catholic Church
- Self esteem
- Self sacrifice
- Sexist comments and jokes
- Sexuality
- Support
- Training
- Transparency
- Visibility/Invisibility of women
- Wanting to have an Influence
- Women/Catholic Sixth Form Colleges
- Women as a threat