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Original Citation

Handley, Janet (2014) Gender, networks and talent management : interim findings of a narrative inquiry. In: European Institute for Advanced Studies in Management (EIASM) 3rd Workshop on Talent Management, 13th-14th October 2014, Berlin, Germany. (Unpublished)

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Gender, networks and talent management: interim findings from a narrative inquiry.
Handley, J. (2014)

Paper submitted for EIASM 3rd Workshop on Talent Management. Berlin. October 2014.

Gender, networks and talent management : interim findings of a narrative inquiry

Abstract

Despite an enduring concern with the acquisition, development and retention of talent, literature in the field has tended to retain a practitioner focus. More recent work, however, includes attempts to develop a more robust empirical and critical perspective, with occasional calls for an analysis of the gendered aspect of talent management. This paper is aimed at partially filling the 'gender gap' in talent management research. Part of a larger narrative study, findings presented here focus particularly on the role of networks in gendering the translation of talent management into practice.

Keywords

Gender, talent management, networks, political process, narrative

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Introduction

Both academic and practitioner-based literature suggests an enduring ‘war for talent’ (Michaels et al., 2001; Lewis and Heckman, 2006; CIPD, 2013), with particular reported competition for both highly skilled (for example, engineering) and managerial talent (CIPD, 2012a; CIPD, 2014). It is hardly surprising, therefore, that there has been a marked increase in talent management research and publications (see, for example, Hartman et al., 2010; Iles et al., 2010; Schuler et al., 2011; Scullion and Collings, 2011; Vaiman et al., 2012; Minbaeva and Collings, 2013; Swailes, 2013; Tansley and Tietze, 2013; Vaiman and Collings, 2013).

This developing prominence notwithstanding, there remains considerable debate about the nature of both ‘talent’ (see, for example, Tansley’s (2011) conceptual overview; Mc Donnell and Collings’ (2011) summary of approaches to talent definition; and Meyers et al.’s (2014) consideration of talent ‘philosophies’) and ‘talent management’. Variation in talent management definition and approach (see, e.g., Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Ford et al., 2010; and Sparrow et al., 2013), alongside limited empirical research to date, creates considerable ‘liminal space’ for local interpretation and variation, with informal rules of engagement. As Thunnissen et al. (2013) highlight, this may have several effects or outcomes; a potential ‘dark side’ to talent management, one possible aspect of which might be the gendering of talent management practice.

Farndale et al. (2010), in their overview of talent management research, highlighted the continued under-representation of women in multinational enterprises (MNEs) and Tatli et al. (2013), similarly, depict prevailing ‘untapped female potential’ (p. 539) in the Asia Pacific region. In the UK, Tansley and Tietze (2013) call for:

“... gender and ethnic-specific studies in ... future projects.” (Tansley and Tietze, 2013, p. 1804)

Broadridge and Simpson (2011), in their 25-year review of research into gender and management, outline persistent variations in the work experiences and outcomes for men and women. Despite an interval of almost 40 years since the implementation of the first UK equal pay legislation, women in the UK continue to be paid less than men (ONS 2012), particularly more senior women (ONS, 2014). They are more likely to work part-time (Durbin and Tomlinson, 2014), be employed lower down the organisation and in ‘feminised’ work (Metcalf, 2009; ONS, 2012). Although women in the UK are now better educated than ever before, with a doubling of the number of women on FTSE 250 Boards - an increase from 7.8% in 2011 to 15.6% in 2014 (Davies, 2014) – Britain is set to remain ‘a country dominated by men’ (EHRC, 2013). Women in Britain comprise just 21% of FTSE 100 Board members (Davies, 2014) and are likely to become stuck in the ‘marzipan layer’ (EHRC, 2011) just beneath the top level in organisations. If they do succeed, there is some evidence to suggest that they are more likely to be appointed to failing organisations (Ryan and Haslam, 2005; 2007) and precarious positions, although the nature of such may be shifting in ‘neoliberal’ organisations (Williams, 2013). Mentors and role models remain central to the experiences of women managers (Durbin and Tomlinson, 2014), although negative experiences remain, particularly – as in Durbin and Tomlinson’s (2014) study of 27 part-time female managers – for part-time workers (74% of whom are female (Durbin and Tomlinson, 2014)).

**Gender, networks and talent management: interim findings from a narrative inquiry.
Handley, J. (2014)**

The aim of this paper, therefore, is to present interim findings from an empirical investigation conducted as part of a PhD exploring: ‘how talent and talent management are talked about, how talent management is translated into practice and whether this is ‘done’ in a way that is gendered – i.e. to explore the gender implications of talent and talent management’ (Handley, 2013). The focus here is on the UK context, although host organisations include MNEs (and, therefore, a global influence). Particular emphasis will be given to tentative conclusions about the role of mentors in the wider gendering of talent management practice.

The paper will begin with consideration of both talent and talent management – definitions and knowledge of current practice – followed by an exploration of the potential effects and negative consequences; the ‘dark side’ of talent management. It is suggested here that one potential dark side to talent management is the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity, particularly concerning leadership talent, through practices such as informal mentoring and networks and the role thereof in talent management programmes. The second part of this paper will, therefore, explore prior research and knowledge of gender in organisations, particularly in the context of leadership and management and also mentoring and networks. Methodology will be outlined prior to explication and discussion of findings.

Talent Management: definitions, practice and the ‘dark side’

What is talent?

An understanding of talent management is predicated on assumptions about the nature of ‘talent’. However, as De Vos and Dries (2013) conclude, definitions of talent are often noticeable for their absence from talent management literature.

Most current definitions – where explicit – tend to build on Gagne’s (2,000, cited in: Tansley, 2011) notion of innate abilities and knowledge – or ‘innate giftedness’ (Tansley, 2011, p. 268). In an organisational context, Tansley suggests that notions of both high performance and high potential prevail, mirroring an exclusive approach to talent management (see below). McDonnell and Collings’ (2011) summary of key approaches refer to the original McKinsey & Co. research (Michaels et al., 2001), with a similar reference to ‘innate’ qualities such as ‘character’ and ‘judgement’.

CIPD (2012b) suggest that:

“Talent consists of those individuals who can make a difference to organisational performance either through their immediate contribution or, in the longer-term, by demonstrating the highest levels of potential.” (CIPD, 2012b. Accessed 17.07.13)

Whilst adding an element of contingent interpretation or organisation-fit of talent, this definition reinforces Mc Donnell and Collings’ (2011), Tansley and Tietze’s (2013) and also Swailes’ (2013) conceptualisations of talent as ‘high performing and high potential employees’ (Swailes, 2013, p. 32).

Of course, verification of such opaque qualities as ‘character’ and ‘high potential’ is likely to be highly subjective. In an organisational context where – particularly ‘leadership’ (one of the key espoused talent skills deficits) – talent might be deemed to be normatively masculine (Cockburn,

Gender, networks and talent management: interim findings from a narrative inquiry.
Handley, J. (2014)

1991; Walby, 2011; Powell, 2011; Berg et al., 2012; Wilson, 2013), it is suggested here that the process of identifying such might, therefore, be a gendered one.

The following section will explore current approaches to defining – or at least classifying – talent management policy and practice, prior to consideration of a possible ‘dark side’ to talent management.

What is talent management?

“... there is not yet consensus on definitions of TM [talent management] ...” (Vaiman and Collings, 2013, p. 1737).

Despite a 7-year interval and exponential growth in associated publications between reviews, it might be argued that little has changed since Lewis and Heckman (2006) commented on the:

“...disturbing lack of clarity regarding the definition, scope, and overall goals of talent management.” (Lewis and Heckman, 2006, p. 139)

Many of the definitional and methodological difficulties in the talent management arena might be traced to the original work of Chambers et al. (1998), which called for a ‘talent mindset’ (p.49) on the basis of empirical work in only 77 organisations, with little or no consideration of the meaning or implementation of ‘talent’ and limited details of methodology (Ford and Harding, 2013).

Vaiman and Collings (2013) identify four continuing themes in the talent management literature. These include national and organisational context and talent management implementation (with limited empirical work to date), in addition to consideration of conceptual and intellectual boundaries of talent management. Of particular note is their exposition of the continuing controversy over inclusivity / exclusivity, the role of strategic / pivotal positions, internal / external sourcing and talent management systems and processes.

The above notwithstanding – and space precluding further elaboration in this paper – the 2012 definition proffered by CIPD has been widely cited in several empirical and review papers and will be the working definition adopted here:

“Talent management is the systematic attraction, identification, development, engagement, retention and deployment of those individuals who are of particular value to an organisation, either in view of their ‘high potential’ for the future or because they are fulfilling business / operation-critical roles.” (CIPD, 2012b, accessed 17.07.13)

Whilst comprehensive, this definition is itself indicative of ongoing debate in the field – reflecting Vaiman and Collings’ (2013) and Al Ariss et al.’s (2014) conclusions - around the inclusive or exclusive nature of talent management and the extent to which it can actually be differentiated from HRM practice. The following section will elaborate on this aspect of differentiation and talent management practice.

Gender, networks and talent management: interim findings from a narrative inquiry.
Handley, J. (2014)

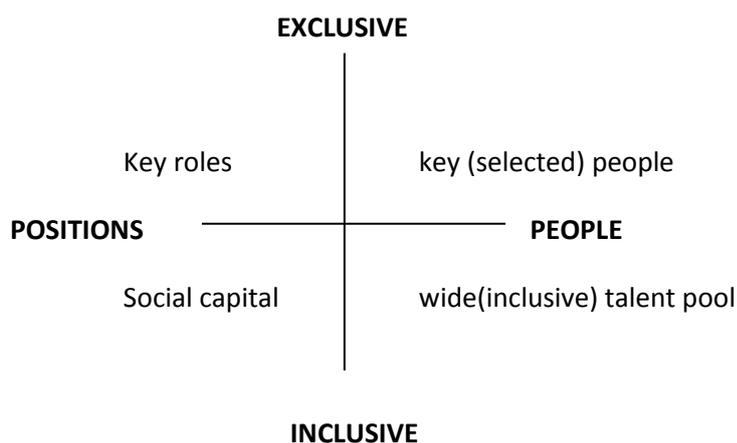
Talent management practice

In the context of persistent definitional ambiguity (see, for example: Ford et al, 2010; Carmichael et al., 2011; Torrington et al., 2011) it is hardly surprising that scholars and practitioners alike continue to debate the inclusive / exclusive dimension of talent management.

Essentially, the concern is with whether *all* staff should be developed to achieve their potential (thus, an inclusive approach to develop *all* ‘talent’) as opposed to focusing only on developing ‘A’ players (top performers). Lewis and Heckman (2006), Collings and Mellahi (2009) and Mellahi and Collings (2010) all advance the notion of talent management as distinct from HRM through differentiated, exclusive, treatment of and focus on high performers in pivotal or strategic roles. In one of the earlier empirical studies of talent management, Iles et al. (2010) reported that senior multinational enterprise (MNE) managers deemed this exclusivity as central to talent management practice. For these managers, HRM was inclusive of *all* talent, whereas *talent* management was seen as exclusive. This empirical work reinforces Thunnisen et al.’s (2013) literature-based conclusion that an inclusive approach renders practice little more than HRD.

Iles et al. (2010) outline four possible approaches to talent management, see figure 1 below, with their empirical investigation providing some support for the model. Thus, across the seven participating MNEs, there was a suggestion that the perspective adopted would have implications for talent management practice. Subsequent empirical work by Sparrow et al. (2013) and Ford et al. (2010) reinforced this notion of a ‘contingent’ perspective of talent management, although Swales (2013), in his review of research to date, suggests that an exclusive approach continues to dominate (presumably irrespective of organisational context).

Figure 1. Approaches to talent management



Adapted from: Iles et al. (2010), p. 182.

Of particular note here is Iles et al.’s reference to ‘social capital’, referring to factors over and above individual talent and including, for example, ‘teams, cultures, divisions of labour, leadership and networks’ (p. 182). This firmly locates talent management within the broader organisational context, a point reinforced in Farndale et al.’s (2010) depiction of four types of ‘capital’: cognitive (‘mental models’ (p. 163)); social (i.e. ‘necessary connections’ (p. 163)); political (legitimacy); and human
Paper submitted for EIASM 3rd Workshop on Talent Management. Berlin. October 2014.

**Gender, networks and talent management: interim findings from a narrative inquiry.
Handley, J. (2014)**

(competencies). In addition to providing an explanatory framework for the difficulties inherent to talent 'transfer' between organisations, both conceptualisations highlight the intangible nature of 'talent', which is particularly pertinent to a focus on gender and talent management practice.

If talent is something linked to 'connections', 'networks', (appropriate) mental maps and leadership, one might expect considerable scope for potential gendering of our understanding and practice. Moreover, in the face of continued ambiguity of definition and implementation, practitioners may find space for informal 'rules of engagement', with associated central roles for mentors and networks in talent identification and development – with associated gender dimensions.

The following section provides an overview of these and other potential consequences arising out of talent management practice – notably, the 'dark side'.

Talent management: the dark side

Research by CIPD (2010) remains the most substantive study to date of the effects of talent management on the individual – both those included and also staff excluded from a talent pool. Their (self-reported) findings suggest that inclusion in the talent pool tends to be associated with higher levels of organisational commitment and perceived benefit to careers, whereas those excluded from the pool were likely to report lower levels of motivation and self-confidence. Selective talent management programmes were seen to have more extreme consequences for both the included and excluded, although Ford et al.'s (2010) NHS study reported potential negative consequences for the *included*, who were likely to have concerns about opportunities available at the end of the process.

Opponents of an exclusive talent management approach highlight the negative consequences of such, including overemphasis on the individual, development of an elitist culture, a negative impact on teamworking and also on the non-selected (Mellahi and Collings, 2010; Thunnissen et al., 2010), whilst the CIPD (2010) study referred to above also pointed to a lack of transparency. Ford et al.'s (2010) study similarly reported significant implications for performance and also a sense of insecurity amongst those *not* selected for the talent pool.

At an organisational level, further (unanticipated) consequences include a tendency towards a silo mentality in global MNEs (Farndale et al., 2010; Mellahi and Collings, 2010; Huang and Tansley, 2012), with over-emphasis on parochial self-interest, rather than (central) organisational performance. Of particular interest here is the framework posited by Mellahi and Collings (2010), with two explanatory concepts: bounded rationality and agency. The latter relates to the role of both the skewed distribution of knowledge and also geographical distance in enabling local managers to 'hide' highly performing talent from the centre, thus facilitating increased subsidiary performance, possibly at the expense of central or organisation – wide performance. Bounded rationality would suggest that central management will satisfice in the face of limited cognitive processing ability, limited information and decision-making heuristics. Highly performing staff who are geographically and culturally remote from the centre are less likely to be noticed and, therefore, less likely to be promoted centrally. This 'political' side to talent management practice might create considerable space for a gendered dimension thereof, not least because women tend to have comparatively less access to powerful networks than men (Acker, 1990; Acker, 1992; Acker, 2012; Williams et al., 2012).

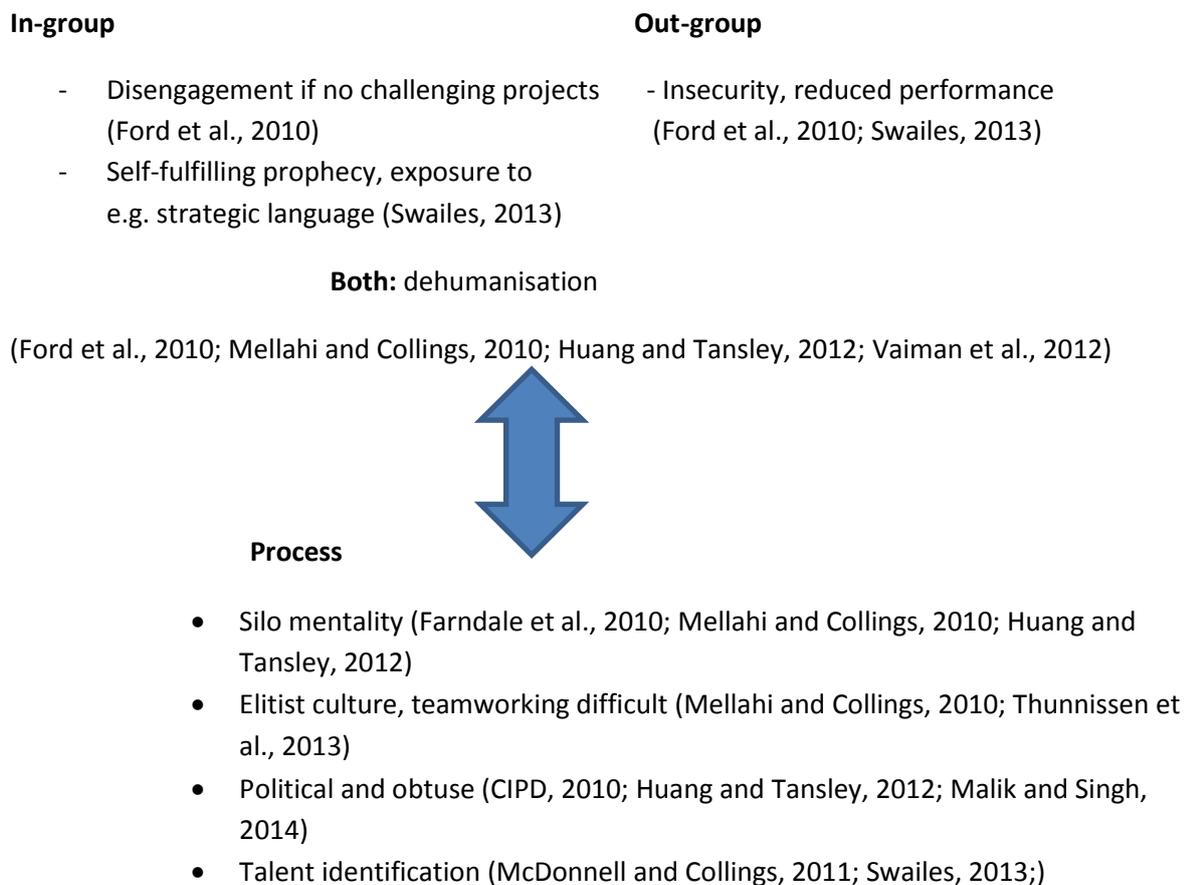
Paper submitted for EIASM 3rd Workshop on Talent Management. Berlin. October 2014.

Gender, networks and talent management: interim findings from a narrative inquiry.
Handley, J. (2014)

Swales (2013), in his conceptual paper, identified two problematics in terms of a potential dark side to talent management practice: firstly, limitations due to inherent flaws in the performance appraisal process, typically used to identify ‘talent’; secondly, ‘dehumanisation’ of both the included and the excluded. Limitations of performance appraisal are well established (see, for example, Longenecker, 1997), with particular bias arising out of interpersonal liking, political behaviour and impression management. Dehumanisation affects both the out-group (those excluded from the talent pool) and the in-group (those included): the former suffer through being denied ‘agency’, feeling less valued (Ford et al., 2010) and having limited access to developmental opportunities; the latter through potential exploitation, exposure to additional duties and pressure to be mobile (see also Huang and Tansley, 2013 and Pfeffer’s (2001) conceptual paper on the threat to organisations due to excessive focus on the individual and a self-fulfilling prophecy as the out-group receive fewer resources, training and mentoring).

As summarised in Figure 2, therefore, talent management is likely to have several negative consequences at both individual and organisational levels. Given the opaque and political processes involved in talent management practice (CIPD, 2010; Huang and Tansley, 2013; Malik and Singh, 2014), there is significant potential for a gendering of talent management. The following section will, therefore, consider several concepts central to gendered organisational theory and the potential gendering of talent management practice, prior to elucidation of methodology.

Figure 2: Summary of the ‘Dark Side’ of talent management



**Gender, networks and talent management: interim findings from a narrative inquiry.
Handley, J. (2014)**

Gendered organisational theory – and talent management?

Women – even professional and managerial women - continue to be disadvantaged in terms of organisational and professional location (both horizontal and vertical segregation), pay, connotations of part-time work as ‘women’s work’ and the skewed distribution of domestic responsibility (Acker, 1990; Calas and Smircich, 1996; Calas and Smircich, 2006; Broadridge and Simpson, 2011; Crompton and Lyonette, 2011; Acker, 2012; EHRC, 2013; European Social Survey, 2013; Wilson, 2013;).

In this context, it is appropriate to consider the manner in which organisations produce and reproduce gender relations and gendered practice. A central concept in this respect is patriarchy (Connell, 1987; Walby, 1990; Walby, 2011; Bradley, 2013), which might most simply be deemed a set of structures that ‘perpetuate male dominance’ (Bradley, 2013, p. 48). Acker (1990; 1992) suggested that male employees comprise the ideal (unencumbered) worker, reinforced through the interplay of four gendered organisational processes within patriarchal organisations. The first – gender divisions – refers to both horizontal and vertical segregation at work; horizontally, certain work is categorised as ‘women’s / men’s work’ and vertically one finds fewer women at the top of organisational and professional hierarchies. Acker’s second process is that of ‘symbols, images and forms of consciousness’ (Acker, 1992, p. 253) and includes language and communication in organisations, again seen as gendered and favouring males (a point reinforced by, for example, Spender (1987), Talbot (2010), Walby (2011) and Wilson (2013)). Acker’s third process – interactions between stakeholders – reinforces the significance of informal processes and networks and the final process (‘internal mental work’, Acker, 1992, p. 253) includes actions that adhere to gender stereotypes. All four processes reproduce gendered organisations which are highly patriarchal and more in line with the unencumbered (male and masculine) worker.

Mills (1989), Ford (2005) and Walby (2011) draw a distinction between the public and private spheres, with women seen as fitting most easily in the latter and men more suited to the - gendered and patriarchal – public organisational culture. Witz (1992) and Doldor et al. (2013), amongst others, articulate this patriarchal problem in terms of implicit political power (with women losing out in battles for organisational control) within organisations. Doldor et al.’s (2013) empirical work suggests that female leaders are aware of the significance of organisational politics, but are also cognisant of the gendered nature of such and the ‘... practices and processes stemming from and perpetuating gender inequalities’ (Doldor et al., 2013, p. 423). Men, on the other hand, were deemed to be ignorant of gendered processes and practice.

Any political manoeuvring in organisations relies on access to networks, with the sponsorship of a senior manager being useful. However, mentoring has been particularly problematic for women (Linehan and Scullion, 2008), who face a paucity of senior (female) role models in addition to difficulties with combining networking with other responsibilities. The senior women in both Linehan and Scullions’s (2008) and also Ibarra et al.’s (2010) qualitative inquiries were seen to lose out on senior appointments due to a lack of access to both central networks and effective sponsors. Williams et al. (2012) similarly concluded that networking was key to success, yet remained highly gendered . Tansley and Tietze’s (2013) empirical investigation of talent management reinforced the centrality of key mentors to ‘advancement decisions’ (p. 1804), with a call for further research in this area. Thus, In a talent management context, where sponsors are crucially important, women might

Paper submitted for EIASM 3rd Workshop on Talent Management. Berlin. October 2014.

Gender, networks and talent management: interim findings from a narrative inquiry.
Handley, J. (2014)

be *more* disadvantaged, given the role of self-promotion, impression management and individual (sponsor) recommendation. The following section will further highlight the significance of gender for talent management practice.

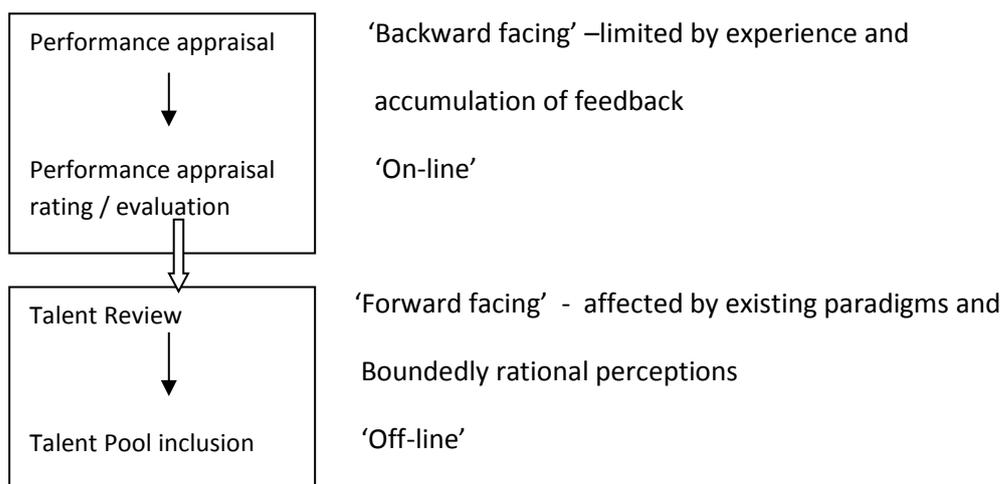
Gender and talent management

Extant literature has highlighted the significant potential for gendered talent management practice, with calls for further research in the field. Minbaeva and Collings (2013), for example, call for further research into the significance of individual factors, including gender, and both Farndale et al.'s (2010) conceptual paper and Iles et al.'s (2010) literature review highlight the significance of political and informal processes. CIPD's (2010) empirical investigation specifically provides support for the centrality of opaque processes and social networking, reinforced by Swailes' (2013) summary of leadership and talent:

"As leadership is seen as a masculine construct, and since leadership potential is a constant ingredient of talent searches, then talent searches appear to have an in-built bias towards men."
(Swailes, 2013, p. 36)

Following a qualitative study across four countries, Mäkelä et al. (2010) identified a two-stage model of the talent identification process - see figure 3 - that differentiates 'on-line' and 'off-line' processes. The off-line phase was reported to be influenced by 'simplified heuristics' (p. 135), affected by decision-makers' bounded rationality and worldview. This second stage was limited, therefore, by 'cultural and institutional distance' (reinforcing Mellahi and Collings, 2010), 'homophily or similarity bias' (with those 'like ourselves' being more likely to be appointed to talent pools) and, significant here, 'network position'. Those more visible in informal, central networks, were more likely to be selected. Thus, as women are far less likely to be included in informal networks and are far less likely to be 'similar' to the (masculine) leadership ideal, it is posited here that talent management practice is likely to be gendered.

Figure 3. Two-stage model of internal talent identification



Adapted from: Mäkelä et al. (2010), p. 136

**Gender, networks and talent management: interim findings from a narrative inquiry.
Handley, J. (2014)**

The first and second stages of Swailes' (2013) ethical framework reinforce this proposition. His first stage – 'imagining talent' – refers to 'knowing talent when you see it' (see, for example, CIPD 2010) and is likely to be gendered as above. The second stage – 'identifying talent' – is similarly so; where women bear the brunt of the domestic burden and long working hours continue to be the Achilles heel of equality (European Social Survey, 2013) it is far less likely that they will be identified as talent.

Support for gendered political structures and talent management processes can be further implied from Huang and Tansley's (2012) identification of 'rhetorical obfuscation', defined as:

"... the intentional use of persuasive language to selectively project and communicate organisational agendas as a means of directing and reinforcing relevant stakeholders' commitments and confirming behaviour." (Huang and Tansley, 2012, p. 3673)

This language ensured that attention was drawn to the external threat (talent shortage), to be met through talent management, the political connotations of which were ignored.

Most current talent management research focuses on processes and practice, though Tansley and Tietze (2013) draw attention to a hitherto overlooked aspect – the construction of talent. Their identity work perspective highlights the importance of ambiguity and liminal space, a logical progression of which might be to explore talent management from an interpretivist or constructionist perspective, whereby:

"... an individual is produced, rather than discovered, in HRM processes ..." (Alvesson and Karreman, 2007, p. 712)

Language, communication, notions of hegemonic masculinity, liminal space and informal, political processes, provide the justification for this study, from an interpretivist perspective, of the way in which talent is talked about, selected and how talent management is translated into practice – in a potentially gendered way.

The following section provides further details of research method, prior to exposition and discussion of findings.

Methods

The findings presented here reflect the initial phase of data collection for a PhD exploring : ' how talent and talent management are talked about, how talent management is translated into practice and whether this is 'done' in a way that is gendered – i.e. to explore the gender implications of talent and talent management' (Handley, 2013). Specific aims for this paper are:

Aim1: To develop understanding of potential gendering of talent and talent management practice;

Aim2: To explore the role of mentoring and networks in talent management practice.

Gender, networks and talent management: interim findings from a narrative inquiry. Handley, J. (2014)

Loosely structured interviews were conducted with middle-tier male and female managers who worked for organisations in the North of England, with a talent management system in place. All interviewees had studied part-time for either an MBA or Post-graduate Diploma in HRM and had responded to an e-mail or personal invitation to participate. This approach is congruent with similar work in the talent management field, with analogous aims. Tansley and Tietze (2013), for example, used semi-structured interviews of those with some responsibility for talent management and Stewart and Harte (2010) and Sparrow et al. (2013), in their exploratory studies of talent management, also used semi-structured interviews, in addition to analysis of internal documents in the latter case.

The term 'loosely structured' is preferred here since the interviews followed a socio-biographical (Rustin and Chamberlayne, 2002, cited in Durbin and Tomlinson, 2014) or 'life story'/ life history (Mc Adams, 1993; 2012; Fotaki, 2013) approach. Thus, participants identified the main 'chapters' in their life and career story, prior to specific focus on talent and talent management. Data was analysed approximating King's (2004; 2014) template analysis, without the use of qualitative data analysis software, but supplemented by a second reading of interview data as a whole.

Findings

Aim1: To develop understanding of potential gendering of talent and talent management practice.

As summarised in Figure 4, 5 'gendering' sub-themes emerged from the data. Firstly, the notion of talent itself was a highly intangible concept for all participants. Phrases such as the following were typically used to describe talent:

".. there is something about that person.. must have something .. and is this talent" (female mid-manager, large public sector organisation);

Talent is someone who *"... stands out"* (female senior partner, law firm) or *"...something a bit special"* (male senior data executive, large data bureau).

This, combined with highly stereotypical notions of male / female (senior) staff might be expected to create liminal space for gendered interpretations of talent. Thus, participants spoke of:

"It's a daily challenge, I think, to get your point across without appearing to either be trying to be one of the guys or to be emotional about it" (female senior partner, law firm).

"... people see them (women) as being bossy or see them as being quite arrogant, but then when a guy does that you say that is good leadership" (male manager, large engineering MNE)

Indeed, there was evidence to suggest a double-bind for managerial and professional females, who tended to be marginalised if they attempted to participate in male networks. One senior partner in a law firm highlighted the male-dominated and masculinised nature of networking events, dominated by attending sports such as rugby or football. Women-only networks were said to be undervalued; thus, women were often sole females and seen as 'alien' if they attended sports-related networking

Gender, networks and talent management: interim findings from a narrative inquiry.
Handley, J. (2014)

events (this senior partner had actually been overtly ridiculed for attending one such event!), but this type of networking was crucial to advancement.

Such stereotypical notions create particular disadvantage for women in a context where 'talent' is often seen as 'similar'. Thus, one participant talked of her mentor's view that she was seen as 'similar' (in terms of career progression and 'attitude') to him. In this case, this was a mixed-gender relationship, but with clear implications for similarity bias transferring on gender lines.

One such stereotype is that women tend to be less confident than men when self-promoting. There was some evidence to support this notion (from both female and male interviewees), albeit with a caution that men may only *appear* more confident. One female respondent was considering whether or not to apply for the talent pool at the time of the interview, but was concerned not to 'look foolish' and acknowledged her own 'self-doubt'. She was centrally involved in a national talent management programme for one category of staff and reported that women tended to be more concerned to ensure that they had covered all criteria, whereas men were more likely to 'just have a go'.

The work-home nexus was also highlighted as being important. One manager in a large multinational engineering firm highlighted the significance of overseas assignments in promotion and pool selection criteria, whilst others suggested that working part-time was a significant barrier to progress. The senior partner in a law firm had specifically been advised by her mentor *not* to work part-time if she wanted to succeed within the firm.

Aim2: To explore the role of mentoring and networks in talent management practice.

All participants told stories that reflected the perceived centrality of networks and mentors to career progression and access to a talent pool:

"... the contacts move people on at work..." (female mid-tier manager, large public sector organisation).

Two participants – one male, one female – had made very deliberate attempts to access powerful mentors, in one case external to the organisation and in the other external to the host country, in addition to internal mentors. They both reflected on the centrality of their mentors to their current position, both in terms of access to opportunities but also confidence and visibility. Even those who did not have access to mentors themselves were aware of the significance of such:

"It's not just about what you know, it's sometimes who you know and the person who was going to give you perhaps the best support in something" (female mid-tier manager, large public sector organisation, without a mentor).

One further, over-arching, finding was that of the opaque, covert nature of much talent management practice:

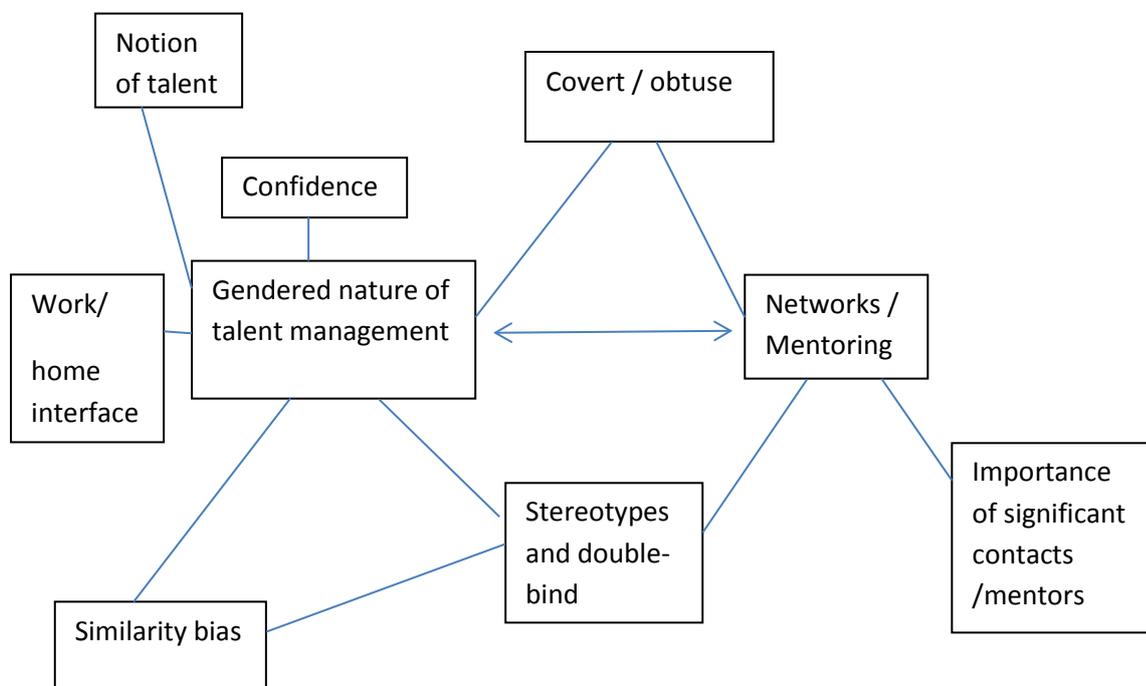
"It's like everything is secret – we really like them, they are tipped to be really good in the future, but we can't tell anybody" (female senior partner, law firm).

Paper submitted for EIASM 3rd Workshop on Talent Management. Berlin. October 2014.

Gender, networks and talent management: interim findings from a narrative inquiry.
Handley, J. (2014)

Two respondents – both of whom had been selected for talent pools – told how they had not even been aware of the talent management process, ‘stretch’ projects, formal internal mentors etc, prior to their inclusion (and one was only told of such by e-mail!). Indeed, they were not aware of colleagues in the pool, other than one or two faces of those attending similar events. However, they both talked of being much more aware of the importance of being ‘visible’ and doing the ‘right’ kind of (more strategic) work in order to be noticed and advance, post inclusion in the talent pool. One noticeable down-side to this was the possibility of feeling *more* vulnerable due to inclusion in the pool; one participant talked of feeling more open to jealousy and also more open to challenge (and, presumably therefore, more open to failure).

Figure 4. Findings: Talent management, an exploratory study



Discussion

This study provides support for Acker's (1990; 1992; 2012) notions of gendered organisations, informal processes and networks. Organisations were seen to be patriarchal arenas with sufficient ambiguity to sustain gendered connotations of talent. Doldor et al.'s (2013) findings of women's awareness of the centrality and gendered nature of organisational politics is reinforced here, although – contrary to Doldor – there is some evidence here that men are similarly aware. The ideal worker would, it seems, continue to be 'unencumbered man', with anyone choosing to work part-time or choosing not to accept assignments overseas likely to be overlooked when talent is identified, reinforcing Durbin and Tomlinson's (2014) findings relating to the experiences of part-time female managers.

The opacity of talent management practice and intangible nature of 'talent' reinforce findings from Mäkelä et al.'s (2010) qualitative study, suggesting that there is considerable scope for local interpretations thereof. Given further findings in support of a 'similarity bias' (Mäkelä et al. (2010)) it is suggested that this talent identification and talent management practice is, therefore, likely to be highly gendered.

There is also support for Alvesson and Kärreman's (2007) and Tansley and Tietze's (2013) notion of talent construction *through* practice. Thus, those who are *selected for a talent pool are the main ones likely to be *aware* of such, to be assigned mentors, have access to more strategic projects, combined with greater familiarity with strategic language (Swales, 2013)). Through this process, talent starts to *look* and *talk* like 'talent'.

Congruent with previous research (Linehan and Scullion, 2008; Ibarra et al., 2010; Williams et al., 2012; Tansley and Tietze, 2013) findings reinforce the continuing significance of access to informal networks and effective mentors. As highlighted by Mäkelä et al. (2010), those more visible in informal and strategic networks are more likely to be identified and selected as talent. The male-dominated nature of such networks appears to continue to provide scope for significant gendering of talent management practice.

Further research might extend this exploratory study of the gendering of talent management practice, in particular the role of networks and political processes.

**assuming the process to be one where talent is identified by senior managers, rather than being a process of competitive application*

Gender, networks and talent management: interim findings from a narrative inquiry.
Handley, J. (2014)

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