

# Professional Women's Experiences of Trade Unionism: Understanding Enablers and Barriers to Participation

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## Abstract

The composition of trade union membership in the UK has changed: the traditional image of white, male, manual workers has been replaced with a feminised professional profile. Despite this, women's participation levels remain low and women remain underrepresented at all levels of trade union hierarchies (Kirton, 2005). As a consequence, the gendered nature of work remains side-lined on the trade union agenda (Munro, 2001; Kirton and Healy, 2013). Working class identity has long been associated with trade unionism (Moore, 2011) but this raises questions around how professionals, arguably situated within the middle classes, identify with their trade unions.

Using data from 41 semi-structured interviews with unionised women in professional and managerial roles in the UK Civil Service, this thesis explores the intersections of class, gender, and professional and trade unionist identity. In doing so, the ways in which professional women identify with and experience trade unionism are examined.

The findings suggest that both individualist and collectivist benefits of union membership are important membership motivators, with professional development opportunities placed alongside collective bargaining as significant motivators for participation. Managerial identity is seen as associated with risk and demands union protection. Public service ethos is conducive to union membership. However, gendered structural inequalities in the workplace are replicated within trade union hierarchies, restricting women's opportunities to participate and consequently limiting the trade union agenda to the concerns of the traditional (male, full-time) worker. The trade union reinforces organisational messages which regulate identity both in the public and private sphere, making motherhood a particular barrier to participation. Homogeneity amongst trade union officials damages perceptions of union instrumentality thereby reducing identification with the union for many women.



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# Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction .....	8
1.1 Title of Thesis.....	8
1.2 Context .....	8
1.3 Research Aim, Questions and Objectives .....	11
1.3.1 Research Aim .....	11
1.3.2 Research Questions .....	11
1.3.3 Research Objectives .....	11
1.4 The FDA Trade Union and its Female Members .....	11
1.5 Feminist Intersectional Approach .....	12
1.6 Methodology .....	13
1.6.1 Research Method .....	14
1.6.2 Sample, Data Collection and Data Analysis .....	14
1.7 Researcher Positionality.....	16
1.8 Thesis Outline.....	17
Chapter 2: Identity .....	20
2.1 Introduction.....	20
2.2. Identity .....	20
2.2.1 Identity within Organisations .....	23
2.3 Gender.....	25
2.3.1 Gender as practice.....	26
2.3.2 Gender and the Organisation of work.....	29
2.3.3 Gender and Identity in organisations.....	31
2.4 Class Identity .....	37

2.4.1 Classifying class.....	37
2.4.2 The Middle Classes .....	40
2.4.4 Class Mobility – Being and Becoming Middle Class .....	41
2.4.5 Class at Work .....	42
2.4.6 Researching Class .....	44
2.5 Identity Intersections .....	47
2.5.1 Intersections of Privilege and Oppression within Organisations .....	48
2.6 The UK Civil Service and Professional Identity.....	49
2.6.1. The UK Civil Service Today – New Public Management, Identity and Resistance .	51
2.7 Conclusion .....	54
Chapter 3: Industrial Relations, Trade Unions and Diversity.....	56
3.1 Introduction.....	56
3.2 Gendering Industrial Relations.....	56
3.3 Trade Unions as Organisations.....	59
3.3.1 Trade Union Purpose .....	60
3.3.2 Trade Union History and the Development of a Trade Union Agenda .....	61
3.3.3 Trade Union Renewal .....	62
3.4 Joining a Trade Union.....	66
3.4.1 Individual Attributes .....	66
3.4.2 Individual Motivations .....	67
3.4.3 The Working Environment and Union Behaviour. ....	68
3.5 Participation .....	70
3.6 Non-standard Membership and The Development of White Collar Unions .....	72
3.6.1 White Collar and Professional Workers – The Development of the White Collar Union .....	72
3.6.2 Characteristics of White Collar Unions.....	74

3.7 Gender, Diversity and Trade Unions .....	76
3.7.1 Women and Trade Union Activism.....	79
3.7.2 Equality Strategies and Self-Organisation .....	81
3.7.3 Young Workers and Trade Union Activism.....	85
3.8 Employment Relations in the Public Sector .....	87
3.9 Conclusion .....	90
Chapter 4: Methodology.....	93
4.1 Introduction.....	93
4.2 Feminist Theory and Intersectionality .....	94
4.3 Researching Professional Women’s Experiences of Trade Unionism.....	99
4.3.1 Researching Identity – The Research Method .....	99
4.3.2 The Participants .....	106
4.3.3 The Research Interviews.....	111
4.3.4 Access, Participation and Data Gathering .....	116
4.4 Data Analysis .....	120
4.5 Conclusion .....	124
Chapter 5: Being a Professional Woman in the UK Civil Service .....	126
5.1 Introduction.....	126
5.2 The UK Civil Service and its Employees.....	127
5.2.1. Women in the Civil Service .....	129
5.3 Professional Identities .....	130
5.3.1 Public Service Ethos .....	130
5.3.2 Professional or Manager? The Contested Role of Management .....	131
5.3.3 Ambition and Talent in the UK Civil Service .....	136
5.4 Private Lives, Public Faces – The Intersections of Professional and Private Identity ..	138
5.4.1 Homogeneity in the Senior Ranks .....	138



5.4.2 Fitting in and Standing Out.....	142
5.4.3 Gender and Motherhood .....	152
5.5 Employment Relations in the Workplace.....	158
5.6 Conclusion .....	164
Chapter 6: Participation in the FDA Trade Union .....	167
6.1 Introduction.....	167
6.2 The FDA Trade Union in Context.....	167
6.3 Professional Identity and Trade Unionism.....	169
6.3.1 The Trade Union as a Professional Body .....	169
6.3.2 Unionised Managers.....	172
6.3.3 The Union as Organisational Communications .....	175
6.4 Employment Relations and Union Strategies .....	177
6.4.1 Workplace Disputes and Personal Causes.....	177
6.4.2 Union Activity and Recruitment Strategies .....	180
6.5 Personal Identities and Action .....	185
6.5.1 Leveraging Disadvantage.....	187
6.5.2 Leveraging Privilege .....	195
6.6 Identities, Agendas and Structures of the FDA Trade Union .....	196
6.6.1. Identity and Difference - the Homogeneity of Trade Union Officials. ....	196
6.6.2 The Trade Union Culture and Procedures .....	202
6.6.3 “Women’s Issues” and the Trade Union Agenda .....	207
6.6.4 Segregation of Union Work .....	209
6.7 Conclusion .....	210
Chapter 7: Discussion.....	213
7.1 Introduction.....	213
7.2 Professional Identity and Trade Unionism.....	214

7.2.1 The Disavowal of Management .....	215
7.2.2 Managers’ Need for Trade Union Representation .....	218
7.3 Gender, Management and Trade Unionism .....	222
7.3.1 The Intersections of Gender and Management .....	223
7.3.2 Gender and the Notion of Motherhood .....	225
7.3.3 Women’s participation in the FDA Trade Union .....	229
7.3.4 Youth, Femininity and Trade Unionism .....	233
7.4 Class .....	235
7.4.1 Class and Professional Identity .....	235
7.4.2 Middle Class Trade Unionists .....	238
7.5 The Simultaneity of Privilege and Oppression .....	240
7.6 Conclusion .....	242
Chapter 8: Conclusion .....	244
8.1 Introduction .....	244
8.2 How do professional women experience working life within the UK Civil Service? .....	245
8.3 In what ways do professional women identify with, experience and act within trade unions? .....	247
8.4 What are the barriers to and the motivations for women’s trade union participation? .....	250
8.5 Implications .....	253
8.5.1 Recommendations for Trade Unions .....	253
8.5.2 Implications for the field of Industrial Relations .....	255
8.5.3 Implications for Intersectional and Gender Scholarship .....	257
8.6 Future Research .....	258
8.7 Reflections on the Research Project .....	259
References .....	264

Appendix 1: Participant Information .....	297
Appendix 2: Information Sheet.....	300
Appendix 3: Participant consent form .....	302
Appendix 4: Debrief document.....	303

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 Title of Thesis

Professional Women's Experiences of Trade Unionism: Understanding Enablers and Barriers to Participation.

## 1.2 Context

This research seeks to understand the ways in which women experience their working lives and their trade union, with a view to identifying motivations for and barriers to participation in the trade union. To develop this understanding, it is critical to appreciate the societal, organisational and political contexts within which these experiences are framed.

Despite the dramatic increase in women's participation in the workforce since the 1960's (Alvesson and Billing, 2009), and the fact that women now make up nearly half of the active working population (Philpott, 2012a), there remains significant economic inequality between the sexes. Structural arrangements of work and employment relations do not take into account the fact that women's lives are qualitatively and quantitatively different from men's, and that as such women's experiences are qualitatively different.

Women remain underrepresented in positions of power and privilege within organisational and economic settings (Tyler, 2005). Organisations play an important part in developing and maintaining gendered identities (Acker, 2006), restricting women's access to male circles of power and consequently limiting their ability to gain the social capital necessary to understand and challenge such networks (Ledwith and Colgan, 1996). Women who do gain access to positions of privilege face unique struggles through the intersection of their privileged, masculinised position in the workplace and their disadvantaged, feminised place in wider society (Ely and Rhode, 2010).

Trade Unions are organisations whose purpose has remained unchanged. Webb and Webb's (1920) definition of a trade union as a "continuous association of wage earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving conditions of their working lives" remains as relevant today as it was nearly 100 years ago. Despite this, trade unions have faced significant

challenges since the 1970s: hostile governments, the rise of neoliberalism, and a shifting industrial profile have all contributed to declining membership levels.

The changing landscape of labour markets, with a decline in traditional trade union heartlands such as manufacturing and heavy industry, and the corresponding growth of a service sector offering part-time and flexible contracts, has dramatically increased the rate at which women have accessed the workplace. As a consequence, the composition of trade union membership has changed: the traditional image of white, male, manual workers has been replaced with a feminised professional profile (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2016); and trade unions now have a predominantly female membership (Brownlie, 2012).

This increasing presence has not, however, led to increased participation levels amongst female trade unionists, who remain underrepresented at all levels of trade union hierarchies (Kirton, 2005). Indeed, trade unions, historically opposed to women's participation in the workforce through fear of the loss of the "family wage" (Hunt, 2011) and mistrustful of part-time and flexible working, were slow to adapt to their changed environment, resulting in calls for renewal. The inclusion of "new workers" such as women and those on non-traditional contracts has frequently been seen as central to such renewal (Moore, 2011; Benyon, 2011).

The inclusion of such "new workers" on the trade union agenda has not been unproblematic (Heery and Conley, 2007). The dominant trade union agenda is based on, and seems to speak to, the white, male collective of its past (Munro, 2001). Collectivism based on class identity is seen as central to the trade union movement, but class identity seems to be conceptualised, by both trade unionists and the majority of industrial relations scholars, as single-fold – the differing experiences of class that result from the intersections of other identities or identifiers (such as gender or race) are not given space on the agenda. As such, issues that do not relate directly to the white, male, full-time norm are seen as marginal and as potentially diluting the strength of collectivism.

The significance of class as a mobilising identity is further complicated by the rise in white collar, professional and managerial trade unions. Today, trade union members are most likely to be professional employees, middle-income earners and public sector workers; and nearly 60% of female professionals are unionised (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial

Strategy, 2016). Due to this, white collar trade unions, and trade unions which act as professional bodies, are now significant movers in employment relations. These unions have been said to have some different characteristics to more traditional unions, notably a tendency towards a partnership approach to employment relations (Goldstein, 1955; Allen, 1966) and an aim to propagate professional ideals as well as engage in collective bargaining (Shlakman, 1950). In this context, professional identity and employment relations are closely linked for many workers.

The gender segregation apparent in organisations is reflected in trade unions – with a dominant discourse which paints women as passive and emotional, and prevents access to key roles such as negotiation, from which leadership candidates typically emerge (Sayce, 2006; Guillaume and Pochic, 2011). The trade union environment has been reported to be hostile and overly masculinised (Heyes, 2012), preventing women from voicing their concerns and consequently limiting trade unions' ability to fully represent them.

Trade unions' role as protectors of members' interests is under the spotlight; and questions remain about their ability to represent the increasingly diverse workforce from which their membership is drawn. In the UK, changes to welfare provision and cuts to the public sector under the guise of austerity have been seen to have a disproportionate impact on women (McLeavy, 2011; Conley, 2012). Women are more likely to be in receipt of benefits than men, are more likely to work in areas most at risk of job losses; and are more likely to work part-time, hence standing to lose more from pension reform. While women working in lower paid and precarious public sector jobs have experienced the greater impact of austerity, such changes do still impact upon professional, more highly paid, women in the public sector – both extrinsically, in terms of pay and pensions, but also intrinsically, in terms of their experiences of their working lives.

Women make up the majority of trade union membership, and are disproportionately affected by recent changes in working conditions; but their participation in trade union activities is low and their concerns are not reflected in trade union priorities. If trade unions are to develop strategies for effective – and relevant – resistance and representation, they must understand the ways in which their members identify and engage with them. It is in this context that this research looks to develop an understanding of the ways professional women experience their working and trade union lives.

## 1.3 Research Aim, Questions and Objectives

### 1.3.1 Research Aim

This research aims to further our understanding of professional women's participation in trade unions, in particular in relation to the debate about women's inclusion and participation as a central union revitalisation strategy.

### 1.3.2 Research Questions

1. How do professional women experience working life within the UK Civil Service?
2. In what ways do professional women identify with, experience and act within trade unions?
3. What are the barriers to and the motivations for women's trade union participation?

### 1.3.3 Research Objectives

In order to address the research questions, the following objectives have been established:

1. To examine the intersections of identities, power and action in professional and trade union contexts
2. To examine the relationship between women's identity as trade union members and trade union agendas
3. To map out the intersections between gender, class and industrial relations
4. To provide an underpinning for trade unions to develop their offering to female members in order to more fully represent the interests of all of their members in both times of dispute and more settled times.

## 1.4 The FDA Trade Union and its Female Members

This research specifically seeks to capture the experiences of professional unionised women: an increasingly significant, but as yet under-researched, group of trade unionists. The sample in this research is drawn from the FDA trade union, which represents senior managers and professionals in the UK Civil Service. For the purposes of this research, "professional" has been defined broadly, in line with the Civil Service definition of its senior ranking staff and encompassing a range of professions including law, taxation, finance, policy and operational management. Again, in line with the Civil Service's own definition, graduate entrants to the



Civil Service Fast Stream have been included as representative of early career professionals. The Civil Service Fast Stream is a development scheme for graduates identified as “high potential”. The aim of the scheme is for graduate trainees to be ready for promotion to senior management positions within three to five years.

The FDA describes itself as having “an influential membership of more than 18,000 senior managers, policy advisors, diplomats, tax professionals, economists, solicitors, prosecutors and other professionals work across Government and the NHS.” It is affiliated to the Trades Union Congress, but is “strictly politically neutral”, with “no formal links with any political party”<sup>1</sup>. Notably, the FDA describes itself as “a professional association” as well as a trade union for senior members of the Civil Service, suggesting its positioning of identity in line with what has been described as a “consultancy union” (Boxall and Haynes, 1997) representing the professional middle-classes. For these reasons, the FDA allows easy access to the target demographic i.e. professional women.

## 1.5 Feminist Intersectional Approach

This research is primarily concerned with understanding the intersection between gender, class and participation in trade unions. Feminist theories provide the critical perspective from which the research questions are considered. Specifically, this research is aligned with two central concerns of feminist theories: “(1) opposition to the domination of men over women and (2) a belief that women share a status as member of a subordinate group” (Riger, 1994:275). As is common in contemporary feminist research (Fawcett and Hearn, 2004), the political agenda of the work is explicit: a stated objective of this research is to aid trade union effort to provide effective representation to all members.

While feminist theory has historically focused exclusively on gender, in recent years the development of “intersectionality” (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2000; Hancock; 2007) has allowed feminist theory to broaden its scope, recognising that “some women have ... been more unequal than others” (Evans, 2011:xi). Oppression and constraints on the production of knowledge and the legitimacy of the identities that produce it are not single fold; multiple, interlocking oppressions exist based on race, class, ability, age, sexuality or other

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<sup>1</sup> Source: [www.fda.org.uk](http://www.fda.org.uk) (last accessed 25/01/18)

characteristics. Intersectionality allows for the study of the “intersection” of various forms of oppression, recognising the simultaneous and interlocking nature of socially constructed categories and the range of experiences that this will therefore result in, without offering an additive explanation.

In an employment relations context, concepts of class identity have been central to the trade union movement and experiences of work (Moore and Wright, 2012; Kirton and Healy, 2013b); as such, multiplicity of identity must be acknowledged in order to understand how trade union members identify with their trade union.

Intersectionality also acknowledges the simultaneity of privilege and oppression; and in doing so allows attention to be paid to the heterogeneity of women’s experiences. This is significant for this research, as participants in the study cannot be described simply as “oppressed” – they occupy positions of status and power within the UK Civil Service and, in some cases, within their trade union. While a key aim of feminist research is to provide voice to those rendered silent by oppression, very few (if any) individuals occupy positions purely of power or oppression (Collins, 2001). As a result, to overlook the intersection of privilege and oppression is to overlook power relations. Allowing the voice of the “sometimes privileged” (Atewologun and Sealy, 2014) to be heard contributes to “knowledge from below” (Calás and Smircich, 2009:6), when below is seen as relative, and the contextuality and simultaneity of privilege and oppression is acknowledged.

This intersectional approach is critical to the research methodology, and the next section considers this further.

## 1.6 Methodology

This research is positioned within a feminist, critical interpretivist framework, in which gender is seen as a fundamental organising principle, and in which constructed meanings and interpretation are seen to be significant. As Alvesson and Billing (2009:46) state: “this means an interest in the more nuanced aspects of cultures, identities and interactions in work and in organisations”.

The research questions explore the ways in which women make sense of their experiences of trade unionism within the context of the organisation and society in which they live and work. How individuals frame these experiences will be central to developing an understanding of the motivations behind participation. The research questions, and the framework within which they are positioned, therefore strongly suggested a qualitative approach, with qualitative research allowing individuals to construct their own meaning, in order to make sense of their experiences (Merriam, 2009). In this way, the framing of the response is self-directed rather than imposed by the researcher.

### 1.6.1 Research Method

The research has used semi-structured interviews as the primary method to gather data. For the interviews, a thematic, biographical approach was selected (Ritchie, 2014) – that is to say that the participating women were aware that the topic of the interviews was related to their professional and trade union lives but would also include some aspects of their home life and experiences outside of work.

### 1.6.2 Sample, Data Collection and Data Analysis

41 female members of the FDA Trade Union have been interviewed as part of this research. Interviews lasted between thirty minutes and just over two hours, providing a rich data set which covers the women's professional lives and career development alongside their participation in the FDA Trade Union.

Participants varied in seniority from early career graduate trainees to one member of the Senior Civil Service, with the sample ranging from those new to the workforce to those with over forty years' working experience. Over half of all participants had, at some point in their career, engaged in formal trade union participation – nine of them at national level (two having been the president of their trade union). Reflecting the demographic make-up of high ranking civil servants, the sample was overwhelmingly white and university educated, although issues pertaining to race, class, sexuality, disability and age are present in the data, with social background having been narrated as significant in both career and trade union decision making.

Following transcription the data was transferred to NVIVO to facilitate analysis. The research is exploratory in nature and therefore there were no predefined or expected parameters for responses. Participants were free to raise whatever was significant to them and their own experiences, although they were all aware that the research related to trade union participation and gender. This meant that coding using predefined themes was difficult for significant proportions of the data.

Analysis was therefore conducted through the thematic organisation of participants' accounts of their working and trade union lives. Emergent themes were organised by topic; for example, data relating to different forms of participation in trade unions was coded and then further analysed to allow for more in-depth exploration of the different forms of participation and associated motivations and barriers.

Initial analysis of participants' narratives around trade union participation was coded using topics from the interview guide; for example, data nodes were created covering reasons for joining a trade union, and participation. Under these headings, participants' responses to, for example, why they joined a union were grouped thematically under nodes such as "family background", "networking opportunities" and "insurance policy" in order to start to assess emerging themes. Similarly, data which discusses experiences of informal and formal participation has been collated, with motivations for (and barriers to) participation again grouped thematically under nodes such as "time constraints", or "helping others" which allowed for more straightforward assessment of the most commonly cited motivations and barriers.

Findings related to experiences of working life were grouped by emergent themes in participants' narratives. These included common themes around their perception of their working environment, employment relations issues, and perceptions of both "blockers" and "facilitators" to career progression.

The data was also grouped, where possible, by characteristics of participants (such as level of seniority, age, or extent of participation) in order to allow analysis of how identity may impact upon experiences of and perception of the trade union. Underpinning this research is the concept of identity and therefore intersections of identity and the impact they have on women's professional and trade union experiences formed part of the process of analysis.

The process of data analysis inevitably led to reducing participants' stories to fragmented sections – elements of their stories were assigned to their trade union experiences, while others were used to shed light upon professional identity in the Civil Service. While this was a necessary process, in doing so some of the richness of their narratives was lost, particularly the interactions between different identities and spheres of life. In order to highlight this richness of individual stories, a selection of individual participant narratives have been included in the findings.

## 1.7 Researcher Positionality

Feminist researchers have long considered women best placed to tell the stories of women's lives (Oakley, 1981; Reissman, 1987; Cotterill, 1992; Finch, 1993; Oakley, 2016) although it has also been widely acknowledged that gender alone is insufficient (Reissman, 1987) and it has been seen as increasingly important to acknowledge different subject positions that exist. A crucial component of feminist research is highlighting subjectivities and locating the researcher within the research (see, for example, Oakley, 2000; Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002; Letherby, 2003; Haynes, 2010). For this reason, I have included a brief summary of "the researcher" in this introduction.

As has been set out above in section 1.4, the research was conducted with professional, unionised women in the UK Civil Service. Before embarking on a PhD, I worked in the UK Civil Service and was a member of the FDA trade union. I share many characteristics with the women who participated in the study – the majority of women were white, university educated, with a family history of both trade union activity and public service, all characteristics I share. We also shared many similar experiences – I entered the Civil Service as a graduate trainee, as did the majority of women in this study; I was a member of the FDA trade union and I retain associate membership; and I joined some of the women in this study on the picket lines in 2012 and at trade union meetings before that.

My own personal characteristics and experiences have been significant in shaping the research from the outset. As Haynes (2012) explains, motivations for embarking on research projects may be personal as well as academic; and to some extent this research project provided an opportunity to seek answers to questions about my own experiences of

employment relations and trade unionism in the Civil Service. In addition, the impact of the researcher on participants is relevant when considering data gathering and at the time of the data collection I could still, at least to some extent, be considered an “insider” (Chavez, 2008).

## 1.8 Thesis Outline

This thesis is organised into eight chapters. Following this introduction, there are two chapters which review relevant literature. Chapter 4 then introduces the methodological issues associated with researching identity and sets out the methodological approach used in this research. Chapters 5 and 6 present the research findings; Chapter 7 discusses the implications of these findings; and Chapter 8 draws conclusions.

Chapter 2 is the first literature chapter. It introduces concepts of identity, considering how identities are developed and enacted within organisations. Ideas of gender identity are unpicked, with particular reference to gender and the world of work. This part of the chapter also considers management and privilege within organisations and how this intersects with gender identity. This is significant given the research sample for this thesis – women who exist in privileged positions within their organisation and must position their femininity accordingly. Class identity is then explored – and again, due to the sample, specific attention is given to what it means to be or become middle class and how this may be experienced in an organisational setting. The chapter then considers the intersectional nature of identities, exploring how in organisations (as well as in society in general) individuals simultaneously experience privilege and oppression. Finally, this chapter considers identity in the UK Civil Service, providing the context within which to position these participants’ understanding of their professional and trade unionist identities.

Chapter 3 introduces literature on trade unions themselves, positioning the thesis within the field of employment relations. It begins with a discussion of why employment relations needs to bring gender and identity into its framework, before setting out an overview of trade unions as organisations, considering their history, purpose and strategies for renewal. Research on how and why individuals join and participate in trade unions is discussed, with specific consideration of micro factors in joining and participating. Wider structural issues impacting trade union membership, such as fragmentation of the workforce, cannot be

explored through this sample and therefore the focus remains on decision making at the level of personal identity. The chapter then explores diversity within trade unions, with reference to previous research that has considered women in trade unions as well as a discussion of the literature on white collar and professional trade unions and a brief section on younger workers. Finally, to provide context, the chapter concludes by presenting relevant literature on employment relations in the UK public sector, with specific reference to the UK Civil Service.

Chapter 4 sets out an overview of the key components of feminist theories, addressing the implications of the political nature of feminist research and its consequent positioning within an interpretivist paradigm. The chapter then discusses the research design in detail, including reflections on the research process.

Chapter 5 begins the presentation of the findings. This chapter presents findings regarding how the participants in this study experience their working lives. It is an assertion of this research that the experience of working lives must have an impact on how individuals identify with trade unions – if we accept that trade unions represent workers, then what it means to be a worker must be of significant concern to them. Therefore, this chapter presents findings on why and how the sample became professional women in the UK Civil Service; the development of their professional identities; how the women experience their working lives; and their career aspirations. The chapter begins with providing an overview of the Civil Service and its history. In order to set the findings in context. It then discusses professional identity in the Civil Service. The chapter then moves on to provide a more holistic view of women's experiences, through discussion of the intersection of their public and private lives and how private identities are experienced in working lives. The chapter also seeks to demonstrate the interactions of identities and contains several vignettes of participants' narratives. Finally, the chapter presents the participants' explicitly stated views on the key employment relations issues for them as individuals, thereby providing the bridge between their working lives and their trade union participation.

Chapter 6 is the second chapter of findings, and presents findings that address the fundamental questions asked by the thesis: what motivates professional women to participate in a trade union, and what prevents them from becoming active? The chapter begins by providing a short history of the FDA and gives details of the union's membership as

well as key values and policies. The chapter is then composed of four main sections – the first three sections reveal participants’ motivations and the enablers to participation; while the fourth considers barriers.

Chapter 7 is a discussion of the findings in light of past understanding of the key issues raised in this thesis, highlighting the ways in which this thesis advances understanding in the fields of industrial relations, gender and organisational studies more broadly. The chapter begins by establishing the links between professional identity and trade unionism. Following this, the intersections of management, trade unionism and gender are discussed. Next, the links between class identity and trade unionism are explored, with particular reference to the interactions between class, professional and trade unionist identities. Finally, the simultaneity of oppression and privilege, as experienced by this group of senior women, is examined. Throughout this chapter there is an emphasis on the intersections of multiple identities and the interconnectedness of the different spheres – domestic, Civil Service and trade union.

Chapter 8 is the conclusion. It is organised around the three research questions: how do professional women experience working life within the UK Civil Service; in what ways do professional identify with and act within trade unions; and what are the barriers to and motivations for women’s trade union participation. The chapter then considers the implications of the research, including what recommendations might be made to trade unions, what implications the research has for the field of industrial relations and for intersectional and gender scholarship, and what further avenues for research are suggested by this work. The chapter concludes with personal reflections on the research project.



# Chapter 2: Identity

## 2.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces literature on identity. Initially the meaning of identity itself and its significance in an organisational context is considered, before a specific exploration of gender and class identity, each of which is seminal to the research. While class is gendered and gender classed (Acker, 2006), each is initially considered individually, with intersections of privileged and oppressed identities considered later. Both class and gender identities are then related to organisations and the world of work.

The chapter concludes by considering professional identity in the context of the UK Civil Service, the organisation from which this study's sample is drawn. This includes a discussion of New Public Management, a key part of the environment in which the sample's professional identities are developed; and resistance, as trade union members will naturally experience and embody some forms of resistance to perceived detrimental organisational changes.

## 2.2. Identity

The question of “what is identity?” is not new, and it has been considered by scholars of Philosophy, Sociology and Psychology as well as, increasingly, by scholars in the field of Organisational Studies (Alvesson et al 2008). Identity can be, and indeed has been, considered on many levels (personal, organisational, societal); and the interdependencies between these levels of identity create a complex field of study (Ybema et al., 2009; Brown, 2015). Despite the complexity and ambiguity surrounding the study of identity, in order to explore how individuals understand themselves, process the world around them, and act upon this information, developing an understanding of identity is crucial (Brown, 2015). Although there already exists an abundance of work considering identity, there is still a need for identity and identity dynamics to be further explored (Alvesson and Wilmott, 2002), taking into account the vast array of factors which may influence identity.

In early identity research, more emphasis was placed on the idea of identity as a stable concept, aligned to ideas of personality. However, there is increasing focus on the idea of

identity being fluid, and of multiple identities co-existing simultaneously. In this way identity scholarship is able to concentrate on the processes of identity formation and the ways in which individuals exercise agency and navigate external influences (Brown, 2015). Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003), for example, focus on “dynamic aspects of identity work – on-going struggles around creating a sense of self and providing temporary answers to the question “who am I?” and “what do I stand for?””. The shift towards identity as an on-going processes has led to the term “identity work”, which has been described as the most significant metaphor being used in the analysis of identity construction within organisational studies (Brown, 2015).

Identity work can be considered an iterative process, through which individuals actively consider and develop their identity through the (re)construction and (re)interpretation of the self in relation to particular roles and positions. In this process the self is associated with agency and reflexivity (Brown, 2015). Identity can, therefore, be seen as an evolving process of three interlinked elements: self-identity; identity work; and identity regulation (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Significantly, identity work is the process by which internal self-identities are linked with external social identities (Watson, 2008). Through this work and the human imagination, personal emotions are linked with wider external structures: the micro meets the macro, and identity becomes both temporally and situationally contingent (Moore, 2011). For this reason, identity cannot be seen as a stable entity – as Ybema et al. (2009:302) point out “the appearance of stability in any given identity is, at best, a transient accomplishment”.

The acceptance of the situationality of identity leads logically also to the acceptance that an individual’s identity management consists of the ongoing development of multiple identities (Ashforth et al. 2008; Brown, 2015) or “many selves” (Ibarra, 2002). These identities, in a fashion reminiscent of Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical metaphor, are called to the stage to play a part as required. This allows people to take on the numerous, sometimes contradictory, roles required to play the various parts in their lives.

The temporality of identity can be illustrated through the ways in which expectations surrounding the role of collective groups (such as women) change; what is considered appropriate behaviour for a wife, for example, has changed significantly over the last 50 years . Alvesson et al. (2008) consider that collective identities provide a resource upon

which to draw during the process of identity work. The mores and norms of these groups may be internalised and provide guidance for individuals seeking legitimacy in their identities (Eccles, 2009).

However, Baumeister (1986) suggests that the move towards the conceptualisation of identity as fluid may result in traditional means of self-definition associated with collective identities – gender, social rank and religious affiliation – being diminished in importance, providing people with more choice in how they construct their identities. These choices may create some individual tensions that require ongoing identity work in order for individuals to accommodate multiple, potentially contradictory identities such as “mother” and “career woman”. This, it is suggested, is reflective of wider social changes that have promoted individualism (Brown, 2015). However, while there may be more permutations of existing collective identities available as resources, and individuals increasingly occupy multiple roles and consequently manage “multiple selves” (Ibarra, 1999) dominant societal discourse still constrains what people can be; and plays out in line with heterosexual, masculine hegemony.

Despite this Ybema et al., (2009:308) have argued that “whether actors constitute themselves through discourse or are choreographed by discourse remains an “essentially contested” matter of interpretation”. As such, it is important to consider how individuals perform their identities.

Jenkins (1994; 2008) has suggested that the social construction of identity is a matter of establishing similarities and differences – we can only positively be something by establishing what we are not. Individuals draw upon apparently objective external realities – for example, a person’s ethnicity, gender, or job role – and then position each against its opposite: black and white; male and female; manager and worker. This simplification of identity positions allows the justification of certain behaviours or decisions based on what would be considered as the “rational” course of action in relation to a specific group. As a man you are not a woman; and so your behaviour may be defined as much by that difference as by ideas regarding what the behaviour of a man should entail.

However, given the multiplicity of identities an individual manages, identity cannot be simply a result of “ingroups” and “outgroups” (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Hogg and Terry,

2000) – instead, individuals simultaneously occupy many subjective and sometimes contradictory positions, identities and allegiances. As Collinson (2003:534) points out: “rarely if ever do we experience a “singular or unitary sense of self””.

Finally, self-categorisation alone is not sufficient to understand identity; aforementioned macro and meso factors influence identity work, forcing individuals to navigate a “melange of different identity projects” (Beech, 2008:52). Due to this, there remain questions over the extent to which individuals choose and mould identities and to what extent identities are simply ascribed by societal forces (Brown, 2015).

The fact that identities are certainly, to some extent, ascribed, means that the study of identity is crucial in developing understanding of the interactions between power and agency within societal structures. The ways we understand ourselves and others, while partly due to our own agency, remain largely based on predefined understandings of who we are based on larger structural factors such as gender, class and race (Somers, 1994; Prins, 2006). While these factors are statistically hugely influential to life courses, they are never experienced in the same way. Individuals must be considered as both more and less than the combination of social categories by which they are identified and with which they identify (Hall, 1996).

### 2.2.1 Identity within Organisations

As has already been discussed, the concept of identity is ambiguous. However, the term “organisation” may also be used to encompass a large range of social entities. Child et al. (1973:71) refer to organisations as “an institutionalised collectivity displaying some degree of permanency”. Using this definition, both work organisations (in the public, private and tertiary sector) and trade unions may be considered organisations.

Within work organisations, identities are regulated by employers (Alvesson and Wilmott, 2002) who have much to gain from such regulation. Alvesson and Svingesson (2003) describe identity within organisations as “central for issues of meaning and motivation, commitment, loyalty, logics of action and decision making, stability and change, leadership, group and intergroup relations, organisational collaborations”. However, employees may contest such regulation and modify their identities – accepting, rejecting or rethinking such

identities at different times and in different contexts (Kunda, 1992). Consequently, identity can be seen as particularly pertinent in the context of changing organisations, with identity work more necessary and frequent in situations where there is an element of the unknown creating stress and tension (Brown, 2015). As such, in times of change, individuals' understanding of where they belong and how they should behave may be challenged – incoming organisational discourse may force individuals to (re)define and (re)locate by searching for identity resources which allow them to navigate contradictory organisational discourse (Musson and Duberley, 2007).

Alongside changing organisational contexts, the tension between work and non-work identity has been widely discussed (Brown, 2015). This tension may be created at the macro, meso or micro level.

At the macro level, for women, societal value placed on career success and its associated economic rewards may clash with discourses that celebrate women's role in the home, as carers and mothers.

At the meso (organisational) level, studies have shown considerable tensions between managerial and professional identities, particularly in the public sector (for example Exworthy and Halford, 1998; Spicer and Böhm, 2007; Hotho, 2008) as well as tensions between organisational concepts of "rationality" and individual concepts of "morality". In Clarke et al's 2009 study of managers, individuals grappled with having to take the "rational" decisions expected of managers, sometimes to the detriment of their friends and neighbours, leading to identity work as a constant feature of their experience of being a manager.

Managerial identities, despite being associated with privilege and power, are also characterised by fragmentation, and are fluid and unstable (Alverson and Willmott, 2002) and therefore are subject to high levels of ambiguity and complexity. Knights and Willmott (2002) highlight that power, which is integral to the management role, is precarious; and is always subject to negotiation and renegotiation, dependent as it is on legitimate consent of those over whom it is exercised. This highlights the ways in which identity must be constantly renegotiated by individuals, even during the course of an average working day, as

managers navigate changes in their own relational status. Issues of hierarchy may be particularly challenging to those in middle management positions; while managerial discourse highlights autonomy and power, their actual power may be considerably restricted (Thomas and Linstead, 2002) challenging their constructed managerial identity.

At the micro level, legitimacy and authenticity are also central to occupational and professional identities (Eccles, 2009; Brown, 2015) as professional identity is not only a result of expectations of other people, including the organisation itself and wider society, but is also what professionals themselves find important in their work based on their work and personal background (Beijaard et al. 2004:108). Authenticity is described by Heidegger (1962:117) as “the loyalty of one’s self to its own past, heritage and ethos”. Authenticity may influence career choice and motivation but is, once again, open to being contested as identity related to the past is open to change.

Finally, collective professional associations can be seen as identity resources (Sachs, 2001). In this way, work organisations and professional bodies can be both a regulator of identity and a resource. For some groups of workers, trade unions may also be seen as an identity resource, and trade unions which organise based on professional identity, such as the British Medical Association, may be active in the regulation of members’ professional identity.

It should be noted that while resistance in organisational contexts is most frequently associated with forms of collective resistance such as trade unionism, identity itself can provide platforms for individual resistance. Identity work as a form of resistance may be seen, for example, through the reworking of managerial identity, with individuals distancing themselves from organisational decision making (Collinson, 2003). This form of resistance has been reported within the UK public sector and is discussed in more depth in section 2.6.1: “The UK Civil Service Today – New Public Management, Identity and Resistance”.

## 2.3 Gender

Studies on gender, work and organisation have been at the forefront of adopting and developing ways to research and think about gender in practice (Kelan, 2009), perhaps because organisations provide an ideal platform from which to view identity work (Brown, 2015).

Foundational concepts of gender within organisations stem from Acker's (1992) idea that gender "refers to patterned, socially produced, distinctions between female and male, feminine and masculine [...] in this way gender is not so much about what we are but what we do" (1992:250). While the research questions for this project focus on women's experiences of trade unions, it is important to remember that the socially constructed and relational nature of gender makes both masculine and feminine identities subject to social constructions that may limit the range of options realistically available to individuals in all areas of their lives. Considering gender in terms of the simple male/female dichotomy neglects the ways in which individuals negotiate their identities, meaning that only certain masculinities and femininities are available to either sex as identity resources.

In order to explore gender and identity, this section firstly considers broad conceptualisations of gender, then moves on to explore gender and the organisation of work, followed by gender in organisations. Finally, the section will consider how privilege interacts with femininity within organisations.

### 2.3.1 Gender as practice

Commonplace understandings of femininity and masculinity are developed and maintained by the idea that there is a common-sense understanding that two genders exist and are fundamentally different – biologically and psychologically (West and Zimmerman, 1987; West and Fenstermaker, 1995). However, since early feminist research such essentialist concepts of gender have been routinely challenged. Gender itself has become a contested term, with notions of female and femininity, and male and masculinity, increasingly seen as a process rather than having fixed identity or meaning (Butler, 1990; 1993; West and Zimmerman, 1987; Jeanes, 2007). In keeping with this argument, this research rejects the apparent stability and objectivity of two genders, instead seeing gender as a social construct and consequently a product of social interactions.

Doing gender is defined by West and Zimmerman as "a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine "natures"" (1987: 125). West and Zimmerman distinguish between sex, sex category and gender. Sex has since been considered the

biological distinction between male and female (although even within biological understandings of sex, this dichotomy is not considered accurate (Ainsworth, 2015)). Sex category has been defined as the application of biological sex criteria, or “the ongoing identification of persons as girls or boys and women and men in everyday life” (West and Fenstermaker, 1995:20). Sexual category, based on such “common-sense” assumptions regarding the nature of men and women can be seen in multiple ways. Individuals are likely to “embody” their sex category – individuals know the environment in which they operate partly due to both their own and other people’s perceptions of their physical body.

This embodiment may be particularly influential in the case of gender embodiment through pregnancy and early motherhood (Haynes, 2011). The notion of motherhood is a persistent constituent of feminine gender identity, linked to essentialist concepts of gender, defining women’s social role (Gillespie, 2003) and with negative consequences for those who defy them, as well as those who conform. Those choosing to be childless may often be seen as deviant, unfeminine, and as making a choice which is an unnatural choice for women, or something that appears to upset the imagined “natural order” (Macintyre 1976; Somers 1994; McAllister and Clarke 1998; Gillespie 2000). Becoming a mother frequently results in significant engagement in unpaid labour in the form of caring responsibility, with subsequent loss of economic capital as well as loss of access to positions of power.

The interactional nature of gender means that gender can be seen as practice (Butler, 2000; Priola and Brannan, 2009) and individuals can be considered to be “doing gender” through performances which contribute to the formation and maintenance of gendered identities and consequently practice (Priola and Brannan, 2009). Due to the situational and contextual nature of identity construction, gender must be seen as an ongoing activity – what is considered a gender appropriate performance or activity changes significantly depending on various factors such as age, class and race.

The ways in which individuals enact gender are also significant. When gender is considered an identity, which may be ascribed but not fixed, then the ways in which gender is learned, displayed and reinforced must be considered when trying to discover the boundaries to participation in societal hierarchies. Any conceptualisation of identity must be framed within societal and personal understanding of the pre-defined gender roles that society prescribes.



Hegemonic discourses constrain gender identity (Butler, 2000); and for women in particular, it cannot be ignored that ensuring a legible sense of gender identity may be grounded in ideas that constrain economic gain and financial security. If an individual fails to enact gender in a way considered appropriate to the context then it is that individual who is questioned rather than societal assumptions (West and Zimmerman, 1987).

Understanding gender is therefore necessary in understanding power and control. Gender does not exist in a fundamental way but is created through processes of power and interaction. In this way gender is part of, and a result of, societal hierarchies and structures. The understanding of gender as the activity of managing behaviour in terms of the societal norms dependent on context ensures that individuals comply and develop further ties to their gender identity (West and Fenstermaker, 1995). While gender identity may be fluid and unfixed, the range of gender identities available to individuals, which allow them to make their identities legible, remain heterosexual and restrictive. People are therefore already categorized by sex when they do gender. Individuals draw on a range of pre-determined identity resources which define the activities appropriate to appear as either women or men. In this way gender identity is not simply accomplished but also ascribed (Czarniawska, 2006).

This ascription could be termed “doing gender to the other” or “coercive gendering” (Czarniawska 2006; 2013). Czarniawska uses the distinction between male and female toilets as an example of ascribing gender which is generally seen as justified and legitimate as well as more overt discrimination in the form of banning one gender from a place or event. I would argue that in organisational and trade union settings, the casting of parental leave arrangements and part-time and flexible working patterns as “women’s issues” is a further example of “coercive gendering” which reinforces the link between femininity and domesticity or care work.

Despite the above emphasis on the regulatory and coercive nature of gender identity, women’s (and men’s) own agency and ability to challenge and criticise hegemonic concepts of gender should be noted. As Jeanes (2007) points out, subjectivity can be reconstructed through processes of reflexivity. In addition, while gender may be a restricted identity resource, there is not a single way to do gender.

The pervasive nature of gender seems to indicate that gender identity is enacted and blended with most, if not all, other identities. Gender will only cease to be enacted when the category of gender loses its importance (West and Fenstermaker, 1995) and this is unlikely to happen while gender is considered fundamental in defining what individuals can do and how they are likely to do it.

### 2.3.2 Gender and the Organisation of work

The pervasive nature of gender discussed above means that it seems clear that gender must have a huge impact on the way work is organised, how individuals experience it and how they experience private, domestic life and its links with public, working life (Priola and Brannan, 2009). In the following section, the structural organisation of work is discussed.

The participation of women in the workforce has increased dramatically since the 1960's (Alvesson and Billing, 2009), and women now constitute nearly half of the active working population (Philpott, 2012a). Despite this increased participation, however, women have not achieved economic equality in the workplace. Structural arrangements of work do not consider the qualitative and quantitative differences between men's and women's lives; and the gender segregation seen in the labour market today makes the impact of this clear. The gendered segregation of work is a well-discussed theme in research (see, for example, Rubery, 1994; Adkins, 1995; Acker, 1998); and issues such as the gender wage gap, maternity rights and work-life balance have been discussed in both the academic and public arenas, with such issues being a central facet of campaigns, particularly for liberal feminists.

The gender wage gap, the need for maternity regulations, and flexible working conditions for women have all been linked to women's role in the family and the separation between the private and public sphere (Gregory and Milner, 2009; Lewis and Humbert. 2010). Women's role in the private setting of the home and family has been explored by many authors across a range of disciplines and perspectives. Whether considered a result of women's "natural" caring nature, of the need to free the man for working labour or of established gender roles, it is widely known that women, despite years of awareness of this inequality, still take on the majority of domestic and child-rearing responsibilities, regardless of class or occupation (Sullivan, 2000). This creates time pressures for women (Warren,

2003), which may limit their employment choices; indeed, women make up a disproportionately high percentage of the part-time or casual workforce (Heyes, 2012).

This prevalence of women within the part-time workforce is relevant because part-time workers have both historically (see, for example, Booth, 1986) and more recently (Alvesson and Billing, 2009) been considered uncommitted or peripheral; and as a result many part-time roles are proportionately less well-rewarded, either financially or in terms of responsibility, security, or stability, than full-time equivalents. Inequalities already present through occupational differences in the availability of part-time work (which tends to be concentrated in lower paid, more precarious occupations (Conley, 2005; Kirton and Healy, 2013a, b)) have therefore been exacerbated by these reduced benefits, making part-time work an important element of gender segregation (Walby, 1997).

It has been argued that such inequalities are a result of a choice made by women, a preference for caregiving over economic gain (Hakim, 1993). However, when considered in the light of identity construction, it would appear that choice means quite different things for men and women. Private identities remain gendered and women's private identities continue to be tethered tightly to the private sphere. Parenthood may provide the clearest example of such restrictions: fatherhood identity may be situated within the public sphere in the form of father as breadwinner, whereas the caring involved in motherhood is placed within the home and considered separately from economic activity (Wajcman and Martin, 2002:999). Therefore, despite changes that mean that the professional, career woman can be considered a legitimate identity – and even a favourable one – private identities and roles mean that women may still struggle to adopt and manage the identities, especially if their professional identity is considered unfeminine (Billing, 2011).

Despite the apparent link between the gendering of domestic roles and the tendency for women to work part-time, it should be noted that women experience their participation in paid employment differently, depending on various factors including class, race, age and education. This idea, of discrimination as an intersectional phenomenon, can be seen in several recent studies. For example, Healy et al.'s (2011) study shows how the intersection of race and gender plays an important part in women's experiences of the workplace, while Hebson's (2009) study of the aspirations of working and middle class women explores how

women make sense of their classed and gendered identities in order to negotiate the various expectations and demands in both their working and family lives.

While the discussion of women's responsibilities in the domestic sphere provides some insight into differences in men's and women's working lives, many feminist scholars (Acker, 1990, 1992; Walby, 1997; Hancock, 2007) have been wary of essentialist explanations of women as the natural care providers, and have instead turned attention to systematic inequalities in the organisation of work itself.

Although constraints on women's access to the workplace may arise, in part, from gendered domestic arrangements, there are also significant gender differences in representation within sectors or occupations. The vast majority of positions held by women reflect the traditional domestic roles ascribed to women – for example, caring, raising children, or cleaning (Alvesson and Billing, 2009). Even within a given sector, the types of roles occupied by women will often reflect societal segregation, with women being offered roles or responsibilities which are considered more “feminine” (Acker, 1992). The gendered segregation of work does not in itself necessitate economic and social inequalities, but the way in which roles and the skills associated with them are valued can be seen to privilege masculinities in a way that creates inequalities based on gender.

### 2.3.3 Gender and Identity in organisations

When gender is considered an identity and “identity work” (Alvesson et al., 2008; Ybema, 2009) as a process shaped by experiences of an individual, organisations can be seen to be heavily influential in the on-going development and reinforcement of gender identity (Acker, 2006). As Davies and Thomas (2002:463) point out: “the modern organisation is a discursive arena that champions the masculine over the feminine, the public over the private, cold rationality over the body and emotionality.”

Within organisations, cultural constructs are linked to gendered expectations of workers and their abilities. Unequal power distribution becomes significant to identity work (Ely and Pachavic, 2007), highlighting how power and gender are structurally and culturally linked.

Culturally, the dominant social constructs of gender, which juxtapose masculinity and femininity, reduce gender to a series of dichotomous traits: men as strong and women as weak; men as rational and women as emotional; and men as assertive and women as passive. This “symbolic production” (Acker, 1992) results in the privileging of masculinity in the workplace, with masculine traits being seen to align more closely to the needs of businesses and organisations, in which the dominant discourse focuses on competitiveness and rationality as key to success.

Individuals’ identities are likely to be more complicated, dynamic and fluid (Beech, 2008), but as Davies and Thomas (2002:474) point out, “as individuals, we come to think of ourselves, and interact with others, in ways that reflect the dominant understanding of what it means to be *either male or female*”, again reinforcing division of work along gender lines. As has already been discussed, such gendered interactions have a powerful regulatory role on people’s employment (and life) choices; indeed, as Ely and Pachavic (2007:1131) suggest, “monitoring one’s compliance with stereotypical gender beliefs and behaviours is a form of “self-surveillance” that gains much of its power because it goes unnoticed”. This internal regulation is further enforced through external organisational processes, structures and practices, which have been largely seen as gender-neutral in management and organisational studies (Acker, 1992; Alvesson and Billing, 2009).

Structurally, while organisational codes and regulations often emphasise their fairness and objectivity – a wage is paid for the job not the worker, and performance is assessed against objective criteria – Acker (1992:255) explains that “these practices and relations, encoded in arrangements and rules, are supported by the assumptions that work is separate from the rest of life and that [the organisation] has first claim on the worker”. The “abstract worker” (Acker, 1992; 2006) is unencumbered by caring responsibilities and can focus their attention and commitment on the organisation which pays them for their labour. This focus does, of course, rely on someone else taking care of family and private issues, in order to prevent these intruding into the world of work. Once again, women’s domestic responsibilities become problematic as their feminine identities (wife, mother) come into conflict with organisational rules based on a masculine norm. As previously noted, the ways in which women balance these commitments (such as through take up of part-time work or flexible

working options) can result in their participation in paid work being seen as peripheral and has led employers to doubt their commitment (Alvesson and Billing, 2009). Predetermined career paths are reserved for men (Billing, 2011) leading to men occupying positions of greater status and more organisational decision making power.

The impact of this unequal distribution of power and opportunity is significant to identity construction in several ways. As Tafjel (2010) notes, in order to gain a clearer understanding of the self, individuals often compare themselves to others within their environment. This process of social comparison as a form of identity work is highly significant in the workplace, where individuals may be frequently required to evaluate themselves relative to others, whether externally in the form of pay reviews and performance appraisals, or internally and privately. Given that men represent the ideal worker and, as such, typically earn more and receive greater career development opportunities and faster promotions than female colleagues (Heilman, 2001; Agars, 2004), it may be problematic for women making such comparisons to untangle the structural factors from individual performance, resulting in lowered confidence. This lower confidence has been linked to lack of progression and lower pay (Wade, 2001; Heckert et al. 2002; Babcock and Laschever, 2009).

Finally, external stereotyping within organisations can have a heavy impact on women's experiences of employment. Assumptions about women and their domestic responsibilities do not solely impact on women with families. In her study of gender stereotyping in organisations and the ways it can lead to discrimination, Bobbitt-Zeher (2011) found that belief in women's family orientation meant that they were considered a "risk" to employers whether or not they had, or planned to have, a family. Bobbitt-Zeher considers two forms of gender stereotyping: descriptive stereotypes (beliefs in what women and men are like); and prescriptive stereotypes (beliefs in what men or women should be like). Descriptive stereotypes, Bobbitt-Zeher claims, have a regulatory role in choice of career, with access granted or denied based on perceived suitability of the occupation to a given gender. Prescriptive stereotyping, meanwhile, was seen in unequal application of company policies: harsher penalties were applied to women, who had displayed a "double deviance" – not only did they break company rules, they also broke gender rules by, for example, behaving aggressively. Examination of women in leadership and management roles, often seen as

masculine, further highlights conflict created for women in typically male domains (Kanter, 1977; Ridgeway, 2001; Alvesson and Billing, 2009).

Women remain underrepresented in the positions of power and privilege within organisational and economic settings (Tyler, 2005; Barretto et al., 2009). As discussed above, organisations play an important part in developing and maintaining gendered identities (Acker, 2006), restricting women's access to male circles of power and consequently limiting their ability to gain the social capital necessary to understand and challenge such networks (Ledwith and Colgan, 1996).

The acquisition of cultural capital in the form of education has been seen as the solution to help women achieve greater positions of power and status in society (Ely and Pachavic, 2007) but while in the UK more women now attend university than men (UCAS, 2015), this has not resulted in equality. Instead it appears that women have increasingly moved into areas of high expertise rather than high authority (Savage, 1992). Those women that have succeeded in achieving positions of leadership and influence are often seen to have done so through identity work that focuses on adopting masculine strategies and characteristics (Tyler, 2005).

As discussed above, masculine traits are frequently privileged in organisational settings, with identities such as "the authority", "the entrepreneur", or "the careerist" associated with masculinity (Collinson and Hearn, 1994). Consequently, to be a successful manager, achieve in organisations, and fit in with the organisational elite, women may attempt to emulate the organisational masculinities that are held in esteem (Fearfull and Kamenou, 2006).

Within the UK public sector, often given as an example of an organisation with a strong equality ethos, the adoption of new managerial controls means that even non-management professionals are expected to adopt managerial values and align themselves with managerial concerns (Thomas and Davies, 2005). The masculine norms of management, and New Public Management's emphasis on entrepreneurial (masculine) qualities, appear likely to have a significant impact on identity (Thomas and Davies, 2005). In this context, "expert"

is undermined in favour of “manager”; and cultural images of “manager” demand masculine embodiment (Haynes, 2011).

For women, and others who do not easily align with the dominant white male norm, this creates a complicated and challenging process of identity work (Fearfull and Kamenou, 2006) if they are to fit into organisational elites. Thomas and Davies (2005) have shown how women who do emulate more masculine styles of management experience numerous difficulties in relation to “the denial of sexuality, tensions in identity management and for their life experiences and relations” (ibid:479). As such, the experience of contradictory and conflicting identity work within management roles may be heightened for women and consequently result in feelings of burn out and performance strain (Priola and Brennan, 2009). Further to this, and as has already been discussed, those breaking gender norms may be seen in a negative light: women who emulate male management practices may be negatively evaluated, as lacking the “people skills” associated with femininity (Priola and Brennan, 2009). In order to ease such tensions, female middle managers for example are often seen to take on pastoral roles (Coleman, 2007) instead of roles considered organisationally essential and suitable to aid progression.

Work intensification, associated with, in the public sector, both New Public Management and progression through organisational hierarchies, presents difficulties for both men and women. However, with organisational culture attributing higher value to the “abstract worker” with no other commitments (Halford et al., 1997; Acker, 2006) the separation of identities at work and at home once again influences women’s experiences of career development. Women frequently adopt the dominant organisational career narrative in work but experience a deep conflict when attempting to add their family life to this narrative (Wacjman and Martin, 2002). Priola and Brannan (2009) have described how, in order to achieve a coherent identity, women in senior management positions are likely to have made significant changes to their domestic life and consequently have experienced the negativity of breaking gender norms in both arenas of life. For example, only a disproportionately small percentage of female academics and female CEOs have children (Mason, 2013) suggesting an either/or decision for many women when it comes to career success or family life.



The struggle to fit in and gain privilege in organisational settings can therefore be seen as a struggle “the Other” faces against the white, heterosexual, male norm (Prasad and Prasad, 2002). Through diversity statements and other organisational narratives, “the Other” may be occasionally constructed as bringing additional value to an organisation, for example to ensure that the organisation reflects the population it serves, or to encourage alternative views. However, underlying assumptions about the capabilities of those who do not fit the dominant norm often result in them being seen as deficient (Zanoni and Janssens, 2004) and requiring additional help and support.

Davies and Thomas (2002) present evidence of women positioning themselves as “the Other” in organisations. In terms of identity, this is significant as it suggests some level of acceptance that women have additional needs above those of the “average”, which is to say, male, workers. Equality initiatives in organisations practice coercive gendering through removing issues such as childcare from their male workers and considering them a woman’s issue. Senior women wishing to remove themselves from their “othered” position may find themselves both avoiding behaviour associated with femininity but also seeking to enhance their position in the organisation through drawing attention to how they are not affected by female deficiencies such as motherhood. This form of female misogyny (Mavin, 2006) highlights the ways in which economically active women are reminded of their contradictory and problematic identity, as well as their subordinate position in the organisation, by both women and men (Fotaki, 2011).

Despite the above emphasis on the existence of the “abstract worker” as a white male, it is significant to point out that this norm alone cannot account for the complexities in the experiences of women managers (and workers) (Billing, 2011). Individuals possess and display numerous identities, some conferring privilege and some oppression. Privilege and oppression may, and do, exist simultaneously. In order to understand privilege and oppression in organisations and society, other identities must be examined and the interaction between such identities must be explored (Anthias, 2012).

## 2.4 Class Identity

Class has long been a key category of analysis and foundational concept for the discipline of sociology. This section considers the difficulties with classifying class, and goes on to discuss how individuals may experience class mobility as well as classed experiences of work.

### 2.4.1 Classifying class

Despite its long history in sociological scholarship, there remains a lack of consensus around what class really means, how it can be observed and how individuals themselves understand it. Changes to the workforce, the decline of manufacturing, growth of the service industry and the rise of neoliberalism have challenged traditional ways of thinking about class (as purely occupational or based on economic location).

Post-Marxist class analysis has focussed most frequently on the occupational position of individuals. Occupational analysis can be seen to shed light on both economic resources as well as less tangible considerations such as educational or cultural capital and status. In this way, occupation as one indication of class cannot be overlooked, as occupationally structured labour is still fundamental to societal organisation and personal identity (Reveley and McLean, 2008). However, social class as defined through occupation alone appears unsuitable to modern Britain (Dorling, 2014), providing an over-simplistic understanding of class power dynamics and how this links to individual subjectivities.

Discussions of the meaning of class are rarely complete without reference to Bourdieu, who provides a starting point to understanding some of the more hidden and complex aspects of class based power and domination. Bourdieu builds on Marx's theory of economic capital providing a model for the ways in which various forms of capital are acquired and then used for further acquisition. The acquisition of capital, for Bourdieu, is directly related to concepts of power and domination in society: to put it simply, those with more economic capital can use it to acquire more social and cultural capital, leading to symbolic power. Bourdieu's concept of habitus describes the ways in which individuals act, the expectations and values they hold, and their "ways of being" (Lovell, 2000). Such ways of being are internalised through primary socialisation and reinforced through interactions with classed

institutions such as schools and later workplaces (Ely and Padavic, 2007). In this way, individuals may become complicit in their own oppression, embodying features of their class and enacting them in ways that hinder chances of mobility.

To complicate issues further, the individualisation thesis put forward by Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991) has ultimately led to class being pronounced dead (Pakulski, 1996). According to Giddens and Beck, modernity has led to individuals removing themselves from forms of collective categorisation, no longer restricted by structures and power dynamics that have long played a part in identity politics. As Giddens puts it: “we are not what we are, but what we make of ourselves” (1991:75). In addition to challenges from the individualisation thesis, within feminist research, while social class still remains named as part of the trinity of oppression (class-race-gender) it has frequently been neglected in more recent feminist theorising (Skeggs, 2004). Perhaps in part due to the strong criticism of second wave feminists’ neglect of race and the origins of intersectionality, intersectional scholars have tended to engage more strongly with discussions around the intersections of race and gender, alongside less explored categories of difference such as nationality and sexuality (Skeggs, 2004).

Despite such claims around the death of class and the neglect of class analysis in feminist research, access to economic resources and opportunities remains key to understanding issues of oppression and privilege. As Walkerdine (2010:139) explains: “the exploitation and oppression which class politics signals, though changed, has not ceased and no other political discourse has emerged to explain or mobilise around these issues, that is, the issue of inequalities associated with social and economic difference”. While the exact structures of class may have changed, institutions that have long been associated with the middle and upper classes still dominate British public life – individuals from the same backgrounds, the same schools, and the same universities continue to hold the most sway and the most prominent positions of power in public life (Dorling, 2014). With this social landscape remaining firmly in place, the way people reflexively make sense of the world, and understand their own position within it, cannot be unaffected by class distinctions (Reay, 1997) given that reflexivity is culturally embedded. Class at birth remains the best predictor of life course (Jones, 2003), and therefore continues to be influential in shaping individuals’

lived experiences across a spectrum of life spheres, including voting behaviour, educational achievement, leisure activities, political participation, labour market participation and religiosity (Dawson, 2012).

While class at birth remains significant in understanding life outcomes, it should not be considered a one-dimensional construct that renders individuals without agency. Instead, class must be considered as an ongoing, dynamic process, which is experienced across all areas of life (Mellor et al. 2014), including in the most intimate of settings.

Beyond the influence of material and economic constraints of the individual, class identity is present as cognitive restraints linked to moral judgements and respectability (Skeggs, 1997; Sayer, 2005). Class judgements include judgements on race, gender and sexuality, creating an intersection of characteristics that cannot be disentangled from class, just as gender and race cannot be disentangled. However, the othered dimension of class identity work does not mean that class is not embodied by individuals. Social class in the UK can be seen and heard through accent, vocabulary, dress, or mannerisms (Walkerdine, 2010), or may be exhibited by individuals through their acquisitive tastes. However, the multifaceted, slippery nature of class alongside neoliberal discourse of individualism renders it osmotic yet hidden: success and failure is presented as the result of individual merit and effort, rather than as a result of physical characteristics.

In spite of class not being deemed an essential trait, characteristics associated with genetics and biology have become conflated with class. As Lawler (1999:9) points out, “intelligence, knowledge and taste are usually considered to be features or characteristics of the self – something innate, rather than something acquired”; and yet these characteristics are fundamental to class identity and the maintenance of middle class normative values. Such class essentialism allows the reinforcement of the meritocratic myth of the neoliberal society in which class is permeable and inequality is individual failing (Jones, 2003).

Efforts to explore class identities are complicated by the ways in which class stratification works. While individuals hold multiple, intersecting identities, social context plays an important part in influencing which identities and intersections are most salient at a given time (Jones, 2003). Class identity may become most salient when individuals step outside of

the institutions they are most familiar with – their workplaces, family, neighbourhood, and friendship groups are all part of the class system and this both reinforces class habitus or identity and also renders it invisible to the individual. It is only when an individual finds themselves in a place associated with a different class, encountering those with different class identities, that one becomes aware of class attributes or as Bourdieu (1999) puts it individuals experience a sense of “difference”.

Class, as well as processual, is also hierarchical and relational. It can be considered a system of ranking that sets material conditions but also defines other social relations (Jones, 2003). The hierarchical nature of class provides individuals with room to challenge and contest their class identities – rather than simply occupying a class location, class becomes an ongoing challenge through identity work involving the othering of some and the highlighting of characteristics associated with who you want to be. In this way, Lawler (1999:6) points out: “class distinctions are simultaneously at work and obscured: they are at work through the distinctions drawn between the cultural competencies attached to different class positions.” Class as a social categorisation therefore differs from other key categories in the sense that one can more easily aspire to rise in class position as well as more easily fear a loss of class-based privilege. As a result, while class is partly ascribed at birth, it is also achieved through an ongoing process of identity work, both for those placed in oppressed and in privileged positions.

## 2.4.2 The Middle Classes

In the 1970s, as Nielson (2007) notes, neo-Marxist scholars became particularly concerned with the increase in “middle class” wage-earner positions that were ambiguously located between labour and capital (Wright, 1976). On the one hand, these were waged positions and therefore proletarian; but on the other hand, such “workers” performed capitalist functions. In order to explain this contradiction, Olin Wright (1976; 1985) explained class in terms of its relationship to exploitation rather than capital per se.

In formal Marxist analysis of class, the vast majority of the middle classes are proletarian, in the sense that they do not own the means of production and rely upon wages. However, the nature of the nature of the labour carried out by the middle classes distinguishes it from the

greater proletariat, due to middle class labour's autonomy and potential function as an agent of capital (Nielson, 2007). As a result, professionals occupy a unique position within exploitation relations because, while they are not capitalists, they are less vulnerable to exploitation than much of the proletariat (Olin Wright, 1976; 1985). In order to capitalise on the scarcity of certain skills, owners of the means of production must essentially buy loyalty through the alignment of such workers interests with those of the capitalist classes through, for example, the provision of ownership stakes, delegated authority over their fellow workers and autonomy over their work. For these reasons professionals tend to have a level of income and security allowing for the likelihood of a high level of capital accumulation in the form of, for example, personal assets.

#### 2.4.4 Class Mobility – Being and Becoming Middle Class

While the possibility of social mobility, specifically social climbing, may be overstated by the “strivers vs skivers” rhetoric of present day Britain (Valentine and Harris, 2014), in which hard work is rewarded through improved social and economic status, downward and upward changes in class status do occur for individuals. In academic literature, the experiences of working class female academics entering the middle class world of university life are well documented (Reay, 1997; Walkerdine, 2010). These accounts show the way that “class positions cannot just be taken up and left, even if one has the means to do so: class is embedded in people's history” (Lawler, 1999:6). The influence of one's past on one's present shapes individual subjectivities, impacting on their attitudes, taste and their understanding of their own present day classed experiences (Jones, 2003).

The issue of class mobility highlights the way that class identities are relational and temporal but also achieved through identity work. The individual who changes their class position does not simply become middle class with all the taste and dispositions that that may involve at the point of accepting a “middle class” job. They may instead find themselves partly occupying two class positions but fitting into neither (Lawler, 1999; Mellor et al., 2014). This unclear class identity is termed by Lawler (1999) as “disrupted habitus”, and will inevitably lead to identity work in which individuals attempt to redefine themselves in alignment to dominant middle class discourses. The influence of past and possible future class identities, and of different class experiences and understandings, illustrate the

complexity of class and may mean that individuals occupying the same nominal class position at a given time may have very different conceptualisations of their class identity.

Despite some examination of the lived experiences of upward social mobility in academic literature, those who are born and remain middle class have typically received scant attention. As such middle class women are rarely problematised in feminist theory (Reay, 1996). Where scholars have considered how the middle classes construct and negotiate their class identities, it has been reported that morality and respectability play a key part in their identity work – however, rather than respectability on their part, lack of respectability of others is more significant. The assertion of difference as a mode of identity work can be used to reinforce the idea of the middle class norm (Lawler, 1999), allowing the middle classes the sense of individualism and achievement that allows them to construct themselves as more agentic than their working class others. Bourdieu (1987) also refers to the middle classes' judgemental gaze, suggesting that the middle classes use a “neutralizing distance” in order to assert themselves as outside of class, normalising middle class ideology and values and marking a distinction between them and those that get carried away by their emotions. In this way, middle class values become associated with rationality and intellect and the working class others become linked with base emotions and physicality (Skeggs, 2004).

The lack of examination of middle class identity work and subjectivity leaves the middle classes as the invisible norm, unchallenged in its domination of societal values. Furthermore, this neglect homogenises the middle classes and consequently risks trivialising identity struggle at the very intersection of oppression and privilege, which may shed light on how privilege is gained and maintained.

#### 2.4.5 Class at Work

Working life is hugely influential when it comes to class identity. Professional status, wages and work conditions are all linked to class (Holvino 2010; Ravenswood and Harris, 2016) and consequently organisations are an integral part of how class structures are developed and maintained.

Organisations are critical to the development and regulation of class identity. Class mobility is attained or prevented, in most circumstances, through access to and progression through organisational and professional hierarchies. As such, organisations act as gatekeepers to the middle and upper classes.

Individuals' class background is also significant in entering and "fitting in" to a profession. In McDowell's (1997) study of the banking sector in the UK, the embodiment of middle and upper class identities was crucial to how individuals gained access to the profession - perspective employees were deemed able to fit in or otherwise based on class markers. Participants in McDowell's study were also able to use class and educational background (attendance at elite universities) as cultural capital facilitating success in the banking environment. This demonstrates how the class identity of institutions and individuals intersect in the world of work, (re)creating and reinforcing class privilege.

Educational achievement itself is often used as an indicator of class status (Piasna et al. 2013). Organisations gate keep roles which are associated with professional (and middle class) status through the overt setting of minimum qualifications such as a degree. However, maintaining class privilege for some can also be seen in recruitment strategies of organisations which target graduates from specific (elite) universities. In addition, middle class and masculine attributes are often prized and seen as particularly suited to managerial and professional positions (Witz and Marshall, 2003:41).

Elite universities themselves draw more students from the middle and upper classes and those students with such a background are then more able to "play the game" (Bourdieu, 1986) by using class knowledge to capitalise on university experiences and education in a way that will lead to maintenance of their privileged class position (Bathmaker et al., 2013).

While organisations are significant players in class identity construction, class identity is not produced within organisations alone. Macro capitalist structures limit access to resources (such as elite education) for some (Berry and Bell, 2012) and access to resources at a micro-level is one way class is enacted within organisations (Acker, 2006). In this way, just as gender identity cannot be thoroughly explored without considering public and private spheres, class identity must be considered in both arenas. While rarely discussed in studies



of work-life balance (Ravensworth and Harris, 2016), class is a significant factor in the management of such concerns, particularly for women (Acker, 2006). Managerial control and access to flexibility relate to class status (Acker, 2006; Weigt and Solomon, 2008) and resources outside of working life (spouse's income; family support) impact heavily on choices made around issues such as childcare. For many working-class women, continuing in a lower paid role – even if that role could lead to significant career progression and in turn upward class mobility – is not an option due to the cost of childcare.

Knowledge is situated, and consequently lived experiences of class will inevitably impact on decision making, including when it comes to pursuit of entry into a profession or career progression. As Holland, (1999:477) points out, class is an obstacle “to reflexivity, laden with ideological traps which seek to narrow our vision”. We see this in Hebson's 2009 study which highlighted the classed nature of women's aspirations. In addition to uneven access to resources, “classed thinking and feeling” (Reay, 2005:913) constrained aspirations for the working class women. Feelings of pride, and fears of guilt and shame linked to class identity, impacted on experiences at work and consequent career decision making, meaning that while careers may offer the potential to gain class privilege (Giddens, 1991; Grey, 1994), working class women shied away from opportunities that middle class women felt able to seize.

#### 2.4.6 Researching Class

The study of class has long been considered to be challenging, complex and elusive. As Ball (2003) has pertinently pointed out, class identity research has been “beset with problems of measurement, method and conceptualisation” (pp175). Social scientists have developed theories of how gender and racial identities are developed, negotiated and maintained, but there are no comparable theories to explain how individuals develop a sense of their position with the class system, as members of a class collective or of themselves as having classed identities (Jones, 2003).

The slippery nature of class itself (Bottero, 2004), resulting in unclear definitions of what class really means, creates methodological uncertainty for researchers grappling with class as a key category. Some researchers have used quantifiable definitions, such as income,

occupation, or property ownership to establish class (Marshall et al. 2005), but these measurements, while perhaps being indicative of class status, impose the researcher's own understanding of the meaning of class onto the subjects of such a study. As a result they limit the ability of the research to uncover the meanings individuals assign to class, or how they experience this status in their lives.

Savage et al.'s recent (2013) and much publicised study on social class in the UK developed a more complex, but still quantifiable, tool, by incorporating Bourdieusian concepts of social and cultural capital into a questionnaire to allow for analysis of current class positions in the UK. The study received significant public interest, primarily as a result of its challenge to traditional class structures, but it only provided a snapshot of class at one given time and therefore failed to capture changes in class positionality at the micro level. Due to the changing nature of class, a full exploration must incorporate a way to capture changes to individuals' class positionality.

Problems of definition are exacerbated by the problem of imposing class status onto research participants. In studies focussing primarily on class, sample selection is highly problematic, with individuals increasingly less likely to self-identify as a certain class (Skeggs, 2004), and in the event they do, it is unclear whether they will share their definition with the researcher. This issue is compounded by neoliberalism, which has blurred understanding of both class and wider collective identities, emphasising the reflexive self and in doing so rendering traditional categories such as race and class less significant (Skeggs, 2004).

Individuals may have similar characteristics to others of the same social class but will not necessarily identify as members of the same class (Dawson, 2012). This dis-identification further highlights the relational nature of class (Savage and Devine, 2013) with people identifying what they are not more clearly than positively identifying themselves with a specific group. This dis-identification means that simple, direct questions on the topic of class identities are unlikely to yield much useable data.

It is also important to recognise that for qualitative researchers, more open styles of questioning may prove problematic. The nature of class itself, with its overt links to privilege and oppression and implicit links to respectability and morality, makes class an uncomfortable topic for discussion. With the middle classes defensive and the working

classes embarrassed (Mellor et al., 2013), researchers seeking to uncover classed identity can rarely rely on explicit acknowledgement of class positionality. Researchers must therefore seek ways of uncovering the hidden narratives of class, making explicit the implicit nature of participants' narratives through analysis of the life situations that bring class to the surface, both materially but also in terms of identity.

To tackle issues of discomfort and power inequity in the interview, feminist research methodologies often prefer class matching (in the same way as with, for example, gender matching), especially when researching those in more vulnerable positions, such as the working class (Mellor et al., 2014). Scholars (Reay, 1996; Skeggs 1997) have considered their working class backgrounds to allow more in-depth, empathetic understanding of issues affecting the working class women in their research.

While understanding class mobility and changes in class identity may be significant in providing some understanding of power dynamics, it remains unclear whether class matching (between academics and the working classes) is, ultimately, a realistic proposition. Self-identifying as working class appears to be the preserve of academics and others who occupy positions of relative power in society (Mellor et al., 2014). Academics and researchers self-positioning as working class risk ignoring issues of status and material differences in wealth (Mellor et al. 2014). In doing so, not only does such scholarship downplay ongoing power dynamics, it also risks patronising participants, assuming that their own awareness of such dynamics is limited to, for example, recognising an accent, and does not take into account titles such as "doctor" or "professor" which in their very use denote status and power not readily available to the working classes.

It is also important to recognise the significance of context, and the influence of institutions, as performances of class are made during the research event itself (Skeggs et al. 2008). The research, and therefore the interview, is inextricably linked to the institution of academia; and academia, in turn, is associated with power, privilege and higher class status. During an interview both the participant and the researcher will respond to their respective perception of the other's relative position within the social hierarchy, and the interview involves two sets of subjectivities, that of the interviewer and the interviewee (Berger Gluck and Patai, 1991). The interaction of interviewing will, therefore, in itself, create more

awareness of class identity for some and allow others (those sharing class identity with the interviewer) the comfort of a shared, but unspoken, understanding. It is for this reason that standard forms of interviewing alone will be unable to fully capture class identity and the way in which it changes over time or within differing contexts.

In summary, while class as a category has been extensively discussed in academia, it remains an ambiguous and problematic categorisation. As Mellor et al. (2014:136) point out, “discussions about class research methodology have only very recently begun to emerge”. Significantly for this research, there remains very limited discussion of how to research the middle classes, or those with class privilege. Academics, including intersectional scholars, prefer to research the more “exotic” intersections (Verloo, 2014) – those which represent difference or oppression. However, to overlook the intersection of privilege and oppression is to overlook power relations. This in turn leads to the enhancement of positions of privilege (Mellor et al. 2014) enjoyed by those, including academics, who hold such positions and stand to gain from – and indeed believe in – the invisibility of such privilege.

## 2.5 Identity Intersections

While the following discussion of identity has been primarily concerned with issues of gender and class, as has been implied, the multitude of interacting identities (including, but not exclusively, race, disability, age, sexuality) are all significant in shaping lived experiences and life outcomes. Acker (2006:422) highlights that “gender is fundamentally complicated by class, race/ethnicity and/or other differences”; and this is equally true in reverse, and considering all other forms of “difference”. As such, using only a single category of analysis would lead to oversimplification of issues, or even to the silencing of some areas of inequality that have significant impact on individuals’ lives (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012).

Further to the importance of considering multiple factors of disadvantage is the fact that inequalities are not experienced in an additive form (Hannock, 2007) but instead categories are interactive (Collins, 1990) creating unique outcomes and experiences. Individual agency also plays a role, as an individual’s position (the multiple categories by which one is identified) and positioning (the identities used to construct a sense of self) interact.

Intersectionality can allow researchers to consider all these factors (Atewologun and Sealy, 2014) and also to acknowledge that such interactions may support identity work in some contexts and challenge it in others.

### 2.5.1 Intersections of Privilege and Oppression within Organisations

As has been discussed, organisations provide a platform for viewing identity work.

Organisations also can be seen to be composed of various and interacting structures and regimes that confer power onto some, and deny others (Acker, 2006). Within feminist approaches to organisational research, there has been most focus on the intersections between identity categories most associated with oppression. However, this exclusive focus on disadvantage renders those with privilege invisible (Collinson and Hearn, 1994).

Furthermore, privileged identities have frequently been conflated through use of terms such as “the white, middle class” (Levine-Rasky, 2007), suggesting a homogeneity of privilege and consequently understating the complexity of multiple identities and power structures.

Most organisations have some level of defined hierarchies which publicly position individuals into positions of power relative to other organisational members. This may occur both vertically – in terms of hierarchical position – and, in more subtle ways, horizontally, across professions and occupations. This organisational segregation not only confers power but also serves to legitimise inequality. Within critical organisational studies, the emphasis on privileged organisation members being white, male, middle class and heterosexual further reinforces binary concepts of privilege. However, as Collins (2000) points out, very few (if any) individuals occupy positions purely of power or oppression – there are rarely “pure” victims – and so to begin to unpick complex power relations within organisation some attention must be given to what Atewologun and Sealy (2014) term the “sometimes privileged”.

The fact that some individuals occupy precarious positions of privilege comes as a result of that fact that organisational power cannot be seen as a simply a result of hierarchical or professional status. Wider social identity categories also deny or grant power, for example male over female, or white over non-white (Atewologun and Sealy, 2014). In this way the

intersections between multiple identities and multiple positions will result in qualitative differences in how privilege is experienced, just as is the case with oppression.

Atewologun and Sealy (2014) point out that over time, privilege, both professional and occupational, is developed, attained, and secured in various ways. However, for some groups the maintenance of such privilege may be more difficult than for others.

Privilege has often been associated with a lack of recognition or acknowledgement of one's own privilege (Harraway, 1988, McIntosh, 2010). However, in studies focussing on atypical entrants to organisational elites, participants often report being acutely aware of their privilege and the work that was done in order to achieve it (Tatli and Özbilgin 2012; Atewologun and Sealy 2014). Reay et al. (2009), for example, demonstrate how working class students openly recognise the sacrifices they made to achieve the privilege of attendance at an elite university.

Ely and Rhode (2010) point to the fact that elite women leaders experience unique struggles through the intersection of their privileged and masculinised position in the work place and their feminised disadvantaged place in wider society, while Puwar (2001) highlights how for black senior civil servants, operating in an overwhelmingly white, male, middle-to-upper class environment, "the process of "becoming" or performing upper/middle class etiquette is simultaneously a performance of a particular variant of whiteness and a disavowal of blackness" (2001:663).

These brief examples suggest that even those in positions of high power and privilege may also experience ongoing struggles which mean that allowing their voices to be heard can still contribute to "knowledge from below" (Calás and Smircich, 2009:6) when below is seen as relative and the contextuality and simultaneity of privilege and oppression is acknowledged.

## 2.6 The UK Civil Service and Professional Identity

The workforce of the UK Civil Service, as part of the wider public sector, has some unique characteristics. The workforce has been commonly characterised as having different motivators to their private sector counterparts – "public service motivation" or "public

service ethos” has been associated with altruism, higher levels of collectivism, belief in democracy and a commitment to fairness (Gabris and Simo, 1995; Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler, 2002; Diefenbach, 2009). Thomas and Davies (2005) point to the vocational orientation of public sector workers as a key part of their identity, noting a reliance on specialist skills and training in areas such as medicine, education and social policy to provide a service characterised by “quality” rather than “cost” (Duncan, 2001).

In terms of professional identity, the UK Civil Service provides a unique platform for viewing identity work. As discussed under section 2.2.1 “Identity and Organisations”, professional identity can be seen as a shared set of resources that individuals draw upon to inform their behaviours and develop and sustain their practices (Healy, 2009). Professional identity relies upon a clear ethical framework; in the case of the Civil Service, Horton (2006) suggests that the “public service ethos” can be considered as such, with values such as integrity, honesty, impartiality and objectivity providing the foundational principles for civil servants’ conduct. Ensuring that individuals can work within this set of values can be key to providing the authenticity required for positive identity work. In addition to these overarching principles, the UK Civil Service comprises numerous specialist professions, each also operating under profession specific guidelines which also provide identity resources to workers.

As with all organisations, the Civil Service plays an active part in the regulation of civil servants’ identities. The Civil Service has long considered the selection and training of new recruits (particularly graduate recruits and those identified as high potential) to involve factor beyond the identification of knowledge and skills, including assessing values and motivations as key indicators of suitability (Horton, 2006). As a consequence, just as in other elite professions such as medicine, early career socialisation for such recruits has involved the development of graduates’ identities and sense of self as part of the profession in which they belong (Healy, 2009). Part of this socialisation also strengthens values associated with public sector motivation, leading to certain types of work and outcomes being seen by employees as holding greater legitimacy than others.

### 2.6.1. The UK Civil Service Today – New Public Management, Identity and Resistance

The introduction of New Public Management (NPM) in the public sector, has been the topic of some debate, with authors suggesting that this has led to work intensification and generally deteriorating conditions for public sector workers (Bach and Given 2008; Hemmings, 2011). The drive towards managerialism and the prizing of entrepreneurial values associated with NPM signifies a prolonged period of change in the Civil Service. With this in mind, NPM can be seen as a trigger for identity work. The dissemination of NPM discourse within the public sector has altered power/dependency relations, challenged social expectations and altered the available range of actions for certain groups of workers.

NPM, with its promotion of managerial prerogatives, increased employment insecurity and segmentation, has been described as a key proletarianisation strategy applied to professional fields in the public sector (Nielson, 2007). Braverman (1974) pointed to managerialism as a means of proletarianisation of professional roles, suggesting that the knowledge and expertise of professionals was increasingly rationalised and reformed in a manner reminiscent of Taylor's scientific management, to would allow for greater control of labour processes. A key component of such proleterianisation or deprofessionalisation is the association with removal of autonomy and judgement from professions.

In the context of NPM, one clear example of the removal of autonomy from professionals can be seen in the setting of prescriptive targets and their links to performance management (Heery, 1998). Healy (2009) suggests performance management under NPM also challenges the distinctions between professions, focussing on competencies rather than professional frameworks. This focus on assessing competencies through considering individuals' abilities to complete standardised tasks or display certain generic behaviours, has arguably led to deprofessionalisation in some areas of the public sector.

The quantification of working practices has become entwined with performance management strategies employed within the Civil Service and the Public Sector more widely. Under NPM, performance related pay (PRP) has become part and parcel of performance management systems. French and Marsden (2002) report that by the late 1990s virtually all civil servants' performance was linked to pay in one form or another.



Despite such widespread adoption of PRP, the consensus amongst academic commentators has been overwhelmingly negative, with Heery (1998) describing its introduction as a “central element of the managerial assault on public service professionals” (1998:74). PRP has been introduced via performance appraisal mechanisms that tend to conflate the meeting of predetermined quantitative targets with overall job performance, allowing managers to monetarily reward those said to have achieved good or exceptional performance over the reporting period (see French and Marsden, 2002; Marsden 2004).

The introduction of PRP in the Civil Service has also been linked to demotivation and reduced levels of commitment amongst staff. While French and Marsden’s (2002) study found that the introduction of PRP in the Inland Revenue did increase productivity, it appeared that this was not due to increased motivation but instead due to increased levels of stress. In earlier studies, both Pollitt (1993) and Makinson (2000) had asserted that PRP in the public sector was demotivational and divisive; and this was supported by French and Marsden’s findings: Inland Revenue managers themselves questioned the sustainability of such a system, and reported negative behavioural outcomes such as decreased staff-management cooperation and collaboration across teams.

The introduction of PRP can be seen to put particular pressure on managers in the Civil Service. Described by Marsden (2004) as the “weak link” in the application of such a system, managers are under pressure: from staff to be lenient with the use of such a system; and from the organisation, given their own position within the system. The drive towards managerialism and performance monitoring has left public sector professionals as both “subject and object of the disciplinary gaze” (Thomas and Davies, 2005:242), making the required adoption and acceptance of managerial concerns and values by such workers problematic, and resistance to such systems likely. Marsden (2004) highlights the misreporting of management information by Employment Services managers as an example of managers colluding with staff in order to subvert performance management systems.

Perhaps to counter such problems, at the higher levels of public sector organisations, a significant strategy of NPM has been to turn professionals into professional managers (Evetts, 2011), thereby increasing the workforces’ flexibility through prizing generic management skills rather than the profession specific technical skills. However, individuals

and groups have some ability to define their own realities within organisations, drawing upon available social discourses (Humphrey and Brown, 2002). Simms (2009) suggests that within in the public sector there is a prevalence of narratives that undermine the legitimacy of management as a profession through establishing a belief that management roles remain the reserve of those who are forced into them or professionals no longer capable of successfully fulfilling their technical roles. For this reason, professional identities in the Civil Service may be associated with resistance and a key part of understanding employment relations in the sector.

Within the public sector, resistance to New Public Management has been shown by various professions (Bezes et al., 2012). However, it appears that those professions with relatively rigid occupational boundaries supported by strong technical knowledge requirements are better positioned to resist than those with less clearly defined roles (Healy, 2009). In the context of the UK Civil Service, it appears that tax professionals have been better able to resist such changes than senior managers in other government departments. One clear example is the Home Office, where the role of immigration officials is subject to greater levels of change dependent on political ideologies of the governing parties. The vulnerability of professions may also vary dependent on access to professional associations and profession specific trade union representation, which can act as a professional identity resource and provide opportunities for profession specific career development, thereby ensuring the availability of the desired social discourse.

In addition to issues of professional identity, NPM is also problematic due to the nature of Civil Service work. Barry et al (2006) have argued that the introduction of managerial practices does not cater for competing priorities in the public sector, and even that some managerial practices introduced from the private sector were fundamentally flawed (in the sense that they failed to achieve stated aims). Meanwhile, Hoggett et al. (2006) suggest that due to the adoption of NPM public servants have been deprived of the institutional support that allowed them to navigate the ethical dilemmas associated with work in the public sector, where, for example, the work public servants are asked to do conflicts with personal or ideological beliefs. While it appears that the traditional public service ethos remains an available discourse for many public sector workers (Thomas and Linstead, 2002; Thomas and

Davies, 2005; Horton, 2006), some of the fundamental elements are increasingly challenged. For example, NPM can be seen to impact upon the way value is attributed to work (Hoggett et al., 2006), with quantitative measures being seen as of greater value than qualitative improvements (and as such some professionals, especially those with a scientific, positivist knowledge based, may gain in status (Heery, 2009)). However, these value systems may be contradictory to ideas of professionalism held dear by public sector workers and may thus create ongoing challenges to their working identities, especially as their pursuit of their own gains begins increasingly to conflict with their public service values.

Finally, external factors are likely to have a significant impact on identity work within the Civil Service. Meyer and Hammerschmid (2006:107) suggest that “new social identities need to be available and enacted by the actors”. The enactment of available identities relies upon positive identity work, which in turn is linked to external narratives surrounding the available identities. This becomes problematic in the context of NPM, in which the private sector is prized and through which there has been a “pathologization of public sector organisations and those working within them as “problems” to be solved by this new approach” (Hall et al. 2013:175). Research has shown the negative impact this “pathologization” of public sector workers can have on identity work. Mayer and Hammerschmid (2006) highlight the ways in which external pressures such as negative media coverage can hinder positive identity construction amongst senior civil servants.

## 2.7 Conclusion

Identity is fluid and can be seen as an ongoing process of identity work; the existence of multiple, overlapping, co-existent identities can mean that individuals struggle to align potentially contradictory identities in order to form a coherent life narrative. While individual identities are subject to individual agency, identities are also assigned by society, and organisations play a key role in ascribing and regulating identities.

Class and gender are a key part of structural inequalities; individuals experience their working lives through a gendered and classed lens, and the identity work they perform in this context necessarily reflects the norms, mores and prejudices of the society in which they live. Other identities are significant in impacting on the lived experiences of

participants in this study, but gender and class appear to have the most salient and profound impact on these unionised women in the UK Civil Service.

The ubiquitous and entrenched nature of class and gender identities (both ascribed and self-determined) influences career choices, both union and professional; and it can also limit, or indeed increase, opportunities for some. Capturing identities which exist within the public and private sphere is essential to understanding motivations and decision making.

Finally, the UK Civil Service – within which all of the women in this study work – serves, as does any other organisation, to regulate and develop professional and occupational identities. The context of these women's work, including the impact of New Public Management in the public sector, and their experience of resistance in a trade union context, determines how they understand their working lives and their professional and union identities.

This research draws upon the experiences of professional women in positions of influence and power; yet for complex and multi-faceted reasons they exist at the intersection of privilege and oppression. The tumultuous environment of current public sector change exposes the nature of their identity work, and its links to participation: both in careers; but also, significantly, in trade union activity.

# Chapter 3: Industrial Relations, Trade Unions and Diversity

## 3.1 Introduction

This chapter positions this research within the field of industrial relations. The chapter starts by highlighting the need for gender research in industrial relations, in section 3.2, before moving on to discuss the roles and functions of trade unions, their current operating environment, and the drive for trade union renewal, in section 3.3.

Sections 3.4 and 3.5 present current understandings of membership motivation and participation, while section 3.6 discusses the development of white collar trade unions, alongside the relationship that professional and managerial employees have with their unions. For the most part, chapters 2 and 3 concentrate on a discussion of the most up-to-date literature and the therefore current understanding, but the lack of recent interest in white collar unionisation has resulted in section 3.6 presenting a somewhat historical perspective of white collar trade unions.

Section 3.7 returns to the questions of identity, class and gender, but considers this in an industrial relations context. The changing nature of the workforce has resulted in an increasing need for trade unions to consider what have been termed “new workers’ (such as women, economic migrants, or those on non-standard working contracts) in relation to the discussion of trade union renewal (Moore, 2011; Benyon, 2011). However, today’s generation of new entrants to the workforce are unlikely to consider such groups as “new workers” and this, combined with socio-economic changes, may mean that this generation stands to experience working life differently. The intersection of youth and femininity may create particular barriers and as such the chapter includes a specific section focused on this area.

## 3.2 Gendering Industrial Relations

The field of Industrial Relations (IR) can be considered a political and “practically orientated” (Heery et al., 2008:1) field, due to its roots as a movement focusing on problems arising from the conditions of workers in a capitalist economy. According to Kaufman (2004:2), IR “arose from a conviction that conditions of work and the relations between the bossed and

the bosses could be improved progressively” though raised awareness and education resulting from social scientific studies. Early IR tended to have a liberal focus and was rejected by Marxist scholars who considered the removal of the capitalist system the only true way to improve workers conditions (Kaufman, 2004; Frege, 2008). However, Marxist theory has had extensive influence as the field has developed (Frege, 2008).

Central concepts of present day IR are still concerned with questions around workers’ interests (and how they might define such interests), power and conflict. Blyton and Turnbull (1994:31) describe IR’s primary focus as “the creation of an economic surplus, the co-existence of conflict and cooperation, the indeterminate nature of the exchange relationship and the asymmetry of power”. A key feature of IR as opposed to the (currently more dominant) field of human resource management is the prominence of pluralism; this, according to Kelly (1998), allows IR to prioritise research that is not necessarily aligned with the dominant interests of the state or employers. While traditional areas of IR scholarly discussion focused on trade unions, collective bargaining, and issues of mobilising the workforce, the decline of trade unions has raised concerns within the field about its on-going relevance. Today it is “widely accepted that IR covers all aspects of the employment relationship and the influences upon it and it draws upon theoretical interdisciplinary perspectives including economics, law, management, politics, sociology and psychology” (Holgate et al., 2012:324).

While IR may draw upon theoretical perspectives from other disciplines, common criticisms levelled at IR scholarship include that it lacks depth of conceptual analysis (Kelly, 1998)s; and that its limited scope undermines its ability to build concepts and influence policy (Dickens, 1997). Perhaps the most limiting features of IR research are its tendency to see the worker as a homogeneous group (Wajcman, 2000) and to reduce the concept of power to “haves” and “have nots” in terms of economic capital and control over the employment relationship between employers and employees. As a consequence, gender based power relations have been, and to a certain extent remain, outside the scope of IR (Wajcman, 2000).

The idea of “the worker” is central to IR but there has been little discussion of what makes the worker; that is to say, what factors influence participation in the labour market. As Holgate et al. (2006:312) explain, “IR has more often tended to focus on economic

relationships, with the (undifferentiated) worker as the primary unit of analysis, neglecting the intersection of other social and cultural processes such as ethnicity and gender that also affect participation in the labour force.”

The concept of worker inevitably lies in the understanding of what constitutes work; as Wajcman (2000) argues, IR draws a very clear distinction between home and work, and the private and the public. This limited construction of “work”, ignoring domestic or unpaid work, limits the utility of IR’s explanations of gendered and non-gendered roles. Furthermore, Forrest (1993) suggests that “as a discipline IR is deeply committed to a gendered construction of women and women’s work”. These assumptions have meant that just as in organisations, where the “abstract worker” (Acker, 1992) was male and unencumbered by domestic responsibilities, the “abstract trade unionist” is also a male worker, free to enjoy full participation and consequent representation by trade unions while “differences in how IR regimes affect service workers, non-manual workers and in particular women workers are only given cursory attention” (Rubery and Fagan, 1995:210).

Further to this problematic conceptualisation of the worker, Wajcman (2000) argues that IR over relies on quantitative, structural analysis of employment relations, leaving little room for human agency. Within this framework, women are considered only from the perspective of their situation in precarious work or at lower levels of the labour market. This does not allow for the idea that women may experience the labour market differently from men. Women’s participation in trade unions has, however, frequently been explained using essentialist ideas of female traits or characteristics, while masculinity alone is very rarely considered a variable in itself. Instead men are seen as a heterogeneous group, and afforded more agency.

The British Universities’ Industrial Relations Association (BUIRA), the main British academic association in the field of employment relations, has also been criticised for its lack of engagement and responsiveness to issues of equality and diversity (Holgate et al. 2012). The membership composition of BUIRA is not dissimilar to traditional images of trade unionists – the old criticism of trade unionists being “male, pale and stale” (that is, male, white and middle aged) could equally be applied to those studying them, as represented by BUIRA (Ledwith, 2012; Holgate et al. 2012). This lack of diversity has arguably led to

marginalisation of research considering, for example, ethnicity or gender as a specialist interest: Hansen (2002:192) describes a “tendency to “quarantine” women’s work in general, and all gender research specifically, as something only of interest for and contributing to gender research” through separating work at conferences or in academic journals on this basis. As a consequence, it appears that much IR research lacks an explanation of gender as well as an analytical tool to capture the complexities of the modern day workforce (Forrest, 1993).

In order to address this lack of conceptualisation, some researchers (Brah and Phoenix, 2004; Holgate et al., 2006; Walby et al., 2012; Anthias, 2012;) in the field (particularly female researchers) have turned to intersectionality. Holgate et al. (2006) point out that “gender cannot be understood in isolation from other social constructions such as “race” and class and this concept of intersectionality can be essential in interpreting the lived experience of the researched”, further suggesting that intersectionality is able to “capture the regularity of patterns of inequality (which post-structuralist accounts are unable to explain) and the variability of how these are lived” (p.315). Uncovering the complexities in this way would represent a move away from the single-fold analysis of traditional IR research towards a recognition of intersections, of privilege and oppression which can exist simultaneously. This richer understanding could enhance not only IR research in the academic field but also further its ability to act as an instrumental discipline.

This chapter explores academic literature pertaining to the development of trade unions and their relationship with a changing work force. It ends by considering current understanding of how, and why, individual workers become trade union members and how that membership can develop into active participation in trade unions.

### 3.3 Trade Unions as Organisations

Trade unions are, themselves, organisations; and it is essential to consider how they are structured and how they operate. This section considers the purpose of trade unions, using a historical perspective to develop ideas of what it means to be a trade union today, and considering contemporary issues of workforce change and trade renewal.



### 3.3.1 Trade Union Purpose

The definition and purpose of trade unions has remained fairly constant throughout their history. Webb and Webb's (1920) definition of trade unions as a "continuous association of wage earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving conditions of their working lives". Despite significant changes in the political economy in which trade unions operate, the Webbs' definition is still reflected in modern statements from advisory bodies. ACAS (2005, online in 2018), for example, describe a trade union as: "An organisation of workers created to protect and advance the interests of its members by negotiating agreements with employers on pay and conditions of work. Unions may also provide legal advice, financial assistance, sickness benefits and education facilities." The lack of change can be seen as both clarity of purpose but perhaps also as being indicative of a lack of responsiveness to changing circumstances.

The most common way in which trade unions seek to regulate employment relations is through the establishment and enactment of collective bargaining agreements (Hyman, 2001). Collective bargaining is centred around the idea that workers hold more power as a collective than as individuals (Lewis et al. 2003). The common conceptualisation of collectivism in trade unions, which has guided what is included in collective bargaining agreements, has had a lasting impact on the trade union's representation of certain groups (for example, white collar workers, women, migrant workers) and has perhaps hindered trade unions' responsiveness to changes in the political and economic climate.

Hyman (2001; 2007) sees trade unions as having differing functions, which vary across countries but which can be broadly seen as: the fundamental collective bargaining function, which occurs at national, sector level; and secondly as social partners, which attempt to influence the macro economic and social policies of the nation. In some countries, such as the UK, trade unions were particularly influential in shaping social policies in times of Labour governments: having been instrumental in the party's establishment and maintaining links with it, trade unions held some sway over Labour government policies (Fairbrother, 2000). The role of social partnership for trade unions has been seen as a response to the weakening of their influence over employee relations due to increased neoliberalism (Ackers and Payne, 1998), although trade unions have had a historical interest in some

social policies. Trade unions existed before the development of national welfare systems (Hyman, 2001) and therefore welfare provision was within the remit of trade unions. This historical involvement with welfare can still be seen in trade unions' involvement with broader political debates, especially in areas like welfare, which are seen as relating to class (Johnston et al., 2012).

### 3.3.2 Trade Union History and the Development of a Trade Union Agenda

Trade unions were initially established as craft unions which served to protect workers with specific skills and increase the value of such skills through controlling entrance to the craft itself (Cobble, 1990; Hunt, 2011). The number of apprentices taken on was limited; and thus control over the employment relationship was held by the craft unions. Employers who found themselves boycotted for not meeting the agreed working conditions could not find replacement workers; and they were left with little choice but to acquiesce to the union's demands (McIlroy, 1995). For less skilled workforces, where employers could more easily replace workers, industrial unions developed, starting with the Miners' Federation of Great Britain in 1889 and continuing to spread to the steel and iron industries (McIlroy, 1995:8). These industries, generally considered the heartland of British Trade Unionism, provided trade unions with access to large numbers of potential members – in the 1950s, for example, 40% of employment in the UK was within manufacturing (Philpott, 2012b) – and trade union density (the percentage of a workforce belonging to a trade union) reflected this, with a density of 44.5% in 1955 (Waddington, 2003). The membership of trade unions reflected the profile of the labour market at the time: manufacturing employed the white, working class men who are still, today, often seen as the archetypal trade union members.

A combination of trade union political goals and their historical membership base has had, and continues to have, influence on trade union activities today. A trade union agenda has developed from a discourse that focuses on a class struggle – specifically the struggle between workers and owners (Moore and Wright, 2012; Kirton and Healy, 2013a). Workers are seen as a homogeneous group with a shared set of needs, leading to a sense of

solidarity that can trigger mobilisation when necessary. Hyman (2001:4) states that “whether or not they endorse an ideology of class division and class opposition, trade unions cannot escape a role as the agencies of class”.

A focus on class collectivism as strength is one of the most prominent and enduring messages from the trade union movement. For example, Waddington and Whitston’s (1997) research has suggested that despite the growth in individualism in the workplace, collectivism remained the most common reason for trade union membership, and it has been shown that this belief in collectivism is shared across membership. Similarly, earlier claims that women and part time workers did not share a belief in trade unionism have been proved incorrect (Booth, 1986; Walters, 2002; Stirling, 2005; Kirton and Healy, 2012). However, while class remains a constant in trade union discourses, the conceptualisation of class appears single-fold, with no consideration of how experiences of, and identification with, a class may vary.

Furthermore, conceptualisations of collectivism based on class created stagnation in participation, as the trade union agenda failed to encompass the concerns of growing groups of workers. White collar workers were not included as part of the trade union agenda due to the belief that such their greater career options reduced their collective consciousness; women were not initially included in bargaining as they were seen as peripheral, uncommitted workers (Booth, 1986; Crompton and Harris, 1998); and immigrant workers were often seen as temporary and a potential threat to workers’ wages and jobs (Penninx and Rosblad, 2000). As a result, what constituted “the collective” remained narrow. As changes in the global political economy took hold, the limited inclusivity of trade unions would have consequences in terms of power and influence.

### 3.3.3 Trade Union Renewal

Trade unions developed as national institutions and in most nations became prominent in manufacturing, heavy industry and the public sector (Kelly, 2008). However, from the 1970s onwards the nature of international capital changed significantly (Fairbrother and Hammer, 2005) – the role of the state changed in many countries, with a drive towards neoliberalism calling for a reduced state. Transnational corporations gained increasing prominence, and

global bodies such as the World Bank meant changes to labour processes that posed challenges for trade unions (ibid.)

These developments were seen clearly in the UK, where the composition of the workforce and political landscape changed dramatically – the traditional union heartlands of manufacturing and heavy industry declined and an increasing service sector, offering part-time or more flexible working hours, expanded women’s access to the workforce. Increasing migration in the years running up to the 1980s had also resulted in a more diverse workforce. In addition to such changes, British trade unions were exposed to aggressive attacks from the government, weakening their economic influence as bargaining over pay and conditions grew increasingly difficult.

However, trade unions were slow to respond to this changed economic, social and political landscape. In particular, trade unions traditionally considered “non-standard” contracts such as part-time working a threat to traditional (male) forms of employment (Walters, 2002); were historically opposed to increasing female participation in the workplace, fearing this would undermine the idea of a family wage (Hunt, 2011); and saw migrant workers recruited into industries that trade unions represented as a threat to “traditional” workers (Penninx and Rooseblan, 2000). All of these “new workers” were, as a result, given limited voice on trade union agendas, even as their overall share of the workforce increased.

The loss of trade union membership strongholds, and trade union’s reluctance to accept “new workers” as members, resulted in a dramatic decrease in membership. This, combined with reduced legal rights to bargaining agreements, resulted in trade unions searching for ways to survive and later renew (Stirling, 2005). In order to do so, they needed to reconsider what workers wanted from a trade union, and to recognise that the workforce of trade unionism’s heyday no longer existed. The whole framework of collective bargaining came under scrutiny, as trade unions were increasingly exposed as secondary organisations, dependent on recognition from employers and government (Heery, 2005). If the power to collectively bargain with the employer on behalf of the workforce was reduced, then this called into question both the need for, and the remit of, a trade union.

Initial responses, born from ideas of increasing individualism, included offering consumer services – insurance and legal advice to existing and prospective members (Waddington and Whitston, 1997). However by the mid-1990s it was generally agreed that such measures were ineffective (Stirling, 2005) and consequently a new focus considering specific needs of the as yet unorganised workforce developed. As Stirling (2005: 87) explains “there was at least a rhetorical commitment to the recruiting of “new workers”, as unions attempted to make themselves more organisationally friendly, and to shape their bargaining agendas to the needs of women, part time workers and those from ethnic minorities”. In order to gain access to such workers, trade unions needed to work on “extending the boundaries of unionization through new recognition agreements with employers.” (Heery, 2005:87).

Expanding the membership of trade unions to facilitate renewal has not been unproblematic (Heery and Conley, 2007) and some of the hurdles appear to be a result of trade unions’ commitment to the idea of a “standard” worker, being a white, male, full time, manual worker and this standard worker being the standard member. However, as Björkman (2006:330) points out “there are no average members any more, if there ever were”. This standard being used as the basis for understanding workers’ needs, while attempting to promote collectivism, has perhaps resulted in the marginalisation of concerns which do not specifically fit with the “standard” worker. Munro (2001) suggests that if the dominant agenda is based on a white, male collective; and if collectivism is highly valued, then “trade unions appear inappropriate vehicles for solving workplace concerns” (2001:453) for workers who are not white and male.

Further to this, workers who do not fit into the white, male norm may be reluctant to push for full representation due to concerns around diluting collectivism, considering issues specific to them as marginal. Women’s mixed attitudes towards women’s groups and other female-only initiatives set up in trade unions provide an example of this unease with highlighting one group’s concerns (Kirton and Healy, 2013b). As Kirton and Healy point out, “women often have multiple identity affiliations (e.g. class, race/ethnicity, sexuality) which can create ambiguity about who the “we” are and who “they” are and which leads some women to query the salience of gender as a mobilising identity” (Kirton and Healy, 2013b:5). However, self-organisation by marginalised groups (ethnic minorities, or lesbians and gays

for example) has been seen to add internal pressure to trade unions to recognise and begin to address issues that disproportionately impact upon certain groups within the workforce they represent.

The debate over trade union renewal must therefore consider both an external focus – that of bringing in new members – but also internal pressure for change that allows for a wider, more representative bargaining agenda to be offered to both existing and potential members (Heery, 2005). However, there have been growing suggestions of more radical renewal strategies, involving a fundamental shift in the structure and organisation of trade unions (Fairbrother, 2000; Wills, 2001; Taylor and Mathers, 2002). Wills and Simms (2004:64) suggest that trade unions should look beyond workplace unionism, instead considering the possibility of community unionism, focusing on “the solidarity born from living and working together in close proximity”. Unionising on the basis of community would strengthen unions in terms of membership, and also break down traditional barriers in unions for women, migrant and non-white workers and other marginalised groups in the communities, as the focus becomes centred on the community rather than individual roles. However, the effects of community unionism in practice have yet to be fully explored and it is unlikely that all members of a community will share similar concerns, in the same way as employees in the same company do not always share similar concerns.

Given the preceding discussion, it is clear that while trade union approaches to representation of women and other “non-standard” workers have moved on considerably since the 1980s, there is still much to be done to ensure that all workers receive proportionate representation and in turn become able to voice their own concerns as part of the mainstream trade union agenda. Widening internal trade union policies may be key – as Hyman (2007:205) explains, “uniform policy cannot be imposed when the “average member” no longer exists”. A move in this direction has the potential to strengthen the trade union movement both in its narrower, work-focused, capacity, and also as a wider social movement with influence over social policies; as well as improving conditions and opportunities across societal boundaries.

### 3.4 Joining a Trade Union

There are two main ways that union membership motivation has been considered. Firstly, research into structural macro and meso level factors that contribute to levels of union density (such as industry, workplace structure and union recognition) have revealed trends in union membership. This can be related to the opportunity available to people to join and participate in trade unions (Waddington and Kerr, 2000; Kirton, 2005). Secondly, union membership has been explored at the micro level, considering both individuals' personal attributes and their personal motivations.

Empirical evidence relating to the structural advantages of union organising in the public sector is well documented in research (Schnabel, 2013): low organising costs associated with large organisations and a history of employer support, or at least tolerance, provides a good environment for union recruitment and organising in the sense that it is clear that for most workers opportunity (in the broadest sense) does exist. As such, this section will focus on exploring union membership motivation at a micro level, considering why individuals in organisations chose to join a union or otherwise.

Literature which considers individuals joining and participating in trade unions frequently focusses on the ideas of individual predisposition to joining a union and the opportunity to unionise. Predisposition to unionise is usually taken to be a function of personal characteristics, beliefs and values and negative experiences of the workplace (Waddington and Kerr, 2002; Kirton, 2005; Turner and D'Art, 2012). However, the perception of the union itself and the offering the union is able to make to potential members can also be seen a factor that may influence joining (Waddington and Whitston, 1997).

#### 3.4.1 Individual Attributes

Historically, much research focussed on individual attributes in order to explain levels of unionisation amongst different groups. Credence was given to explanations reliant on deterministic explanations of behaviour leading to well established myths (Schnabel, 2013) surrounding characteristics that lead to joining a union. One, now much disputed, myth, was that women were naturally less likely to unionise due to having lower levels of commitment to the workplace (Booth, 1986) and less interest in political life (see, for example, Inglehart,

1981). However, when working pattern was controlled for, women showed equal propensity to men to join a trade union (Booth, 1986). In general, using individual attributes alone to develop an explanatory model of union membership motivation has been shown to be highly unsatisfactory, failing to take into account other key factors such as experiences of work and trade unions. In addition, evidence for associations based on characteristics such as age, sex, marital status, race, level of education, or occupation has proved contradictory (Riley, 1997). As such, discussions surrounding individual's choices to join must be widened to include agency and experience.

### 3.4.2 Individual Motivations

Personal motivation to join a union can be seen to stem from a number of factors. These factors can be grouped into two main categories. Firstly, collective reasons such as improved pay and conditions, mutual support and belief in unions; and secondly, individual benefits such as protection in disciplinary cases, and legal and financial services (Kirton, 2005). Clearly, all of these may be relevant for both women and men, although the extent to which gender affects prioritisation of motivating factors is not clear.

Striving for collective benefits can be linked to ideological factors (Allen, 1966). The ideological significance of trade union membership is seen to be linked to belief in collective action and associated with political and social attitudes, in particular, left wing ideology (Riley, 1997). Snape and Redman (2004:857) have argued that "member-union relations may have an ideological aspect that transcends private exchange and encompasses wider notions of community and social justice". In addition, material concerns also provided, such as social approval, wage gains and protection are significant in the decision to join and participate in trade unions (Beynon, 2011; Cregan, 2013).

This ideological positioning can be associated with an individual's background, with family having been shown to have influence on individual's decision to join a trade union; the family, and domestic upbringing, has been seen as a site for the development and reproduction of trade union values (Kirton, 2005). Trade unions have also positioned themselves as representing the working classes (Moore, 2011) with the link between class struggle and collectivism a key organising principle (Kelly, 1994). Furthermore, in the UK,



different regions have different traditions and social characteristics that may encourage union membership. In Booth's 1986 study, for example, Wales and Scotland as regions were used as explanatory variables.

However, the rise of the individualisation thesis has created challenges for trade unions relying on values alone. Waddington and Whitston (1997) considered the trade union offering, asking whether, in the light of an apparent decline in collectivist ideology and rise in self-interest, trade unions were more successful in recruiting members by offering services such as loans and legal support. Their research ultimately concluded that the belief in collectivism remained the most prominent reason for union membership. However, many unions have continued to create offerings for individual benefit and this has been seen to encourage greater identification with the union for some groups (Kirton and Healy, 2004).

Tilly (1978) suggests that there may be little use in considering motivation as either collectivist or individualistic, as the union member may seek individualistic or collectivist benefits, or both simultaneously. For example, "white collar workers locked into a career path may seek to improve their working lives through individual efforts to gain promotion, and through collective organisation and action to secure rises in pay and improvements in job security" (Kelly 1997:405). This can be seen in Kirton and Healy's work (2004) which found that, for women, educational and career development courses encourage greater involvement with the trade unions.

### 3.4.3 The Working Environment and Union Behaviour.

Membership of a trade union is inextricably linked to participation in economic activity and individuals' experiences of the workplace can be seen to have an impact on their motivation to join a union and participate in collective action.

High levels of union activity in a workplace is important to develop a sense of collective identity that in turn promotes membership of the union for new members of the workforce (Waddington and Kerr, 2015). Being encouraged to join by colleagues, managers or local union representatives is a powerful motivational factor and a visible and active union presence makes personal contact and consequent membership more likely (Waddington and Kerr, 2002)

Negative experiences of the workplace also contribute to membership motivation. Kelly and Kelly (1994) report that, when perceived, group deprivation is significant in motivating individuals to join a union. If workers feel that they, as a group, are experiencing unfair or detrimental treatment, then they are likely to join a union to leverage collective power. Many individuals feel the need for protection in the workplace – in the UK, representation in the event of grievances or disciplinary action has been cited as the primary motivation for joining a union (Waddington and Kerr, 2015). Whether the dispute in the workplace is an individual or collective issue, the way the union is perceived to be able to handle such issues, or as Klandermans (1986) terms it, union instrumentality, is significant. The perception of union instrumentality as well as union treatment of different groups within the working population is, therefore, very significant in union recruitment.

Certain groups of workers report different experiences of trade unions and consequently have different perceptions of union effectiveness. For example, while women have been shown to have as strong a belief in trade unionism as men, they report being less satisfied with their experiences of trade unions (Sinclair, 1995); and part-time workers, despite valuing the protection offered by a trade union, have been reported as perceiving trade unions to be ineffective (Walters, 2002). Finally, Waddington and Kerr (2002) report that young workers view unions as “out of touch” with members, as a result of being composed primarily of middle-aged men. This again raises doubts about the ability of the union to provide effective representation on the issues that matter to them.

While such perceptions may come in part from historical images of trade unionism and organising myths (Schnabel, 2013), union strategies have a significant impact on recruitment (or lack thereof). Union leadership often determines recruitment strategies (Booth, 1986) and some groups of workers are not targeted – historically, this was particularly true of part-time female workers (Booth 1986) and other “atypical” workers. In this way, perception of workers by union leadership and representatives can create barriers for such workers in joining unions. Part-time workers were considered less committed to the workplace and the union according to one third of union representatives surveyed by the TUC in 1996 (Walters, 2002). Tomlinson (2006) also reports that part-time workers do not receive as much communication from unions, reducing the likelihood of them joining.

### 3.5 Participation

As touched upon previously, renewal and change in trade unions relies on encouraging participation (and therefore membership) in the non-unionised workforce, as well as maintaining and building active participation amongst existing members. For these reasons, the antecedents of participation have been well researched in the field of industrial relations (for example Gordon, 1980; Riley, 1997; Snape et al., 2000; Goslinga and Sverke, 2003). However, participation in trade unions cannot be measured by membership alone – trade union members do not constitute a homogeneous group and nor is participation a homogeneous activity (Fosh, 1993; Kelly and Kelly, 1994; Frege and Kelly, 2003). Among groups, and across unions, the reasons for and barriers to the differing types of participation will vary; and it is the exploration of this variance that could, perhaps, shed light upon the factors that truly affect participation and, therefore, how modern trade unions might begin to remove the barriers for certain groups.

In order to understand what drives participation, a number of researchers have looked to identify contributing factors (for example Klandermans, 1986; Waddington and Whitston, 1997; Goslinga and Sverke, 2003). Goslinga and Sverke suggested the following: union commitment (the level to which individuals identified with the union and supported its goals); union trust (the extent to which members believe that the union will be honest and fair); union support (the extent to which the members' needs are focused upon); union instrumentality (how effective the union is in supporting these needs); and satisfaction (whether the members have had positive experiences of the union). These factors show a complex interdependence of trade unions and their members – with unions relying on members in order to prove (and improve) their instrumentality; and with participation required to engender union support for members' issues. This has perhaps given rise to UK trade unions' predominant focus on membership and participation as their path to renewal. While these factors are likely to have a significant impact on participation, other writers have considered factors from individual characteristics (such as gender, race, or political leanings), structural factors and theories of identity (Kelly and Kelly, 1994; Darlington, 2002; Bradley and Healy, 2008).

Participation itself has been variously categorised. Fosh (1993) notably drew attention to the concepts of formal (holding union positions, attending meetings) and informal (engagement with union literature and campaigns) participation, while Kelly and Kelly (1994) suggest that certain types of participation such as speaking at union meeting and taking a union position can be classed as “more difficult” forms of participation, in the sense that they are more visible both to employers, colleagues and in the individual’s wider environment, as opposed to “easier” forms such as voting in elections and reading literature. These easier forms of participation may have become increasingly “easy” in terms of their anonymity as union communications are increasingly online or through email (Martinez Lucio and Walker, 2005; Kelly, 2008).

“Easy” or “informal” participation is likely to be more difficult to measure but one can reasonably theorise that it acts as a gateway for more formal or difficult forms of participation. It therefore merits investigation by researchers and trade unionists considering at what stage in a member’s relationship with a union the transition to active and formal participation is made; or indeed whether it is made at all. There is evidence that suggests informal participation is an important factor indicating likelihood to formally participate (Kelly and Breinlinger, 1995) and therefore informal participation amongst members should be encouraged by trade unions wishing to adopt a “bottom up” approach to ensuring their members’ voices are heard and wishing to encourage greater participation within a more diverse membership. However, Fosh (1993) suggests that due to an unsubstantiated assumption that informal levels remain constant, little work has been done in this area, which represents a significant gap in current understanding of both membership and participation of trade unions.

Greene and Kirton (2003:320) suggest that the challenge for unions is “to communicate efficiently and effectively with the activists who do not hold office; and to seek channels for increasing their levels of participation.” If the “non-standard” union members show a disproportionate tendency to participate informally, then any union which can activate its informal participants will almost certainly find an increase in the breadth and diversity of its active membership. The consequent effects of this on renewal of membership could be profound; trade unions have found external recruitment based on “like encouraging like” to

be an effective strategy (Stirling, 2005). This would arguably lead to a broadening of the overall diversity of the union.

### 3.6 Non-standard Membership and The Development of White Collar Unions

While the importance of changes in the composition of the workforce to trade unions has been noted by many authors, (Stirling, 2005; Heery, 2005; Kelly, 2008); the specific nature of white collar unions has been largely overlooked. As early as 1955, Goldstein suggested that this was an under-researched change in academic thought surrounding trade union organisation and in 1966 Bain warned that if the Trade Union movement wished to keep power in the UK it would have to turn its attention to the organisation of such workers.

As a result of such limited research on white collar and professional unions, in order to consider the influence of professional status on trade union membership, it is necessary to rely upon literature dated, in the main, from between the 1950s to the 1980s. As a result there are some limitations concerning the changing meanings of “professional” and “white-collar”. However, this work provides a starting point upon which the thesis itself will build, with a view to contributing a more contemporary understanding.

In this section, an overview of white collar unionisation will be followed by a discussion of the ways in which white collar unions have been shown to differ from other unions.

#### 3.6.1 White Collar and Professional Workers – The Development of the White Collar Union

While white collar unions emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a greater expansion of the trend in that direction occurred between world wars as employment moved away from heavy industry and towards more white collar work. In the UK, the heavily unionised public sector contributed to this development – by 1951, one in four union members were white collar with one third of those being civil servants (Carter, 1985). Despite this, between 1948 and 1964 white collar unionism did not keep up with expansion of white collar employment (Price and Bain, 1983) and by 1990, Perkin felt able to claim that unions had not succeeded in organising white collar workers. In the UK, the

level of this failure was partly seen as a result of the growth of neoliberalism under Thatcher and the reduction of trade union power, leaving the largely white collar public sector the largest source of trade union members (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2016).

Although the growth in white collar workers coincided with the feminisation of the workforce (and union membership), at the time of such changes, interest in the phenomenon did not focus on how unions should respond to gender issues, but instead focussed on how white collar unions might differ from “traditional” blue collar unions and what this might mean for prevailing understandings of the trade union movement.

The concept of white collar workers encompasses a large number of roles in a large number of occupational classes. Bain (1970:4) defined white collar workers as “foremen, overlookers, and supervisors; scientists, technologists, and technicians; clerical and administrative workers; security personnel; professions; salesmen, commercial travellers, and shop assistants; government administrators and executive officials; and especially “creative” occupations such as artists, musicians, and entertainers”. Despite the wide range of roles listed, the concept of the white collar worker in a trade union context has been meaning laden, with the worker/manager dichotomy playing into workers’ identities, and leading to these groups seeing themselves as “belonging more to management than with manual workers, and generally regarded by manual workers as one of “them” rather than one of “us” “(1970:4). A significant differentiation between blue and white collar workers was that the market situation has been considered more favourable for white-collar workers (Crompton, 1976), with white collar workers having scarcer skills to trade on. In addition, better, safer working conditions, especially in early decades, were seen to be the preserve of white collar workers.

The unionisation of these types of workers led to challenges to prevailing concepts of the trade union movement as purely class based. Sociological approaches believed the class situation of workers – with the ownership of capital as a central concept – held the key to understanding union motivation and behaviour, while industrial relations theorists pointed to job regulation – and who has the power to regulate – as the key (Crompton, 1976). In 1958, Lockwood pointed to “blackcoat” workers (clerks) to support class based arguments.

These workers were property-less and therefore, in the sociological analysis of the time, belonged firmly to the working class. Despite this, such workers showed less interest in unionisation than blue collar workers, perhaps as a result of their better working conditions. Their apparent belief in the superiority of their position could have been, therefore, explained though a development of false consciousness on their behalf which allowed the employers to profit from an equally powerless but generally more placid workforce.

Turning to professionals, during the post war period professional workers became increasingly salaried (Perkin, 1990). However, professional solidarity based on common professional and economic interests continued to exist (Shlakman, 1950). Without professional associations, salaried professionals had (and have) limited control over professional codes and so will come into conflict with employers who have budgetary considerations that may not align with the aims of the profession itself. This can still be seen 65 years later with unions and professional bodies resisting employer changes to the way the profession is run (see for example, the BMA response to government changes to NHS; and teaching union responses to various government proposals). Shalakman (1950:217) pertinently points out that, therefore, in order to successfully navigate such issues “the salaried professional must satisfy not only...professional conscience; he must also establish a satisfactory working relationship with an employer”. This need for some sort of employee relations system may, therefore, lead to the development of some union-type bodies for all types of employees.

### 3.6.2 Characteristics of White Collar Unions

A significant measure of the extent to which white collar unions could be described a “true” unions was developed by Blackburn in 1967. He suggested the level of “unionateness” was key to understanding the extent to which a union would behave in the ways tradition blue collar unions have historically. The level of unionateness was defined by Blackburn as the measure of “commitment of an organization to the general principles and ideology of trade unionism” (1967: 18). These principles included the centrality of collective bargaining, the union's independence and members’ willingness to engage in all forms of industrial action; as well as formal and political criteria such as affiliation to the TUC and the Labour Party (Carter, 1985).

Blackburn (1967) suggested that white collar unions were significantly less unionate. Allen (1966), also points to the much more conciliatory nature of white collar unions. These differences point to somewhat different roles and objectives. Goldstein (1955) suggests that white collar unions, especially those representing professional workers, have an advisory role and consequently must work with employers to propagate the aims of the profession and industry. In this way they can be seen to have a considerably more unitary approach, believing in the joint aims of workers and employers, than traditional blue collar workers. Crompton (1976) suggests that, to some extent, such unions display qualitative differences in their set up when compared to traditional unions and can perhaps be seen as more in line with early craft unions which sought to protect, regulate and limit access to the craft.

In a more modern analysis, Boxall and Haynes (1997) describe “consultancy unions” which represent the middle classes including middle management and professionals. These are characterised much in the same way as Blackburn (1967) described less unionate unions with employee relations being less confrontational, there being modest organising, members rarely shows a willingness to act collectively. However, Boxall and Haynes (1997) highlight that such unions do engage in collective bargaining.

As a result of these factors, Goldstein (1959) suggests that unionised professionals have unique definition of important features of TU, with professionals joining trade unions as amalgam of professional networking bodies (or professional society) and traditional trade union. The key part of the traditional trade union element comes from the fact that such professionals do have employee status; and therefore the trade union must not only propagate professional ideals and engage in collective bargaining, but also develop protections for its membership (Shlakman, 1950) which, ultimately, still experiences some level of the precariousness associated with employee status.

Finally, union member of all descriptions may seek individualistic or collectivist benefits from their membership; as previously noted, this may involve pursuing individual actions to further their careers, but may also entail recourse to collectivist action over pay bargaining, or representation in disputes.



### 3.7 Gender, Diversity and Trade Unions

Today, it appears that although trade unions have not been able to completely stem the flow of members, with trade union density in the UK at 26% in 2011 (Brownlie, 2012), the membership profile has changed dramatically from the traditional image of white, male, manual workers towards a more feminised and white collar profile. Since 2001, women have made up the larger proportion of trade union members, and also appear more likely to join trade unions (Brownlie, 2012). However, this change of membership has not resulted in significant changes in participation levels: women's participation levels are noticeably low, and although some progress has been made women remain underrepresented across trade union roles and throughout trade union hierarchies (Kirton, 2005).

While women and other "new workers" have become vital to trade union renewal strategies (Moore, 2011) it appears that some persistent beliefs over the concept of "worker" hinder trade unions' attempts to engage with all members. Women, who predominantly occupied part-time positions, were seen as temporary and uncommitted members of the workforce, not only by employers but also by trade unions (see, for example, Booth, 1986). This, combined with the aforementioned perceived threat of non-standard employment arrangements (Hunt, 2011; Walters, 2002), has led to underrepresentation of female (and other) workers' needs – a factor which, it has been suggested (Snape et al. 2000; Goslinga and Sverke, 2003), influences participation levels.

The widely accepted trade union agenda as described by Munro (2001) draws some clear distinctions between what is and what is not a matter of concern for trade unions. Munro explains that the trade union agenda "defines the appropriate business and processes of trade union activity (Munro, 1999). This does not refer to a written or formally acknowledged agenda, but to a range of issues that are generally recognised as part of the appropriate business of trade unions." (pp. 456)

This agenda reinforces existing societal gender segregation by supporting the notion that the public and private spheres can be, and should be, separated. Ultimately, what happens at work remains at work and what happens at home is not the concern of unions (Conley, 2005).

However, as Heyes (2012) points out, “decisions relating to trade union membership and participation continue to be conditioned by the division of domestic labour and to the employment situations into which men and women enter” (2012:672). Women continue to take on the majority of the domestic duties outside the paid workplace, leading, for example, to entering part-time (rather than full-time) work being a “constrained choice” (Tomlinson, 2006; Gregory and Milner, 2008; Heyes, 2012:672).

Additionally, the foundational notion of class struggle in trade union discourses has considered class as a universal concept. Research suggests that trade union members generally identify with the trade union class discourse. For example, Holgate et al (2006) found that class was never far from the consciousness of trade union women; and that it played a central part in how they identified with the trade union. However, while class identity may provide common ground for trade unionists, there is no single way in which class is experienced. Experiences of class differ depending on individuals’ identities (and identifiers) and the ways and places in which they interact (Acker, 1990; McCall, 2005; Kirton and Healy, 2013b). More generally, other strands of difference such as gender, race, disability and age influence how people experience their workplace and as such impact upon their representation needs. This has tended to be overlooked in the context of trade unions, reducing opportunities for effective representation of a diverse workforce. Space on the trade union agenda, and therefore the bargaining agenda, is reserved for issues most relevant to a white, male, full time worker.

Beyond the limited space for protection of “non-standard” workers’ needs, it has also been suggested that the trade union organisational structures and processes may have a negative effect on women’s participation – both overtly and in more subtle ways. Researchers (for example, Guillaume and Pochic, 2011; Heyes, 2012; Kirton and Healy, 2013a,b) have pointed out that unions operate on masculine-neutral norms such as long hours cultures, or meetings outside of working hours which limit the access and participation of women, who tend to have more duties and responsibilities in the private, domestic sphere. Ability or access to participation opportunities is also likely to be influenced by government policies on trade unions, for example, in the UK the current government wish to reduce or eliminate

paid union activities within workplaces (see Wintour and Watt, 2012) which is likely to result in an increase in meetings outside of working hours.

In addition to limitations in women's access to participation opportunities, trade union culture may also act as a deterrent to women's participation. Kirton and Healy's (2013a,b) research suggested that some women find the environment uncomfortably masculinised, and focused on traditionally masculine such as competitiveness and aggression. Heyes (2012) found that women report experiencing overt sexism from male trade union members, rendering trade union forums particularly unwelcoming.

An environment in which certain groups experience a level of discomfort through "difference" (Bourdieu, 1999) may result in reluctance to engage in already "difficult" forms of participation (Kelly and Kelly, 1994) such as speaking in trade union meetings. This, in turn, could produce a situation whereby women's union commitment is reduced – having been neither stated nor heard, their needs are not represented and therefore, the extent to which unions can effectively protect membership interests may be reduced. Greene and Kirton (2003:321) explain that "participants at meetings are often intimidated into accepting the position of the most vocal". In other words, participatory democracy centred on the meeting generally favours those members who are most confident to articulate their views (Dorgan and Grieco, 1993). The most confident participants are likely to be those more familiar and comfortable with the environment (men) and whose concerns are considered mainstream (men). In this way, women's exclusion is perpetuated, which may have a negative impact on commitment and consequently participation levels (Goslinga and Sverke, 2003).

Guillame and Pochic (2011) have further suggested that beyond a simple lack of awareness of specific concerns, there is unwillingness by male trade unionists to represent women's needs, particularly around issues of flexible, part-time working contracts. Acker (2006) has also made reference to this unwillingness to engage on matters considered specifically as "women's issues" such as a fair wage. In Acker's research, male trade unionists were unwilling to campaign for increases in women's pay even though they themselves would not lose money; they simply could not accept women as being skilled workers.

### 3.7.1 Women and Trade Union Activism

There has been widespread academic discussion of women in leadership and management positions (Alvesson and Billing, 2009; Ely and Rhode, 2010; Baumgartner et al., 2010; Billing, 2011; Davidson and Burke, 2011), with the discussion highlighting the slow and uneven progress towards proportionate representation in management positions that is being made across the globe, despite women's increasing access to education and increasing likelihood to enter the workforce at the same level as their male counterparts (Davidson and Burke, 2011). However, this has largely remained outside of the context of trade unions, with only a small number of scholars engaging with the discussion.

With current literature suggesting that the trade union environment is overly masculinised and the trade union agenda reflecting this, questions remain as to how to enable the voices of women (along with other marginalised groups) to be heard; and how this might lead to greater, more representative participation. With this concern in mind, Kirton and Healy (2012; 2013a,b) have looked at women as trade unionist leaders, considering women's access to influential positions as central to mainstreaming gender on trade union agendas. While unions with women in leadership positions have been found to represent female membership more effectively (Kirton and Healy, 2013b), women's access to such positions remains limited.

Kirton and Healy's (2012; 2013a,b) research, along with others in this area (Sayce, 2006; Guillaume and Pochic, 2011), has highlighted the mirroring of gendered work organisation from the workplace to trade unions, where certain tasks and roles are considered most suitable for men and others for women. Within a trade union context this could go beyond the mirroring of gendered work organisation, but actually serve to exacerbate it, as selection of individuals into specific trade union roles may be influenced by the role they held in the organisation which the trade union represents. In complex organisations where work is both vertically and horizontally segregated (Acker, 1990), the opportunity to develop certain skills prized in a trade union environment may not be available to all, particularly to women who, as discussed above, for various reasons, are more likely to work in "softer" roles in less prestigious departments. The assumption of the gender-neutral nature of job and trade union roles, shared by managers, human resource practitioners (Acker, 1990;

1991; Bloksgaard, 2012) and trade unionists may begin to shed light on some of the difficulties faced by female trade union activists. Acker (2006) points out that “the concept of a job is gendered, in spite of its presentation as gender neutral, because only a male worker can begin to meet its implicit demands” (p. 257). The enduring issue of women’s disproportionate responsibility for unpaid domestic duties appears again as one of the most cited barriers to taking on union responsibilities (Kirton, 2005; Heyes, 2012; Kirton and Healy, 2013b).

As noted previously, the alleviation of these responsibilities in order to promote access has not been prominent on the trade union agenda due to the classification of such work as domestic, and hence private. However, it remains clear that these responsibilities affect women activists in multiple ways – from creating a barrier to their physical presence at meetings to creating a sense of role conflict for women who do take on union duties. Kirton (2006) explains that unionist women juggle multiple “careers” – family, work (as the majority of trade union positions are unpaid) and the trade union role itself. Balancing these responsibilities creates strain on time and emotion, emphasised when events such as illness of family members force women to reconsider whether they are appropriately enacting their gendered identity as, for example, mother or wife.

Similarly, lack of physical presence at events can limit networking opportunities, which may prevent progression through the ranks. As Guillaume and Pochic (2011:626) have argued, “the lack of social capital and internal networks is probably the main obstacle encountered by women when trying to reach the upper levels”. Lack of visibility amongst key members is likely to hinder chances in trade union elections. Moreover, as Waddington and Whitston (1997) found, encouragement to participate through being directly approached proved strong motivation for participation; and further encouragement by key actors in the union might again prove key in explaining why some women continue to participate at various levels and others do not. However, this relies on women being visible to these key actors, and being deemed suitable for encouragement.

Another issue surrounding active women’s roles is related to the specific roles they are likely to take up. Sayce’s (2006) research suggested that, even when women take up positions (paid or unpaid) they tend not to be in those that are considered critical such as handling

negotiations, but rather in “softer” roles with more emphasis on, for example, organising social events or dealing with health and safety. This ultimately limits their progression through trade union hierarchies as such roles, even when at the same level in the hierarchy, lack organisational legitimacy and do not provide the experience or skills necessary for further progression. Munro (2001) links this to the perceptions of women’s “natural abilities” in the workplace and union context, where the belief that women have a natural predisposition to caring duties leads to ingrained segregation of roles down gender lines (see Acker, 1989; 1990; 2006). Further to this, as Ely and Padavic (2007) suggest, many women may also hold this belief, having internalised gender stereotypes, and leading to them being more likely to volunteer for roles considered more “female friendly”.

Women seen not to conform to such gender stereotyping by, for example, emulating male practices in negotiations or in meetings can face a further barrier to their progression as they are seen as too aggressive (Healy et al., 2011). The expectations of how gender should be played out within trade union leadership roles is further complicated by female members’ different expectations of female and male leaders. According to Kirton and Healy (2012), there is a widespread belief that female leaders will display a more inclusive, more moral form of leadership. However, the authors also note that: “Women can and do lead in ways that can, and do, marginalize and exclude other women, either inter- or intra racially, resulting in women feeling more let down than when it is the men doing the excluding” (2012:996)”. This leaves female leaders in a complex and precarious position, needing to ensure they are not “too feminine” but still “feminine enough”.

Having seen that both the organisation of work and trade unions is heavily governed by social constructs of gender, it seems that further consideration of the gendering of industrial relations is key for advancing understanding of women’s interactions with trade unions and trade union representation of their membership.

### 3.7.2 Equality Strategies and Self-Organisation

While the above discussion has highlighted the enduring grip of white, male, full-time workers on positions of power within trade unions, this has not gone unchallenged. As was

discussed in section 3.3.3 “Trade Union Renewal”, challenges to trade union strength in the form of membership decline and diversification have forced trade unions to examine equality strategies as a means of trade union renewal. In addition, marginalised groups within trade unions have exerted internal pressure to reform trade union structures in a struggle to ensure their voices are heard (Ledwith and Colgan, 2002). Over the past three decades, the changing socio-economic landscape, coupled with membership decline, has forced structural change in trade unions, providing the fluid conditions in which groups of women, black, lesbian and gay, disabled and young workers have been able to organise themselves collectively in order challenge non-inclusive agendas and push for equal representation (Humphrey 1998; Healy and Kirton 2000; Kirton, 2015).

Today, most trade unions have implemented at least some equality strategies, including women’s committees, separate spaces, reserved seats, and mentoring and learning programmes (see SERTUC Equality Report, 2012; 2016), indicating a drive within trade unions to both widen their appeal to a more diverse workforce and to allow marginalised groups opportunity to voice their concerns and priorities. A driving force for such change comes from self-organisation within trade unions.

Within the context of a diverse workforce, self-organisation has been seen as a solution to the marginality of minority and disadvantaged groups within the trade unions. Self organisation has been seen to create both structural and cultural change through the recognition of new identities and consequent awareness of extant issues within union (Humphrey, 2000). Structural reform may be seen through the introduction of individual and collective mechanisms, within and alongside the union mainstream, which enables input from previously silent groups (Parker, 2006). Such input allows policy makers a greater view of the social realities experienced by the membership and as such increases knowledge available for policy making.

Research (e.g. Kirton and Healy, 1999; 2004; Parker, 2006; Kirton, 2015) has shown that equality measures are viewed (by female trade unionists) as beneficial on both an individualistic level and a collective level, as placing “new” constituencies’ concerns firmly on the trade union agenda remains a crucial component to trade union renewal.

At an individual level, the opportunity to work within “safe spaces” has been shown to increase women’s self-esteem and confidence, develop their assertiveness, and allows for exposure to union practices and procedures (Briskin, 1999). As a result, individual women have found it easier to move into leadership positions within the mainstream union hierarchy (Briskin, 1999), which, in turn, allows non-inclusive trade union agendas to be challenged. For example, evidence from Kirton and Healy’s 1999 study suggests that female national paid officials (NPOs) are more likely to ensure that issues of concern to women were included in collective bargaining agreements. In addition, Heery’s (2006) study demonstrates a “fairly strong” link between negotiator exposure to influence from national equality officers and committees, and involvement in equal pay bargaining (Heery, 2006:536).

Alongside increasing women’s participation in mainstream union positions, collective mechanisms and structural reform also contribute to the equality project within trade unions. As well as supporting women into mainstream leadership positions, women’s committees and conferences, for example, have been shown to have a strong influence the trade union agenda. They have been considered instrumental in getting issues such as sexual harassment and work–life balance addressed in mainstream union forums and negotiations, ultimately ensuring issues relevant to women are included in collective bargaining (Nichols Heppner, 1984; Parker, 2006).

However, despite the apparent positives, the introduction of equality initiatives within trade unions has, at times, been controversial. Beginning with the development of women’s groups in the 1970s (Parker, 2006), the acceptance of self organised groups within formal trade union hierarchies has been debated on both ideological and practical grounds.

Some (particularly male) trade unionists have been reported to be hostile to equality strategies, especially those which offer separate participation, and partly due to the perceived challenge to membership unity (Kirton, 2015). Self-organisation within trade unions is predicated on social identities of union members, as opposed to work identities, which has been the traditional basis of identification with the trade union (Parker, 2006). As such, self-organised groups have been criticised as divisive and at odds with majoritarian democratic principles of union organising (Parker, 2006; Kirton, 2015). In addition, the



conflation of separatism and separate (self) organisation has led to questions regarding self-organised groups' place with the trade union renewal project.

However, as Humphrey (2000:265) explains, self-organising has been "born from a position of exclusion from or subordination with a wider polity" and that it is "geared towards inclusion into that polity or integration on more equitable terms". For this reason, it seems most appropriate to view self-organisation as the search for unity in diversity (Briskin, 1999) and to distinguish between self-organisation as a means as a means to an end or as an ultimate goal (Briskin, 1999; Humphrey, 2000). The absence of the development of, for example, women only trade unions, strongly suggests that self-organisation within trade unions is seen as only a means to an end by activists wishing to shape the agenda in a way that strengthens the union's collective power.

A further criticism of self-organisation based on social identity lies in the assumption that such identities create meaningful collective experiences (Liff, 1997). In a similar vein to criticism of second wave feminism, scholars (e.g. Colgan and Ledwith 2000; Healy and Kirton 2000) have suggested that women's committees, for example, have been dominated by white women and as such have risked further marginalising the experience of ethnic minority women. However, Parker (2006) rebuts such criticism, noting that women's committees have broadened their scope to include a wide range of equality issues. Certainly, in response to such criticism, many trade unions have adopted an integrated equality approach in order to respond to multiple and intersecting experiences of disadvantage within the workplace and trade union (Briskin 2006; Bradley and Healy 2008) An example of such an approach can be seen in the establishment of equality representatives (see SERTUC, 2006).

Practically, self-organised groups in themselves may do little to overcome some of the key barriers to both formal and informal participation. Kirton (2015) points out that irrespective of participation opportunities, many women have little time for participation due to the ongoing struggle to balance competing responsibilities at home and at work. Further, the existence of "safe spaces" may not act as a remedy for an overly hostile or masculine culture of the wider union.

Finally, and perhaps of most concern for the trade union equality movement, Kirton (2015) reports that, despite continuing low participation rates of certain groups such as women, equality initiatives are increasingly seen as no longer necessary and have been reduced in recent years, leaving many workers ominously underrepresented in times of increasingly precarious work conditions.

### 3.7.3 Young Workers and Trade Union Activism

In this chapter, there has been much discussion regarding changes to the workforce and what that means for trade unions. Absent from the discussion so far is consideration of the new workforce as a group of employees who share a common employment concern based on their position as new entrants to the workforce as well as in relation to their age and position in society more generally. This new, more diverse, generation of workers experience working life differently to those of previous generations. From the perspective of union renewal, a significant aspect of these workers' different working lives is their lack of engagement with trade unions – and the question of whether older, retiring members of trade unions are being adequately replaced in trade unions as new entrants join the workforce.

Along with “atypical” workers, trade unions have historically had a difficult relationship with younger workers. As far back as 1955, Cole (1955:79) described engagement with the younger segments of the workforce as “the weakest spot of the Trade Union movement”; and today unions remain predominantly unconcerned about those young workers (Hodder, 2015).

The reported apathy of trade unions towards the younger generation of workers may be, at least in part, attributed to the widespread “perception of the absence of social and collectivist values amongst young people” (Moore, 2011:156). Described in the UK as “the Thatcher’s children effect” (Payne, 1989:114; Hodder, 2015), trade unions have seen “millennials” as inherently unwilling to unionise due to their widespread individualism (Peetz, 2010). Unionists’ apparent belief in increased individualism is, to some extent, supported by research with reports that what membership motivation does exist amongst younger workers is primarily based on instrumentalism (Alvin and Sverke, 2000) rather than

ideological belief. Further to this, as Esders et al. (2011) report, union representatives see younger workers as less willing to confront or tackle problems at work. Whether or not there is some truth in these observations, such attitudes towards younger members of the workforce seem most likely to create barriers to younger workers joining and participating in the trade union movement, through removing attention away from the specific employment concerns of these workers.

External structural factors such as the increased precariousness of work provide some explanation for the low levels of unionisation amongst this group of workers. There is a developing body of academic literature which considers younger workers in their positions as precarious workers or unemployed workers and the difference austerity makes to their working lives (see, for example, Kretsos, 2011; Hodder and Kretsos, 2015). It is clear that this economic situation impacts on the generation as a whole. However, this section does not explore this in detail due to the position of the young workers in this research – they are early career professionals with full employment rights and consequently many issues associated with organising younger workers does not apply to them. Instead, the focus is on other elements of trade unions' engagement with younger workers.

Home and family life may provide clues to low levels of unionisation amongst younger workers. It has been variously noted (Waddington and Kerr, 2002; Blanden and Machin, 2003) that family and social networks are a key site of the development of union values, with individuals being more likely to unionise if their parents were union members. This must be a cause for concern for today's trade unions, as dropping levels of unionisation means that far fewer new entrants to the workforce will have unionised parents.

The image of trade unions amongst younger workers presents a significant barrier to the unionisation of younger workers. Industrial relations action is still covered by national media (Logan, 2008) and such coverage is frequently hostile, thereby reducing the ability of trade unions to communicate with younger potential members including those not yet in the workforce (Hodder, 2015). Despite this, nearly fifteen years ago, Haynes et al. (2005) reported that younger workers have (marginally) more positive views of trade unions than older workers, perhaps reflecting a period of reduced media hostility when compared to the 1970s and 1980s.

Once in the workplace, and in line with the experiences of women and part-time workers, the underrepresentation of younger workers within union hierarchies may make union membership and participation less attractive. It has been argued that younger workers may feel that unions only represent the interests of older workers (Cregan and Johnston, 1990:85; Standing, 2011:77). Healy and O’Grady, (1997:175) report a “mismatch between what young people say they want and what unions think they ought to want”, suggestive again of stereotyping on both sides leading to a lack of open communication.

Despite such issues, Peetz et al. (2015) suggest that unions are aware of the need to attract and engage with young workers, developing strategies that address them not as a homogeneous group but in their capacity as professional workers or as lower-paid members of the precariat (Vandaele, 2015). As Pascual and Waddington (2000:36) note, “an agenda appropriate for young people must address their situation within the labour market and any shift in attitudes”.

Once members of trade unions, encouraging active participation becomes an additional hurdle. In the ways reminiscent of gender disadvantage in union structures, unionised young workers experience systematic obstacles to participation in union democracy and action (Vandaele, 2015) – their concerns may not be considered part of the union agenda, and their working patterns and contractual arrangements may stifle activity. Lacking experience, a sense of authority and an understanding of the ways in which unions operate can all make trade union participation more difficult for younger workers (Esders et al., 2011; Hodder, 2015).

### 3.8 Employment Relations in the Public Sector

Public sector trade unions have arguably become the leaders of the UK trade union movement, with union density in the public sector at 54% compared with 14% in the private sector (Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2016). Furthermore, public sector unions have enjoyed some successes in their response to government proposals (Bach and Given, 2008). However, the government’s position as not only the regulator of employment conditions but also as an employer creates complexities unique to public sector employment relations. Furthermore, certain characteristics of public sector workers,

specifically public service motivation, can be seen to result in a slightly different employment relationship. Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler (2002) have found that civil servants had greater levels of engagement than employees in other sectors; they were prepared to work longer hours and take on tasks beyond their specific job role, due to a sense that they were fairly recompensed for this by their overall package. These high levels of engagement would suggest high levels of identification with their organisation, based on the reciprocal arrangement of their contract.

During the post war period, consensus surrounding the importance of the provision of inclusive public sector services resulted in the public sector leading the way in employment relations, acting as a model, exemplar employer (Duncan, 2001; Morgan and Allington, 2002; Bewley, 2006; Howell and Givan, 2011). The conceptualisation of “model” employer was founded by principles of equality of opportunity and pay, transparency, constructive trade union/management negotiations and high levels of job security (Beaumont and Leopold, 1985; Duncan, 2001). While pay levels were not considered high compared to the private sectors, employees were compensated by benefits such as pensions and guaranteed career paths (Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler, 2002).

The post war consensus which had allowed for harmonious employment relations in the public sector became more fragile through the turbulent 1970s and was finally shattered by the election of the Thatcher government in 1979. The concept of the public sector as a model employer was challenged by a new commitment to reduced public spending and increased focus on efficiency and cost-cutting led by managerialism (Duncan, 2001; Coyle-Shapiro, 2002). During this period, the idea of the public sector as a model employer began to be challenged, with neoliberalism holding a deregulated private sector up as the ideal (Mintzberg, 1996); and the concept of “model” employer was reworked to include resistance to trade unions, efficiency, cost saving and low levels of employee security (Bewley, 2006). This led to the introduction of practices common in the private sector, such as performance related pay, and precarious contractual arrangement such as fixed term and temporary contracts, to be introduced into large sections of the public sector. This, in an environment of cost-cutting, led to a depression of public sector pay, work intensification and generally deteriorating conditions for public sector workers (Bach and Given 2008;

Hemmings, 2011). Over this period, the public sector, rather than leading the way in employment relations in the UK, found itself chasing the private sector's perceived lead on efficiency and responsiveness.

Responses to changing conditions in the public sector can be clearly seen through the breakdown of union/government relations from the late 1970s. While early public sector union/government relations were collaborative, the challenge to the value of public welfare provision by Thatcher's right-wing government brought the end of peaceful times. Public sector unions have shown a continued willingness to call strikes, particularly over pay and pensions (Howell and Givan, 2011). As was discussed in section 2.6.1 "The UK Civil Service Today – New Public Management, Identity and Resistance", the introduction of New Public Management across the public sector has been met with resistance at both individual and collective levels. NPM reforms have also been associated with the spread of performance management and performance related pay (PRP), which has been seen as an attempt to individualise the employment relationship and undermine collective bargaining in the Civil Service (Bach and Kolins Givan, 2011). Since its introduction Civil Service unions have engaged in tense discussions regarding its implementation highlighting the detrimental impact of PRP on the working environment and motivation levels (Marsden, 2004).

While initially trade union resistance to working conditions imposed by NPM was most strongly seen from unions representing lower graded staff, since the election of a Liberal Democrat/Conservative Government in 2010 and a majority Conservative Government in 2015, tensions have grown; and more visible discontent has been seen amongst senior graded/managerial staff. The Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS), the largest union in the Civil Service representing 200,000 members at administrative and clerical grade<sup>2</sup> has been no stranger to direct confrontation with the government, but the FDA trade union went out on strike for the first time in its history in November 2011 over changes to pensions. Following that, the Association of Revenue and Customs (the HMRC branch of the FDA) went out on strike again in February 2014 protesting deteriorating terms and conditions and the introduction of a new performance management system.

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<sup>2</sup> Source: <https://www.pcs.org.uk/about-pcs> (last accessed 25/01/2018)

The apparent attempts at deprofessionalisation of public sector workers by NPM described in section 2.6.1 may well be significant in understanding forms of collective resistance by senior civil servants as their experiences and interests in the workplace become increasingly removed from capital interests.

Public sector unions have, however, not been limited to internal issues and have, instead, widened their agenda beyond terms and conditions and pay bargaining to issues such as school closures and the general defence of the public sector (Martinez Lucio, 2007). In fact, resistance to the undermining of the public sector and opposition to privatisation of public services was a key membership motivation of public sector trade unionists (Kerr, 1992) indicating the level of resistance amongst public servants.

Despite continued resistance to such changes by public sector unions, elements of New Public Management have created a different terrain for trade union operations (Martinez Lucio, 2007). In the Civil Service, the authority to set terms and conditions being delegated to individual departments has resulted in weakening opportunities for collective bargaining. Further to this, previous governments took a “divide and rule” approach to changes of terms and conditions; new entrants to public sector organisations (including the Civil Service) had different terms and conditions to longer serving employees and so trade unions struggle to find solutions which can satisfy their entire membership.

### 3.9 Conclusion

This chapter began by highlighting the need to bring gender into the mainstream of industrial relations scholarship, through rejecting the conceptualisation of worker as one-dimensional and considering the interplay between the different spheres of workers’ lives.

Following this, a discussion of trade unions as organisations was presented, focussing on their purpose history and current problematic status in relation to declining levels of membership and power. This declining influence has led to the need for trade union renewal strategies, which have proven challenging in part due to trade unions resistance to representing new groups, including women, entering the workforce.

Moving from trade unions as organisations to their members, the chapter then discussed motivations for joining and participating in a trade union, focussing on the micro-level of individual agency rather than wider structural factors that have been shown to influence membership and participation levels. This middle section of the chapter considered trade unions more generally, before moving on to discuss the specific relationship that professional and managerial employees have with their unions and considering how that has been shown to differ from more traditional trade unions, with professional workers having historically been seen to look for both a trade union and a professional body in order to protect themselves as both workers and to propagate ideals of the profession.

Finally, this chapter discussed trade union participation amongst certain groups of workers, considering how the trade union agenda influences identification with the trade union, and how the ways in which trade unions have historically mobilised is linked to personal identities such as class. Women's participation and activism was then given particular attention, highlighting reports of an overly masculinised trade union environment appearing hostile to women and limiting participation. Finally, in returning to issues of diversity and their link to trade union renewal, younger workers' participation and identification with trade unions, and in particular the complexity of younger worker's belief in collectivism, was discussed.

The following chapter will outline the key considerations and decisions taken on how to research professional women's experiences of trade unionism in order to provide answers to the questions set out in section 1.3: what motivates professional women to participate in their trade union; and what are the barriers to their so doing?





## Chapter 4: Methodology

### 4.1 Introduction

This research is positioned within a feminist, critical interpretivist framework, in which gender is seen as a fundamental organising principle, and in which constructed meanings and interpretation are seen to be significant. Critical interpretivism, as Alvesson and Billing (2009:46) state: “means an interest in the more nuanced aspects of cultures, identities and interactions in work and in organisations”.

Section 1.3.2 set out the research questions as follows:

1. How do professional women experience working life within the UK Civil Service?
2. In what ways do professional women identify with, experience and act within trade unions?
3. What are the barriers to and the motivations for women’s trade union participation?

In answering these questions, an explicit objective of the research, as stated in section 1.3.3, is to enable trade unions to better represent their membership. As such, this research is clearly positioned within a feminist framework, allowing the clear articulation of political motivation to research. The positioning of the research within a feminist framework has led to further epistemological, ontological and methodological considerations which are explored in this chapter.

The chapter begins with an overview of the key components of feminist theories, addressing the implications of the political nature of feminist research and its consequent positioning within an interpretivist paradigm. Following that, sections 4.3 and 4.4 discuss, respectively, the specific design of the research and the analysis of the data.

Throughout this chapter, reflections on the research processes and procedures have been included. Reflexivity in the research process has been widely discussed and can be viewed as a key consideration for feminist researchers. Hertz (1997:viii) describes reflexivity as:

intensive scrutiny of “what I know” and “how I know it” ... to provide insight on the working life of the social world and insight on how that knowledge came into existence

Reflexivity acknowledges the researcher’s active part in the research process, and provides an audit of how the research was conducted. Further to this, reflexivity on the part of the researcher allows them to develop techniques to deal with the probable new, and potentially challenging, issues arising in their own future research. Locating the researcher within the research (see, for example, Oakley, 2000; Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002; Letherby, 2003; Haynes, 2010) provides insight into how the knowledge generated during the research process came into being. As was discussed in section 1.6, the participants of this research were professional female members of the FDA trade union, which represents the highest ranking members of the UK Civil Service. Prior to embarking on this research, I was both a Civil servant and a female member of the FDA. The implications of this are explored throughout this chapter as well as within the reflexive commentary in Chapter 8.

## 4.2 Feminist Theory and Intersectionality

As set out in section 1.5, feminist theories provide the critical perspective from which the research questions are considered. In this section the background to feminist theories and the appropriateness of feminist methodologies are discussed.

Feminist theories originated from the women’s rights movements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the role of gender in societal relations is now widely acknowledged and forms a significant area of research. However, as Riger (1994) explains, there is no single feminist theory but rather a range of perspectives linked by a common acknowledgement of the role of gender in societal segregation and oppression. Riger suggests that the two central concerns of feminist theories are: “(1) opposition to the domination of men over women and (2) a belief that women share a status as member of a subordinate group” (1994:275).

As a result of a common opposition to the domination of men over women, feminist theories build upon the documentation and explanation of phenomena to seek prescriptive solutions. Feminist theories used in research have developed from political movements to ameliorate the conditions of oppressed women through empowerment and increased

equality, and as a result the political agenda of contemporary feminist research is often explicit. Feminist researchers seek to bring about change by highlighting inequalities that remain hidden, particularly from those in privileged positions. For those in positions of power within trade unions, barriers to women's participation may remain unseen. This research aims to give voice to those women and to allow trade unions to identify ways in which to reduce those barriers and increase participation.

The position of feminist perspectives as both theoretical and political has led to the development of feminist epistemology that challenges traditional, scientific, positivist understanding of what valid knowledge is and how the production of knowledge is affected by patriarchal structures which undermine women's knowledge claims (Alcoff and Potter, 2013). Feminist scholarship suggests that positivist approaches are only one way in which to view realities and that even natural science is shaped by societal hierarchies and human consciousness (Taylor, 1998). Further to this, feminist theory has sought to criticise the dominance of positivism, which, as Harding (1991) explains, exists within an androcentric system which reinforces and perpetuates inequality through its reliance on dominant culture and values.

There has, as a result, been a widespread rejection of positivism by feminist researchers; and, instead, interpretivism has been heavily influential in shaping feminist research methodologies across disciplines (Reinharz, 1992; Atewologun et al. 2016). Interpretivism recognises that context and social interactions change, and that individuals may therefore be constantly revising the meanings they assign to experiences (Grix 2002:177). This is significant to a feminist approach because if gender is to be accepted as a variable then it must also be acknowledged that it is not fixed but constantly (re)constituted (Olesen, 2005). Interpretivism also recognises the researcher's role in constituting knowledge and the lack of objectivity on the part of the researcher (Kauffman, 1992). For feminist researchers, there is no expectation of impartiality on the part of the researcher but rather empathy facilitating shared understanding (Bondi, 2003). These factors characterise interpretivism as a paradigm within which feminist researchers may strive to address some of the power inequalities present in a research setting (Smircich et al., 1992).

Qualitative research has been embraced by feminist, interpretivist researchers because they seek to explore the ways in which people understand their environment, without imposing meaning onto participants. Qualitative research is “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008:4).

As discussed above, feminist epistemological stances challenge traditional, scientific, positivist understanding of what constitutes valid knowledge. As such, quantitative methods have been heavily criticised amongst feminist scholars, with some arguing that quantitative methods are in direct conflict with the aims of feminist research (Graham 1983; Mies, 1983) since quantitative research necessitates the imposition of “expert” knowledge onto participants through use of predetermined categories. Quantitative research also hinders the equality of the relationship between researcher and researched (Oakley, 1981); the positivist, quantitative researcher can be seen to take knowledge rather than build it. While qualitative research “cannot provide the mirror reflection of the social world that positivists strive for...it may provide access to the meanings people attribute to their experiences and social world” (Miller and Glassner, 2003:102). It is these meanings that interpretivist, feminist researchers seek.

In addition, many feminist researchers (see, for example, Harding, 1991; 1992; Haraway, 2003) question claims of objectivity by scientists and social scientists. For them, knowledge is socially situated; researchers can only see their research from the position they occupy in society (Harding, 1991). Society is stratified by various divisions: gender, race and class are the most widely discussed; but many other divisions exist including, for example, ability, sexuality and age. In society, there exist numerous processes which place certain people in positions of privilege, and reinforce oppression for others; but these processes remain invisible for the privileged, especially when such privileged groups are homogeneous (Maier, 1997; McIntosh, 2010).

Those in a position of privilege have strong motives for allowing these processes to remain unseen. Most straightforwardly, they may fear that the recognition of oppression and privilege could upset the existing order (McIntosh, 1988). Many feminist theorists therefore believe that the starting point for understanding must come from the experiences of the marginalised themselves, or that only those that experience oppression can have a true

understanding of it. As such, the idea of “expert knowledge” is rejected in favour of “lived knowledge”. This knowledge should be collected for women in ways that are not oppressive but can be used to subvert dominant structures that lead to oppression (Acker et al. 1983). While there is no single feminist methodology, and feminism and feminist research methods are highly diversified (Olesen, 2005), the multiple meeting points between interpretivism and feminism suggest the adoption of qualitative methods, which allow participants freedom to express issues of importance to them rather than to the researcher and as such allow for the collection of “lived knowledge”.

The research requires an understanding of the ways in which women as an excluded group identify with trade unions and how masculine-dominated trade unions may potentially fail to see oppressive practices that lead to the exclusion of women. As the research ultimately seeks to improve on this situation, and sees trade unions as a vehicle to pursue greater equality for women, feminist theory is central.

Further to this, this research seeks to understand inequalities both within and across gender boundaries; as Evans (2011:xi) notes, “some women have [...] been more unequal than others”. In recognising inequality within genders, feminist theory has broadened its scope to consider interlocking disadvantage and the simultaneity of oppression and privilege – an approach termed intersectionality.”

Oppression and constraints on the production of knowledge and the legitimacy of the identities that produce it are not single fold; multiple, interlocking oppressions exist based on race, class, ability, age, sexuality etc. This explanation has been termed intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2000; Hancock; 2007), described by McCall (2005:1771) as “the biggest contribution that women’s studies has made so far”. Intersectional approaches allow for the study of the “intersection” of various forms of oppression, recognising the simultaneous and interlocking nature of socially constructed categories and the range of experiences that this will therefore result in, without offering an additive explanation.

Intersectionality, according to Hancock (2007:64) is based on:

the idea that more than one category should be analysed, that categories matter equally and that the relationship between categories is an open empirical question, that there exists a dynamic interaction between individual and institutional factors, that members within a category are diverse, that analysis of the individual is integrated with institutional analysis, and that empirical and theoretical claims are both possible and necessary.

Intersectionality has its roots in critical race scholarship (Crenshaw, 1991), but it has since been adopted across numerous disciplines as it offers a way to incorporate the complexities of privilege and oppression as well as social identities into the analysis of social phenomena (Cho et al., 2013).

While intersectionality allows for the acknowledgement of the simultaneity of privilege and oppression, intersectional literature has most commonly focussed on groups at the extremes of subordination (Choo and Ferree, 2010) such as those experiencing economic disadvantage in combination with other non-privileged characteristics (see, for example, Duneier, 1999; Edin and Kefalas, 2009). A key aim of feminist research is to provide voice to those rendered silent by oppression, but very few (if any) individuals occupy positions purely of power or oppression (Collins, 2001). As a result, to overlook the intersection of privilege and oppression is to overlook power relations. Allowing the voice of the “sometimes privileged” (Atewologun and Sealy, 2014) to be heard contributes to “knowledge from below” (Calás and Smircich, 2009:6), when below is seen as relative, and the contextuality and simultaneity of privilege and oppression is acknowledged. This is particularly significant for this research, as participants in this study cannot be described simply as “oppressed” - they occupy positions of status and power within the UK Civil Service and, for some, within their trade union. However, a *relative* lack of voice within their union and organisation persists for these somewhat – or sometimes – powerful women.

Recognition of the complexities of overlapping and interacting identities also appears to be highly relevant to the study of trade union identities. The idea of class identity has received significant attention in industrial relations research, and has been privileged as the dominant category of oppression. It has been argued that it is this privileging that has

prevented thorough analysis of other categories (Wajcman, 2001), thereby limiting trade unions' ability to remove the barriers to participation for significant numbers of workers.

Although intersectionality has been widely discussed in feminist research across disciplines as central to the study of inequality, power and social relations (Choo, 2012), a consensus amongst scholars over what, exactly, intersectionality is in methodological terms has yet to be developed (Rodriguez et al. 2016). However, the majority of intersectional scholarship is conducted through feminist qualitative research approaches.

### 4.3 Researching Professional Women's Experiences of Trade Unionism

This section considers the research method selected for this research in more detail, starting with an exploration of the advantages of qualitative interviewing in social science and the interactions with feminist theories. The section sets out an overview of the participants, noting that their elite status within the organisation presented a number of challenges and complexities. The section goes on to consider the structure of the interviews, together with reflections on the positionality of the researcher and the consequent impact on the interviews themselves. Finally, this section explains how access was obtained, and how ethical considerations such as consent, the use of gatekeepers, and anonymity of participant data, were addressed.

#### 4.3.1 Researching Identity – The Research Method

This research adopted a qualitative approach, with semi-structured interviewing as the research method. The interviews were designed to elicit rich data from biographical narratives. This section will firstly discuss the use of qualitative interviewing, further underlining the appropriateness of qualitative rather than quantitative approaches to this project. Subsequently, a more detailed discussion of the process of interviewing will be introduced; and then finally, the use of biographical narrative approach will be discussed in relation to gathering data on the topic of identity.

Historically, social science research aimed to emulate the natural sciences (Flyvberg 2002) and emphasis was placed on objectivity, with concepts such as reliability and validity



considered in the same way as in the natural sciences. A focus was placed on deductive methods, of proving hypotheses, and this approach was reflected in what was seen as interviewing “best practice”.

However, Rubin and Rubin (2005:2) note that in order to answer some more complex questions, social science researchers have developed data collection tools that can gather information by observing, talking with, and listening carefully to, people in their ordinary settings; and today interviewing is an extremely common data collection method in the social sciences as well as medicine and associated fields. Holstein and Gubruim (2003), for example, suggest that we now live in an “interview society”, with interviewing being a data-gathering technique which has permeated not only research but also the media, consultancy, and many other fields.

The selection of interviewing as a research method does not preclude the collection of quantitative data, indeed, conducting quantitative interviews in the form of surveys is both commonplace and may be considered necessary when working with certain target research populations (Babbie, 2010). Nevertheless, there are many differences (beyond the collected data) including the structure of the interview and the interaction between researcher and participant. However, Bryman (2004) suggests that the fundamental difference lies in the focus of the interview. Qualitative interviewers are primarily interested in the interviewees concerns, while quantitative interviewers are more focussed on their own concerns. In this description, a further understanding of the idea of exploratory research can be gained. The qualitative interviewer focusses on the direction provided by the interviewee as they seek to understand why situations occur or certain behaviour is exhibited, rather than attempting to prove a pre-formulated hypothesis. A pre-formulated hypothesis, in the case of this research, would necessarily have been derived from existing knowledge and understanding surrounding trade union participation. As we saw in section 3.2, a dominance of white men in both academia and trade unions themselves (Wajcman, 2000) means that to use this data would once again impose male understandings on to women and prevent any exploration of the female experience of trade unionism. For these reasons, it was essential that this research was designed to be exploratory.

The use of qualitative interviews and the impact of this methodology on the participants and the researcher should also be considered. Corbin and Morse (2003) note that a potential benefit of qualitative interviews is that they may provide catharsis, an opportunity to articulate feelings and anxieties (Hiller and DiLuzio, 2004) and an opportunity for self-reflection; and my own experiences of this are considered further in section 4.3.4 as well as in section 8.7.

Feminist researchers (hooks, 1981; Oakley, 1981; Harding, 1991) believe that interviews, and the production of knowledge that occurs in an interview setting, can provide an opportunity to give voice to marginalised groups – as hooks (1981) puts it, interviews allow the marginalised to “talk back”. Oakley (1981:48) suggests of her own research that “interviewing women was...a strategy for documenting women’s own accounts of their lives”. In this way, interviewing and research cannot be objective (as would be aspired to in positivist research) – instead, feminist researchers seek to bring about change by highlighting inequalities that remain hidden, especially from those in privileged positions. In this way, interviewing may be seen as a political process.

Qualitative research interview projects are particularly useful for exploring and explaining political or social processes, as they can delve into personal issues and understandings of topics and help explore work issues including unions and strikes (Rubin and Rubin, 2005:4) and were therefore particularly well-suited to this research.

As was discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, collective identities have been highlighted as significant in both the workplace (Sachs, 2001) and for trade unions (Waddington and Kerr, 2015), and, as will be explored in Chapters 5 and 6, the ways that individuals position themselves within or outside of a group has implications for their experiences at work and in their trade union. It was, therefore, important that the research method allowed for the collection of collective stories viewed from an individual perspective. The significance of qualitative interviews for those wishing to understand issues of collective identity, and its role as a personal identity resource, is discussed by Miller and Glassner (2003). Interviewing allows participants to discuss their “collective stories”, and depending on the topic of discussion participants may situate themselves as part of a group, sharing a common identity and positioned against alternative groups, seen as “other”. The contradictions in

accounts, as well as common themes, identified through the process of interviewing all provide insights to the researchers as they seek to explore social meanings.

When we consider that identities are not fixed but rather flexible, changing and sometimes contradictory (Beech, 2008), the concept of identity – and the construction of specific forms of identity in an interview setting – can be significant in revealing parts of the social world (Holstein and Gubrium, 2003). It could be argued that the data provided in a qualitative interview is likely to be a distorted reality – participants may wish to present themselves in certain ways, either knowingly or as a subconscious reaction to the researcher. However, the ways in which people choose to present themselves reveals information about the cultural scripts and stereotyping that people use to construct their social worlds (Diefenbach, 2008). As Miller and Glassner (2003) note:

Language shapes meanings but also permits intersubjectivity and the ability of wilful persons to create and maintain meaningful worlds. Recognising this, we cannot accept the proposition that interviews do not yield information about social worlds.

In addition, the ways in which interviewees see themselves and the world around them give insight into motivations for their actions, allowing the researcher to hear and understand which identities were salient to an individual in any given context, accepting the interview itself as a social context where meaning is developed.

Qualitative interviewers explore new areas and unravel new meanings (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). In this way interviews may be treated as a place where knowledge is produced rather than simply collected (Holstein and Gubrium, 2003); by the very process of interviewing, the participant may be constructing meaning that they had not previously assigned to situations. For feminist researchers it is this development of new knowledge that may empower oppressed groups and act as a catalyst for positive change. During the course of this research project, the interview process allowed space for the expression of experiences that were not considered part of the trade union agenda but influenced women's experience at work and as trade unionists. However, the process of asking questions and prompting identity work was, as with any research, not without risk itself. Some lines of enquiry may have created discomfort for the participants, raising negative emotions as they

recounted unpleasant situations or the frustrations they experienced. Of course, these conversations must be both handled sensitively in the interview itself. These risks were also mitigated through the provision of clear information on the topic of the interview in order to allow participants to give their informed consent. Informed consent by participants agreeing to be interviewed is considered fundamental to research ethics (Sin, 2005) and all participants in this study gave their informed consent.

As has been discussed previously, with feminist research positioned as a form of political action research, a question arises around what is done with the data subsequent to the research interview. Within a feminist framework, data should not be “owned” by the researcher alone (Patai, 1991). However, while professing to be aiming for an improvement in conditions for oppressed groups, it is clear that the researcher themselves and the institution to which they belong also have another agenda. As Briggs (2003:251) points out:

Interviews are structured by power asymmetries and by conventions that produce discursively complex material that is geared towards the institutional ends for which it was created.

In the case of academic interviews, it could be argued that a tension exists between the ethical challenges of emancipatory research and the drive to publish academic papers. These tensions are likely to result in interviews being carried out with those considered most academically “interesting” and data being used to highlight issues on the researcher’s agenda rather than the participants’. In this case, it is clear that an aim of the researcher was to achieve a PhD and, if possible, publish papers. However, to address some of the tensions surrounding ownership of the data, findings were shared several times with women’s groups in the FDA trade union, continuing to provide an opportunity for women to discuss experiences and further reflect on the themes present in the interviews. Emerging findings were also presented to executive committees of the FDA and the thesis itself will ultimately be shared with the union; in that sense, the data will, at least to some extent, be “returned” to the women who participated in the study.

In order to explore the interaction of professional, personal and trade unionist identities, the interviews did not confine themselves to particular subjects or periods of time, but were also designed to elicit biographical narratives.

Biographical interviewing provides a means to uncover the interconnectedness between different spheres of life (Gardner, 2001). Focussing on multiple aspects of an individual's life allows for hidden parts of life to be exposed (Perks and Thompson, 2006) – parts of life that may strongly influence decision making and experiences but are not frequently associated with it. This is particularly useful for those interested in the study of gender and its interaction with other social categories, as women and men are so frequently associated with different spheres of life – women the private sphere of the home and domestic, and men with public life. Even with women increasingly engaging and appearing in the public sphere if we consider these different spheres separately then we will fail to capture the full picture of individuals' lived experiences. Researchers must “prize open the different dimensions of lived totality” (Gottfried, 1998:452), using methods which do not constrain individuals' ability to decide for themselves the most significant factors and influences at any given point.

The autobiographical information interviewees provided in interviews formed clear narrative accounts. Working lives are commonly presented in narrative form: for example, a CV is essentially a biographical narrative telling the story of how someone reached their professional position. The information provided to participants ahead of the interviews informed them that parts of the interview would focus on their working lives and in preparing for interview (whether subconsciously or otherwise) participants may well have run through their own CV<sup>3</sup>. Any prompting in the interview was also designed to elicit information in a narrative form; for example. “tell me how you got to be where you are today”.

Narrative interviews allow the researcher to focus deeply on an individual's perceptions and experiences, which, in turn allows researchers to examine the impact of several characteristics simultaneously. (Lewis-Beck et al., 2003). This is crucial for the examination

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<sup>3</sup> Indeed, several participants noted that in “preparing” for the interview, they had thought back to when they had joined the Civil Service and had checked dates and other details of their careers since.

of identities and identification – individuals are not simply the sum of various social categories, but experience each differently; and their experiences change throughout the passage of their lives. By allowing the individual participant to relate their own stories, through narratives of their own choosing, scholars can begin to examine the simultaneity of multiple identities (Holvino, 2010), exposing their interactive and interlocking nature, as well as how context and culture play a part in bringing certain identities into prominence at certain times.

Narrative is also significant to uncovering identities and lived experiences, as lives themselves are intrinsically narrative in nature (Somers, 1994). The fact that individuals construct themselves through storytelling (Holstein and Gubriem, 2000) means that personal stories are an important source of data for researchers seeking to understand lived experiences. This experiential data sheds light not only on what has occurred in the life of the participant, but also how they have understood those events and assigned meaning to them; and how they have been impacted by wider discourses available at the time. Importantly, narratives do not simply tell the story of a life, but can serve as a tool for individuals to develop and confirm their own identities. Narratives allow the individual space to organise, interpret and draw upon their own understanding of their position in wider structures in order to make events and their own actions meaningful and coherent (Lawler, 1999). Narrative practice, therefore, is related to self-actualization, allowing reflection on past events to justify the individual becoming who they always were. Narrative interviewing can thus also be seen as a political method, providing space for the types of reflection which can lead to the empowerment of individuals (Benmayor, 1991; Cockcroft, 2005).

In the construction of narratives, individuals are also likely to show how they identify with and understand collective identities (Sangster, 1994). Such identification indicates how individuals may use social categories as the navigable surface of the power structures in society. In this way, while individuals display agency in selecting which events and collective groups they narrate as important to their stories, this cannot be uncoupled from wider macro structures. As Prins (2006:281) explains:

Our stories of ourselves and others are only partly of our own making: we enter upon a stage already set, and our lives for the most part follow the course of already available narrative scripts. On the other hand, our stories are multi-layered and contradictory; the scripts of gender, race and class play a constitutive role, but never in the same way, never as mere determining factors.

Significantly to the study of identity, narrative interviewing allows individuals to place their identities within the social historical settings in which they were developed. This in turn allows the researcher to capture both the availability of dominant narratives at the time and also changes to identities as influenced by circumstance and cultural or societal changes (Somers, 1994). This is important to intersectional scholarship as the meanings of social categories, and what is available to shape intersecting identities, changes both societally and as a result of changes in the physical self and in different phases of life. This means that justifications of actions and meanings assigned to events change as the world and people in it change, leaving temporal snapshots insufficient for truly capturing the nature of class and privilege, and how it has intersected with oppression over life cycles.

Ultimately, narrative interviewing provides the opportunity for individuals to convey their identity positions as they develop through time and to account for the influence of changes in circumstances and society (Somers, 1994). This is crucial to studying the changing dynamics of power relations. The unique value of narrative inquiry as an intersectional method lies in its ability to capture change. The way people assign meanings to their pasts continues to affect their current identities and influence their future choices (Somers, 1994) and as such intersectional analyses must take into account not only the heterogeneity of social categories but also the individuals' changing experiences of them. As such, it is critical to understand who these women were and how they were selected.

### 4.3.2 The Participants

The participants in this research were 41 female unionised professional Civil servants. All of the participants were members of the FDA Trade Union. The FDA is a public sector trade union which represents managerial and professional civil servants. As such, all of the women in the sample occupied managerial or professional positions in the UK Civil Service; or had

entered the Civil Service as graduate trainees and as such could be described as in the early stages of a professional career.

The number of participants in qualitative research is, while much discussed, an unresolved issue for qualitative researchers (Fusch and Ness, 2015). Generally speaking, qualitative researchers seek a balance between “representativeness” and the depth or quality of the data (Alvesson and Ashcraft, 2012). Too many interviews may result in unwieldy volumes of data whereas smaller samples rely on a very high level of depth and breadth (Cleary et al., 2014).

The concept of "data saturation" (Morse, 1994; Mason, 2010), the point at which no new information is gained from further interviews, is seen by many as a “gold standard” in qualitative research (Guest et al. 2006). However, as Fusch and Ness (2015) note, data saturation means different things to different researchers, making justification of participant numbers on this alone problematic. However, the homogeneity of the sample influences the point at which data saturation can be claimed to have been met: the more homogeneous the sample, the quicker data saturation is reached (Saunders and Townsend, 2016).

The participants in this study were a reasonably homogeneous group – the vast majority were white, university educated women all of whom worked in professional or managerial roles in the UK Civil Service. All were unionised. The sample size was selected on both the probability of data saturation given the quality of the data and the available number of participants. The interviews generated rich data, providing depth; while the number was deemed sufficient to provide some level of representativeness, given the homogeneity of the sample.

As previously mentioned, all of these women occupied managerial or professional positions in the UK Civil Service. While the grading system of the UK Civil Service varies slightly across government department, the table overleaf shows the most common structure:



SCS	Senior Civil servant  (NB divided into SCS1 (Director), 2 (Director General), 3 (Permanent Secretary))
Grade 6	Deputy Director, Senior Policy Manager etc (Old title: Senior Principal)
Grade 7	Deputy Director, Policy Manager etc (Old Title: Principal)
S(E)O	Senior (Executive) Officer
H(E)O	Higher (Executive) Officer
(E)O	(Executive) Officer
AO	Administrative Officer
AA	Administrative Assistant

Table 1: Grading structure of UK Civil Service

The Senior Civil Service comprises approximately the top 1% of the Civil Service in terms of seniority (ONS, 2017). Grades 6 and 7 generally cover skilled technical specialists such as lawyers, accountants, tax inspectors, senior researchers, doctors, economists and so on; as well as administrators with management responsibility for large numbers of lower ranked employees. Graduate Trainees enter government departments at a grade equivalent to H(E)O, with an expectation that they will be promoted to Grade 7 within 3-5 years. The FDA represents Grades 7 and above as well as graduate trainees.

The seniority of participants was as follows: twenty-three were at Grade 7 level or equivalent; eight were graduate trainees; nine were Grade 6 or equivalent; one was a member of the Senior Civil Service. Participants were spread across government departments and locations. Participants were employed by 11 different government departments including large operational departments (the Department for Work and Pensions; Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs; the Ministry of Defence; the Home Office) and agencies (the Crown Prosecution Service; Public Health England); smaller policy orientated departments (for example the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills); and cultural institutions and devolved government (The Scottish and Welsh Government). To protect anonymity of individuals within very small departments, I have not specifically identified the smallest departments. Due to the nature of the Civil Service, the participants were located across the country – London (18), Newcastle and the North East (11), Manchester (6), Edinburgh (2), Glasgow (2), Cardiff (2).

The vast majority of the women in the sample (38 of the 41) had entered the Civil Service with degree level education and as such had either entered as graduate trainees or joined at a lower rank and then joined the Fast Stream or equivalent as internal candidates. Only one participant had progressed through the ranks without being on a specific professional development or internal “high potential” development scheme.

The sample is broadly representative of the grading structure of the Civil Service, particularly when allowing for the gender imbalance at senior grades. A relatively high number of early career professionals (either graduate trainees or newly promoted Grade 7s) engaged with the research, perhaps reflective of lower demands on their time. This resulted in a younger demographic than one would expect, both in terms of employment at senior levels of the Civil Service and participation in a trade union.

Given the high proportion of senior graded roles based in London, it would be expected that the majority of participants work in London. However, the sample contains a disproportionately high number of women employed by HMRC (23 of 41) and women working in the Newcastle and the North East of England. This can be explained by several factors. Firstly, the researcher’s geographical location (Newcastle) meant that it was easiest to access participants who worked locally and Newcastle is home to a large HMRC site (over 6,000 employees); secondly, the Association of Revenue and Customs, the HMRC branch of the FDA, is particularly active, and so its membership is more likely to engage with union literature (and consequently have seen the call for participants).

In terms of trade union participation, as expected, the sample represented higher levels of formal participation than in the membership overall. As previously noted, informal participation was clearly necessary in order for participants to volunteer, but 22 participants had at some point been involved in formal participation, 9 at national level (including two previous presidents).

Richards (1996:199) defined an elite as:

a group of individuals, who hold, or have held, a privileged position in society and, as such...are likely to have had more influence on political outcomes than general members of the public

Taking this definition, the majority of women in the sample can be classed as part an elite due to their position within the Civil Service, although it should be noted that the level of influence held varied significantly within the sample; trainees, for example, are not likely to have exerted much power within the organisation although they are privileged by the organisation and indeed the trade union. A natural assumption therefore would be that the research was mostly focussed on “studying upwards” (Bowman, 2009; Pelsner, 2011). However, for various reasons which will be explained below, the interview dynamic itself could be, for the majority of interviews, better described as “studying sideways” (Pelsner, 2011).

The sense of “studying sideways” was developed, at least in part, through my own characteristics, a large number of which I shared with the women I interviewed, who as noted previously formed a relatively homogeneous group. In part, this was helped by the “insider” status I held through having been a Civil servant and an FDA member (Soni-Sinha, 2008; Chavez, 2008). The majority of women in the sample were university educated and most frequently attended universities that were often high up the league tables; the vast majority were white; many of the women (as we will see in Chapter 5) had grown up in a family with a history of public service; most women (as we will see in Chapter 6) had parents who had been union members. These are all characteristics I share. In addition, I entered the Civil Service as a graduate trainee and had left the Civil Service only two years before beginning the research interviews. I could still “speak the language” of the Civil Service in terms of understanding the many acronyms, grading structures, HR and other policies, and many other aspects of working life within the Civil Service. Many former colleagues remained friends and it should also be noted that my husband, who had joined the Civil Service as a graduate trainee, remained employed there. Many of the trainees and recently promoted women were also similar in age to me (late 20s, early 30s) and as such raised gendered concerns that mirrored my own, such as the practicality of balancing working life with having children or the need for geographical mobility in careers. In essence, many of

these women looked like me, spoke like me and socialised with the same groups of people as I did.

Of course, there were also characteristics I did not share with participants. The majority of the women were older than me and almost all were more senior than I had been upon leaving the Civil Service; these two factors served to limit our shared experiences. In addition, I had spent my time in the Civil Service based in offices in Newcastle and had not at any time been formally based in London, which was a more common route for graduate trainees. For those participants who knew I had previously been a Civil servant, the fact that I was now a PhD student clearly indicated that I was no longer a true insider, and the topic of discussion (employment relations) may have given some indication of my motivations in conducting the research.

A table of participants together with brief information on their seniority, role and level of participation, as well as personal characteristics, can be found in Appendix 1.

### 4.3.3 The Research Interviews

For the interviews, a thematic, biographical approach was selected (Ritchie, 2003) – that is to say that the participating women were aware that the topic of the interviews was related to their professional and trade union lives but would also include some aspects of their home life and experiences outside of work. The research was to follow Gilbert's (1993) principle of interviewing: the "questioning should be as open-ended as possible, in order to gain spontaneous information about attitudes and actions, rather than a rehearsed position" (pp.138), although interviews were controlled to the extent that topics relevant to the purpose of the research were covered.

The interview was typically initiated with an open question, to the effect of "can you tell me a little bit about your background". This question was designed to allow the participants to bring to the forefront issues that they themselves deemed relevant and thereby, in line with an intersectional approach, avoid using predetermined categories of difference. In some cases, this induced a near-monologue which covered the majority of questions on the interview plan without the need for much prompting. For other participants, it was necessary to follow the interview plan more strictly.

The interview plan contained the following guideline areas of discussion–

- Participant’s personal and family background
- Participant’s career
- Participant’s career aspirations
- Joining a trade union (motivations)
- Trade Union career
- Trade Union career aspirations
- Leadership characteristics in the FDA Trade Union
- The impact of gender on professional and trade union career
- Opinions of the union’s representation of women
- Opinions of the union’s representation of individual

During the interview, issues around gender, work, and trade unionism were raised explicitly. While this could be seen as imposing identity categories on participants, the risk of this was already present due to the information the participants had received prior to the interview, which stated that the topic of the research was gender and trade unions.

While class identity is significant in this research, it is not explicitly addressed in the interview plan. As was discussed in section 2.4.3, although the participants in this study did have similar characteristics in terms of class identifiers (such as economic capital, professional status and educational level), they did not uniformly self-identify as middle class, and any directed questions regarding class would have been unlikely to prompt meaningful discussions of class identity. Most commonly, when class was raised explicitly by participants it was in response to questions relating to their personal background, or was raised by participants when revealing points at which class identity was significant in their experiences of working or trade union life.

No other social identities were raised explicitly unless the participant themselves raised them as significant in their own sense-making – in a similar way to class identities, identities based around issues of race, sexuality and disability were raised as a part of participants’ narratives, highlighting the points at which these identities became salient.

Issues of power in an interview setting have been widely discussed in qualitative methodology literature (Plesner, 2011). However, the vast majority of this discussion has surrounded the ethical considerations of interviewing those in a more vulnerable position than the researcher themselves. In section 4.3.2 I described the participants as an elite (see Richards, 1996). Organisational elites may feel compelled to act as “a spokesperson for their company” creating difficulties in encouraging discussions of their positions outside the workplace and their emotions (Rice, 2010). According to Seldon (1988:10), civil servants may be particularly disinclined to reflect emotionally on events, stating that

Civil servants tend to be dispassionate creatures by nature and profession: cat-like, they observe action, storing the information in mental boxes that can yield a rich harvest.

These factors could have presented difficulties in eliciting the richness of data required for the project. However, “insider status” and the sense of studying sideways meant that in the majority of interviews, rapport was quickly developed and allowed participants to move away from a simple recounting of facts to a more in-depth and personal narrative.

Throughout the research interviews, however, power dynamics were complicated by the differing subject positions of both the interviewees and the interviewer. Indeed, even over the course of a single interview, many interviewees positioned themselves as both part of an elite (high ranking civil servant, senior trade unionist) and part of as a disadvantaged group (women, working class). At times, it appeared that interviewees viewed me as having expert status when it came to issues of gender and trade unions, even to the extent of somehow being “above” gendered concerns, at least in the sense that I would not view them with emotion. Some participants looked to me to provide solutions as to how to solve problems either at a personal level (for example, whether to apply for an internal talent programme when trying for a baby) or at an organisational level (such as how to encourage women to join a union branch). The majority of these interactions took place after the tape recording had finished.

Qualitative interviewing can often draw upon experiences of high emotion such as discussion about relationships (Gatrell, 2009), and the researcher will often require the

participants to make part of their private life public. The presence of notepads and tape recorders indicates that the knowledge shared will ultimately be in the control of the researcher, even when that knowledge is intimate or sensitive in nature. This control over the participants' knowledge can be seen to highlight an inequality in power in the interviewer-participant relationship. The removal of a notepad or switching off of a tape recorder may signal the end of the participant's obligation to the researcher and it was perhaps in this space that participants in this study were felt more able to express what they had hoped to gain from the interview process. Of course, I was unable to answer their questions in any expert way, although I did share personal experiences in an effort to reciprocate (See Oakley, 1981). As noted previously in section 4.3.1, qualitative interviews allow for reflection on the part of both the researcher and the interviewee; and it was clear that for many interviewees the interviews provided an opportunity to consider events in their lives and their own decision making and, in some cases, to plan for their future.

In other interviews, particularly with older and more senior women, my position in the interview appeared much more in line with the concept of student – someone to be educated. Some women took time to explain trade union structures, feminist concepts and general historical events with which they presumed I would be unfamiliar. In these interviews my age and lack of seniority (either at the university or previously in the Civil Service) became salient and the power lay with the participants, which meant that keeping the interview focused on my agenda was more difficult. On one notable occasion, a participant had printed out information sheets on the history of Civil Service trade unions. This interview yielded little useable data as my attempts to bring the interview back to my intended biographical narrative approach were not always successful.

The differences in participants' responses lay in part down to issues of disclosure. In 1981, Oakley argued that disclosure of personal information about the researcher to participants created richer data as a sense of intimacy could be created during the interview (see Haynes, 2006; Ellis, 2007). In this research, some participants were interested in knowing about my background and motivation for carrying out the research. When participants asked for information, I disclosed my background in the Civil Service and any other personal information that participants wished to know – during later interviews I was visibly pregnant

and this prompted enquiry into my personal life. This disclosure did allow for more personal and in-depth interviews. Moreover, there were some interviews where I did not disclose such information, particularly pertaining to my background in the Civil Service, and this at times resulted in uncomfortable aspects to some interviews where a participant talked about, for example, a project I had worked on or a team I had worked with without being aware of my knowledge.

As has been discussed previously, I am a former Civil servant and FDA member. This familiarity with the organisation meant I was able to “speak their language” in the sense that I understood the majority of the organisations’ many acronyms, as well as the hierarchy and more subtle issues such as the relative status of different roles and departments within the Civil Service. I believe this helped to quickly develop rapport within the interviews. While I clearly felt the advantages of such “insider status”, I was aware of the risks of my own positionality – most keenly felt was the risk of assuming greater shared understanding than was actually present. In order to combat this, I frequently asked for clarification of issues “for the benefit of the recording” in order to have a record of the participants’ own understanding.

I had also met some of the women before and was aware of some of their feelings towards both the union, their working and their personal lives more broadly. Some of the women I interviewed I considered friends. This, of course, raises issues in the interview. Prior knowledge on both parts needed to be acknowledged (Haynes, 2006), a lack of acknowledgement of pre-existing relationships could have appeared hurtful and damaged relationships and as such I approached any interview with a friend in just that way, I continued to consider and treat the individual as a friend. Pre-existing knowledge also meant that “friend-respondents” (Brewis, 2014) may skip over details they knew I was already aware of and it was necessary to ask friends to state certain information “for the benefit of the tape”.

A further complication of interviewing friends, colleagues and people known to me is that participants’ narratives involved other people with whom I was familiar. In line with Haynes’ (2006) approach, I was careful in my response not to reveal any information about other respondents.



A further quandary caused by my insider status was in cases where participants told me things I knew to be factually incorrect. In these situations, I found a clear tension between the feminist values underpinning the research (the aim to improve the situation for women) and a practical desire not to damage rapport in the interview itself. For example, during one interview a participant stated that there were no SCS members of the FDA and this was presented as a barrier to participation. I knew this to be untrue, but did not want to interrupt the participant or even embarrass the participant through correcting her; even though this may have reduced her own unease with her union membership. On reflection, I could have addressed this after the interview but was prevented from doing so by the power dynamic within the interview – the participant wished to be seen as the expert and, on some level, I did not wish to undermine that.

Finally, some interviews were complicated by my own relationship with other individuals known to the interviewee. One interview which seems particularly worthy of reflection was one with my husband's line manager. My own identity as "wife" was clearly salient at this point and the interview represented, for me, an uncomfortable overlap between personal and professional lives. Prior to the interview I had not met the participant but I did know some things about her and she knew things about me, things that I had not directly disclosed. This, combined with my position as the wife of a subordinate led to my concern that the interview dynamics would not lead to a very successful interview. However, power dynamics in interviews are fluid (Tang, 2002) and multiple identities co-exist simultaneously (Brown, 2015) meaning that my initial assessment of potential barriers was over simplistic. As Bola (1996) suggests, similarities between respondents and interviewers are not simply a result of issues such as gender or status but may be a result of past experiences. During the interview, the similarities between researcher and interviewee were apparent and the interview was comfortable, resulting in a very rich, deep narrative. As with some other interviews, a friendship developed subsequent to this interview, the impact of which I will discuss under section 4.5.

#### 4.3.4 Access, Participation and Data Gathering

All participants of this research were members of the FDA trade union. The FDA describes itself as having "an influential membership of more than 18,000 senior managers, policy

advisors, diplomats, tax professionals, economists, solicitors, prosecutors and other professionals work across Government and the NHS.”<sup>4</sup> It is affiliated to the Trades Union Congress, but notably describes itself as “a professional association” as well as a trade union for senior members of the Civil Service, suggesting that it positions itself as having an identity in line with what Boxall and Haynes (1997) would describe as a “consultancy union”, representing the professional middle classes.

In line with this, the FDA has not historically engaged in direct confrontation in the form of industrial action but rather describes itself as “working in partnership” and “engaging” with employers. However, as employment relations with the government became increasingly tense, in 2011, the FDA announced the first strike in its history due to changes to pensions. In 2014, the Association of Revenue and Customs, the HMRC branch of the FDA, went out on strike in opposition to changes in their terms and conditions and the introduction of a new performance management system.

Access to the trade union members for the purposes of this research was agreed with the General Secretary and the President of the FDA Trade Union in exchange for some anonymised sharing of data, including presentations of emerging findings to branch executive committees as well as to women’s and diversity groups within the union.

In order to gain access to the FDA trade union, I was introduced to the General Secretary by a former colleague, mentor and friend who had also been a senior official within the union. Following this introduction, a meeting was arranged to formally discuss my research and any implications it would have for the FDA. At the time, the FDA was experiencing perhaps the most hostile employment relations environment in the union’s living memory and senior civil servants were concerned about negative publicity. As a result, and in line with feminist research approaches (see section 4.2), I clearly stated that my intention as a researcher was to seek ways to enable women’s trade union participation and that it was not intended as a criticism of trade unionism in itself nor of the FDA.

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<sup>4</sup> Source: [www.fda.org.uk](http://www.fda.org.uk) (last accessed 25/01/18)

As with many studies in the social sciences, this research involved a gatekeeper, namely the General Secretary of the FDA together with other FDA trade union officials. Gatekeepers can be described as “those in a position to “permit” access to others for the purpose of interviewing” (Miller and Bell, 2002:62). Gatekeepers offer a more expedient way to access populations that would be otherwise hard to reach (Clark, 2011); and in this case the FDA had access to contact details for all its members and could facilitate meetings, offer use of its offices and assist with issues such as security passes. Although the use of gatekeepers and the ethical implications for informed consent, particularly for vulnerable groups has been considered by researchers (see, for example, Heath et al., 2007; Wiles et al., 2007), in this case the participants were educated, professional women and the gatekeeper was an advisory organisation with no authority over its members.

However, gatekeepers also have their own priorities, aims and concerns and as such the development of a positive working relationship with such gatekeepers is key for gaining and maintaining access (Clark, 2011). A key element to my ability to gain and maintain access was the development of trust based, at least in part, on my previous membership of the union. Grant (2017) suggests that researchers may embark on a form of identity work to create or maintain insider status when requiring access to sample populations. In wishing to maintain my own insider status, I maintained associate membership of the FDA, revealing myself to be a supporter of the FDA.

To access participants, a request for volunteers was sent to all FDA members as part of the Union’s regular emailed communication, and was also included on the FDA’s website. The criteria for volunteers were simply for them to be female and members of the FDA. Volunteers were asked to email the researcher directly in order to arrange an interview. The vast majority of interviews were arranged in this manner. However, some later interviews were arranged by a direct approach, and this was particularly true for some of the most active members whose contact details were openly available through the trade union website. The first (and most significant) phase of interviews was conducted between November 2013 and March 2014, with the remaining interviews staggered throughout the following 18 months.

The self-selecting nature of the sample may have impacted the data collected, as all volunteers were already engaged in informal participation in trade union activities (this would have been necessary for them to have been aware of the research through trade union literature, such as newsletters and the website). It is also likely that more active members would have been more likely to volunteer for interview. Diefenbach (2008:880) explains that “in the case of research primarily based on interview data the selection of interviewees decides whose worldviews, opinions and interests will be taken into account – and whose will be ignored and excluded”.

Although more than 41 responses were received to the original request for participants, in practice the availability of these senior professionals meant that some were not able to be interviewed. The FDA represents members across the UK, and interviews were arranged in locations where there were several volunteers available on the same day. This was due to the high cost of travel and in order to maximise time in any one location. Interviews were conducted in participants’ homes, offices, the FDA offices or public spaces such as cafes and bars. While interviewing participants in their own home could be seen to present a slight increase in risk to the researcher, this risk was considered negligible given the characteristics of the sample group and the familiarity that the researcher had with some participants. As a former civil servant, I had undergone security clearance and was therefore able to access government buildings. This facilitated the arrangement of interviews as it meant that participants could be interviewed in time gaps they had in their schedule at a location convenient to them. It also meant that in most buildings I was able to be unescorted when entering or leaving, again reducing the time burden on the participants.

Interviews lasted between thirty minutes and just over two hours. The participants’ elite status raises practical problems when researching such a group, including, for example, lack of availability, and limited access (Rice, 2010). Many of the women interviewed did indeed have hectic calendars and it was necessary to fit interviews into slots between their work commitments, resulting in some interviews that were curtailed or more time pressured than would have been ideal.

Interviews were, with the participants’ consent, recorded and transcribed in full. The data was anonymised and stored confidentially. Participants were advised that they could

request a copy of the transcript as well as access to the final version of the thesis. All demonstrated interest in hearing conclusions drawn in the thesis, but at the time of writing none of the participants has yet requested a copy of their transcript.

Prior to commencing data collection, this project underwent full ethical review at Newcastle University and was approved in September 2013. In line with University ethical requirements, all participants were provided with information sheets (see appendix 2). All participants were given the opportunity to ask questions regarding the project and their own participation in it before being asked to provide written consent (see appendix 3). Following interviews, participants were sent a debrief form via email (see appendix 4), which reminded participants of their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

#### 4.4 Data Analysis

As has been discussed throughout this chapter, the research adopted an exploratory approach, seeking to avoid the imposition of categories onto participants and to allow the participants to give their own meanings and significance to events, decisions and actions that influenced their experiences of trade union participation. As such, an inductive approach to the data analysis was adopted. When an inductive approach is used, codes, categories, or themes are directly drawn from the data – as opposed to a deductive approach which will begin with preconceived ideas drawn from existing theory (Cho and Lee, 2014). As was discussed in section 4.3.1, the use of pre-existing “male” understanding would not have been appropriate in this research, which explicitly aimed to give women themselves a voice.

41 narratives were collected from participants through the interviews. These narratives were “textualised” (Clandinin, 2006), in that they were transformed to text through word for word transcription. As Van Maanen (1988:95) points out: “only in textualized form do data yield to analysis”. Following this, an inductive approach to the analysis of narratives was adopted, with the aim of find common themes across the stories (Polkinghorne, 1995).

The categorisation of data was a recursive process of reading, identifying common themes or concepts and repeating the process until data could be fitted into derived categories. Polkinghorne (1995) suggest that during the process of narrative analysis the researcher

seeks links between derived categories, creating various subcategories. Subcategories included causal factors (for example, family background in relation to joining a trade union) and further description (for example, “lack of time” as a barrier to trade union participation was significant to participants due to factors such as family commitments, work related pressures or simply the time cost of travel to London).

Word for word transcription of the recording began a process of immersion in the data (Ritchie and Spencer, 2002), and transcripts were matched to notes made at the time of the interview. Manual coding then followed, with commonly raised issues noted and considered in light of other factors such as the characteristics of the participant. Some early attempts to unravel individual participants’ narratives were made at this point.

The nature of the research meant that, through initial contact with the researcher, the participants revealed information that is classed as “sensitive” under the Data Protection Act 1998: namely, their trade union membership. Further to this, other sensitive personal information such as racial or ethnic identity, religious belief, sexual orientation, physical disability, mental health and political beliefs were frequently revealed over the course of the interviews. In light of this, the anonymity of participants has been a significant consideration over the course of this research. Following transcription, primary identifiers such as name and specific job title were removed from the data to protect anonymity.

Following this phase the data was transferred to NVIVO to facilitate analysis. While the research interviews had been designed to avoid additive, categorical analysis, participants tended to use commonly understood categories of social difference (such as race, gender, sexuality) sequentially and assign specific experiences to one specific salient identity. This meant that many experiences could be initially coded as pertaining to one specific characteristic.

Emergent themes were organised by topic; for example, data relating to different forms of participation in trade unions was coded and then further analysed to allow for more in-depth exploration of the different forms of participation and associated motivations and barriers.

Initial analysis of participants' narratives around trade union participation was coded using topics from the interview guide; for example, data nodes were created covering reasons for joining a trade union, and participation. Under these headings, participants' responses to, for example, why they joined a union were grouped thematically under nodes created on the basis of frequent responses such "family background", "networking opportunities" and "insurance policy". Similarly, data which discusses experiences of informal and formal participation was collated, with motivations for and barriers to participation again grouped thematically under nodes such as "time constraints", or "helping others" which allowed an easy assessment of the most commonly cited barriers and motivations.

Findings related to experiences of working life have been grouped by emergent themes in participants' narratives including common themes around their perception of their working environment, employment relations issues, and perceptions of both "blockers" and "facilitators" to career progression.

The data was also grouped by characteristics of participants (such as level of seniority or extent of participation) in order to allow for analysis of how different identities may impact upon experiences of and perception of the trade union. A number of these groupings failed to yield results of significant interest – for example, the difference between the experiences and narratives of those at Grade 7 versus those at Grade 6. Such groupings were therefore discarded in favour of those which showed more promise. It also appeared that certain groupings were perhaps acting as proxies: for example, there appeared significant difference between trainees and non-trainees, but participants within the former categorisation were, on average, significantly younger than those within the latter.

Due to the frequency of age, marital status and motherhood being raised as significant identities, participants were, where possible, also grouped by these factors. However, having not asked for this specific information, not all participants could be included in these groups – a very small number of participants did not raise children or relationship status when asked about their background and personal life; ages were based on dates given during interviews (such as "I started work in 1980") and this resulted in any grouping of participants being only approximate.

This research adopted an intersectional approach, allowing the women in the sample to explain which identities were salient and influenced their experiences at any given time. It was recognised that women in the sample would have experienced their working lives and their trade unionist identities in a number of different ways depending on various factors. Class identity has been linked to the ideology of trade unionism (Hyman, 2001) and as such has been explicitly discussed in this thesis (see section 2.4). However, due to the complexities of class identity (see, for example, Bottero, 2004), class itself was not raised directly by the researcher during interviews. Despite this, concepts of social class were significant to participants (see, in particular, sections 5.2; 5.4; and 6.2). Class identity ran through narratives pertaining to family background, experiences of working and trade union life and was frequently associated with the institutions with which the participants interacted. In addition, class was often raised in relation to changing status. As such, it was not possible to have a single node for class experiences; instead, analysis of class positioning was done manually and through the consideration of transcripts as a narrative document. It was not my intention to impose class identity on individual participants, but for ease of presenting the findings, I have used the terms “working” or “middle” class to express the sentiment of participants.

The process of coding the data involved the exploration of narratives to organise the data thematically. In doing so, some of the complexity of narratives was lost – the overlapping parts of individuals’ lives could not be captured using only segments of transcripts. To return some of the richness of the narratives back to the findings, some transcripts have been presented in the findings as vignettes of participants.

Reflexivity throughout the process of analysis has been acknowledged as an important part of qualitative data analysis (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003) and recognising the researcher’s positionality within the research is an integral part of such reflection. In section 4.3.4, the impact of friendship and insider status on the research interviews was discussed in relation to power dynamics within the interview. However, the impact of this must also be considered during the analysis of the data. There was some risk of my own experiences creating a bias. However, the number of participants interviewed meant that clear themes emerged. The homogeneity of the sample also meant that there was clear repetition of



phrases and frequently participants discussed the same incidents. This reduced the risk of bias to some extent.

In section 4.3.3 I highlighted how some interviews were conducted with friends or people who became friends. Due to this, ex-ante and ex-post data was available to me as a researcher; I knew some things that had happened prior to the interview and I knew, for some women, what happened next in their narratives. This information was excluded from the research due to ethical issues of consent – women were aware that what was recorded on the tape was used as data but had not consented to any longer-term involvement in the research project. In addition, as I was not aware of all women's on-going stories the data could not be used to explore themes or draw any conclusions.

In cases where participants gave information I knew to be inaccurate, their data was nevertheless included in the analysis, as the research sought participants' perceptions of their careers and their trade union. What they believed to be true influenced decision making and experiences within both the trade union and the workplace and was therefore valid data.

The importance of anonymity has already been discussed earlier in this section; and in developing the findings, reference to the actual grade of a participant or the government department in which they work has been avoided as much as possible. Direct quotations from participants are presented alongside pseudonyms. However, some of the discussion within the findings (Chapters 5 and 6) required participants to be grouped by characteristics such as level of participation in the trade union or career stage to allow identification and exploration of specific themes. No individual is identified within a grouping, and therefore it is not possible to cross-reference; in this way anonymity has been maintained.

## 4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has detailed the approach taken to designing this research project. The suitability of a feminist approach has been highlighted – this research sought to uncover women's own experiences and understanding of trade union participation, and in doing so sought to ultimately improve women's representation in their union. In line with much feminist research, a qualitative approach was adopted, which avoided the imposition of

predetermined categories onto the women who participated. Instead, women were given the opportunity to raise the issues that they themselves found significant in their experiences of working and trade union life.

Reflections on the research process have been included throughout this chapter. The complex and ever-changing dynamics between the researcher and the researched and my own positionality as a “sometimes insider” have reflected upon from the perspective of methodological considerations. A further reflection on the research process as a whole is contained in Chapter 8, specifically section 8.7.

The next two chapters present the findings from this research. The first of the findings chapters presents how women experience their working lives in the UK Civil Service, with the following chapter presenting the data relating specifically to women’s trade union activity.

# Chapter 5: Being a Professional Woman in the UK Civil Service

## 5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents data related to the first research question: How do professional women experience working life within the UK Civil Service?

As has been previously noted, all of the participants in this research occupied professional roles within the Civil Service, enjoying a privileged position within the organisation, whether in terms of current seniority or, for graduate trainees, anticipated seniority. However, across the UK Civil Service, women in senior grades are a minority. These women are likely to experience their working lives in a qualitatively different way from their male peers and therefore how they perceive their working environment, their professional identities and the employment relations issues present in their working lives is likely to also differ. This chapter considers the ways in which women discussed their working lives, from joining the Civil Service through to their current day to day experiences.

Contained within this chapter are vignettes which reconstruct the narratives of three of the participants. In the presentation of the findings, the narratives of the participants have been deconstructed in order to allow a presentation of the emergent themes contained across participants' narratives. However, the breaking down of these accounts into isolated parts limits the presentation of the intersectional dimension of the narratives. As such, three women's stories have been returned to a narrative form and included in the findings to highlight the complexities and multiplicity of identities and the overlapping nature of different spheres of life; and to illustrate the way many women moved between trade unionist and professional or managerial identities over the course of their careers.

This chapter is organised as follows. Firstly, an overview of the Civil Service as an organisation is presented, in order to situate the following findings in context. Secondly, the ways in which these women's professional identities are developed and maintained in the Civil Service is discussed. Thirdly, the intersections between private and public identities and the way in which these intersections influence women's experiences at work are explored.

Finally, section 5.5 demonstrates the ways in which professional and personal identities influence what are considered key employment relations issues for this group of trade unionists.

## 5.2 The UK Civil Service and its Employees

The Civil Service is a permanent bureaucracy of Crown employees (that is those accountable to the reigning monarch), that supports the UK government in the implementation and administration of policies. In the UK, Civil servants are defined as staff who are “politically impartial and independent of government and work in central government departments, agencies, and non-departmental public bodies”<sup>5</sup>. The Civil Service is made up of a number of occupations and professions, including policy, operational delivery, and various corporate functions and specialisms such as law and medicine<sup>6</sup>

The enduring “Sir Humphrey” stereotype of civil servants<sup>7</sup>, conjuring up images of white, middle class men in bowler hats, belies a large and fairly diverse workforce across the Civil Service as a whole. The latest figures released by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) show that as of March 2017, there were 419,399 civil servants of whom 54% were women, 11.6% ethnic minorities and nearly 10% were disabled. However, at senior levels the old stereotypes become increasingly pertinent: women, ethnic minorities and disabled members of staff are less likely to occupy senior grades, with proportionate representation decreasing with seniority. For example, in Grades 6 and 7, which may be thought of as the feeder grades for the Senior Civil Service, the proportions of disabled, ethnic minority and female staff are respectively 7.0%, 8.7% and 45%; this compares with 10%, 12% and 58% at the lowest grades (AA/AO).

As was presented in Table 1, in chapter 4, section 4.3.1., the Civil Service currently operates a formal bureaucratic grading structure, placing all employees on a hierarchical scale which cuts across professions and departments. The grade of an employee demonstrates their

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<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/professions>

<sup>7</sup> Sir Humphrey Appleby was a fictional character from the British television series *Yes, Minister*. The character was a pastiche of a senior civil servant: he had attended public school and Oxbridge, and as a civil servant was aloof and elitist, looking with contempt on the Ministers he served. The phrase “Sir Humphrey”, or sometimes “bowler-hatted Sir Humphrey” is used by British media to refer, disparagingly but affectionately, to (particularly more senior) civil servants.

seniority in relation to others in the Civil Service, as opposed to the tasks or job role the employee is required to fulfil (although grades should, at least in theory, be indicative of the level of complexity involved in the employees' work).

While pay increases come with each step up the organisational ladder, the history of the Civil Service Grading system lends symbolic significance to certain grades. Until the late 1960s, the Civil Service was divided into three 'classes' – the administrative class, the executive class and the clerical class. These classes were indicative of both organisational status and the social class background of entrants – the administrative class, which was made up of today's Grade 7, 6, Senior Civil Service and graduate Fast Stream, was drawn from university graduates; while others could join the clerical or executive classes. Promotion between the classes was not permitted. While the "administrative class" no longer formally exists, the "Sir Humphrey" stereotype rings most true in the grades that were formerly a part of it.

In the 1980s TV series "Yes, Minister" Sir Humphrey was a privately educated, Oxbridge graduate from an upper middle-class background. Today, while individuals may be promoted through the ranks, the grades of the former administrative class remain occupied by graduates from high ranking universities: for example, 57% of permanent secretaries attended Oxbridge (Milburn, 2012); Oxbridge graduates were more likely to both apply to and be appointed as Fast Streamers<sup>8</sup>; and the extent of Oxbridge dominance has led some commentators to suggest it as a key characteristic of the Senior Civil Service (see Greer and Jarman, 2010). Beyond university attendance, the class background of entrants to the Fast Stream remains privileged – in 2015 fewer than 4% of candidates offered a place on the graduate Fast Stream came from working-class backgrounds compared with 80% for those whose parents worked in senior managerial, administrative or professional occupations (Dudman, 2017). According to recent statistics, 48% of Senior Civil servants were privately educated (Kirkby, 2016), compared with 7% of the overall UK population. The statistics therefore support the common stereotype that the higher ranks of the Civil Service remain the preserve of the privileged.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/blog/civil-service-fast-stream-six-charts>

### 5.2.1. Women in the Civil Service

Women have had a long history of service in the UK Civil Service, with the first women appointed as civil servants in the postal service in 1869 (prior to this, women were employed as housekeepers or “necessary women” but not considered “civil servants”) (Morgan, 2018) Although women were employed in much greater numbers during the first world war, they were barred from taking up positions of seniority until 1925 and were required to resign upon marriage until 1946 (or, in the case of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, until 1972). In 1955, Evelyn Sharp became the first woman to reach the highest level of the Civil Service, Permanent Secretary, having entered the Civil Service Fast Stream in 1926 (one year after women were permitted to join the Fast Stream). Evelyn Sharpe’s appointment, however, proved to be an anomaly rather than a pattern and only one other female permanent secretary was appointed before 1993. Today, 5 out of 36 permanent secretaries are female, down from a peak of 8 in 2011.

Despite slow and uneven advancements in reaching equal representation at the very top of the Civil Service, progress has been made. In 1950, 8% of the “administrative class” were women. However, by the 1960s awareness of this as a problem was growing and in 1971 the Kemp-Jones Committee made a number of recommendations that aimed to help women gain access to the higher levels of the Civil Service (Morgan, 2018). While the number of senior women did increase, it was not until the mid-1990s that the Civil Service saw the beginnings of significant progress towards gender equality in the higher ranks: in 1996, women made up 17% of the SCS, but today it is 42%. During this period, women were also increasingly appointed to the Fast Stream, and by 1999 50% of appointees were women. However, while the overall picture shows progress in gender balance, horizontal segregation is still strongly apparent in the UK Civil Service, with some departments making much slower progress than others. For example, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Ministry of Defence have significantly lower levels of women in the Senior Civil Service (at 33% and 29% respectively) while in the Department for Education nearly 60% of Senior Civil Servants are women.

This context is crucial in understanding how women identify within an organisation which, although it has changed significantly over recent decades, remains to some extent

dominated in its upper echelons by the traditional stereotype of a middle-aged white male worker.

## 5.3 Professional Identities

The development, negotiation and regulation of professional identity was key to women's experiences at work. In this section, women's professional identity is discussed in relation to two competing organisational discourses – that of public service ethos and New Public Management.

### 5.3.1 Public Service Ethos

For many participants, joining the Civil Service was the result of a search for a career which would fit with how they viewed their core self-identity. Participants frequently identified with values of social responsibility, altruism and fairness, and felt working in the Civil Service was a direct positive contribution to society. The following quotations are typical responses when asked about why they chose to apply to work in the Civil Service:

So when I go to work, I contribute to making the UK a better place. When I was at the bank, I was not. (Adele)

I had my own personal ambitions about what I wanted to achieve in terms of helping save the world! (Lilian)

The values presented as being part of participants' core selves were typically articulated as being linked to family background. Family member (particularly parental) careers were heavily influential in shaping participants' career aspirations. For the majority, this was narrated as "following in the footsteps" of their parents, who had had professional public sector careers in areas such as teaching or medicine. For this group of participants, joining the Civil Service represented a continuation of a family tradition of service alongside the maintenance of middle class careers and status.

I wanted originally to be a lawyer and then decided I didn't want to be a lawyer any more so I joined the Civil Service instead. Which was kind of a bit of a compromise ... but I thought the Civil Service would be a better option

for me, partly because it's a bit more about helping people and although I would have done that as a lawyer, hopefully, it was more about that, that kind of service element and that's kind of partly from my family background. My dad is a priest, my mum was a teacher (Holly)

For other participants, a professional career in the Civil Service could be seen as a shift in class status, demonstrating upward social mobility. However, in these cases background was still articulated as being strongly influential on career aspirations; and the perception of the Civil Service as a worthy profession facilitated a sense of it fitting with previous identity work and family tradition.

I always kind of wanted to work in the public sector ... nobody believes me when I say that! This is probably jumping ahead a little bit, but when I was born, my Dad was a miner, in the Eighties and I've always been brought up quite left-wing, I would say – quite aware of social responsibility. (Kate)

### 5.3.2 Professional or Manager? The Contested Role of Management

While women in this study occupied the management grades of the Civil Service, they did not narratively position themselves as managers in the organisation. Instead, the participants positioned themselves as “experts”, anchoring their work identity to their professions. They took particular pride in the complexity of their work and the impact it has on the lives of the general public. The below quotations are typical of the ways in which women described their roles, giving primacy to their technical training and specific professional area rather than considering their managerial positions or seniority as significant:

By training, I am an archaeologist and so what I do is both to work with and research museum collections as well as making them accessible to both the academic and general public. (Andrea)

I'm sort of very much “IT profession” ... (Anna)



I'm a tax professional, I completed a four year training course with my employer to become qualified to do it. (Gemma)

For the majority of women, the intellectual challenge their jobs provided was key to feeling fulfilled in the role, with the ability to demonstrate technical expertise being key to developing and maintaining positive professional identity.

It is a great thing to do and it fulfils you in many ways – I have got the technical ability, you know, the brain; I was managing people; I was talking to accounts; I was representing the department at tribunals and this sort of thing so it was really good. So I enjoyed it and it is very rewarding. (Pauline)

I do like the work, and it's really interesting, and it's definitely intellectually demanding. (Becky)

So now I work in an area where I'm at a senior management grade, but I do technical work – so I don't actually manage anybody, which is fantastic (Joanne)

For participants, the role of management was contested, to the extent that it often seen to detract from the status of "professional". While rising through the hierarchies usually led to some level of people management responsibility, participants were generally keen to avoid it where possible, preferring to anchor their work identity to the technical skills and professional or occupational areas. Trainees were also conscious of the negatives associated with management responsibility and often expressed that some managerial responsibilities would not align with their view of their "core self" or their professional identities, which, as will be discussed in section 5.3.3, had a negative impact on their career aspirations.

Despite this, the transition from Grade 7 to Grade 6 nearly always meant the addition of line management responsibilities. For women newly promoted to Grade 6, the addition of these responsibilities on top of their technical work led to feelings of work-intensification, self-doubt and an increased sense of vulnerability in the workplace.

I've only been a manager for six months – and this is the first time I've ever managed people. I've managed work before, but that's sort of different.  
Completely different ball game (Becky)

The feeling of management being separate or different from the job is demonstrated by the above quotation from a recently promoted woman in their mid-thirties, working in a highly technical profession (law) and who did not readily identify with “manager” as part of their professional identity.

For those that did take on managerial positions, the process of doing so was often described as an unwanted consequence of progression. The work involved with management was frequently seen as separate or distinct from the participants' profession and “true” role within the organisation; and as such, often put strain on individuals both in terms of time pressure but also in terms of professional identity:

I do have too much work – like, more than I can possibly do – and I don't have enough time to do my management as well, which is very hard; being a new manager is very difficult, and so I do feel completely overloaded. (Becky)

Management also appeared to take an emotional toll on individuals due to feelings of responsibility that went beyond the professional:

When it's your own people, and you have to deliver difficult messages to people... it's much more personal; and you feel much more responsible.  
(Beryl)

Where positive managerial identity was displayed, this appeared to be grounded in concepts aligned with public service ethos – managers wanted to be seen to be honest and as having integrity. Indeed, management as a role was adapted to be a caring, people-orientated task rather than one of delivery or target-hitting:

I never did anything that I didn't believe was the right thing to do and I think one of things that would mark my career is that I care about people including when, at the end, I had 28,000 of them but I cared about the people in the

team and I very very much cared about the customers and what we were doing there and believed in that and didn't do anything I didn't think was the right thing to do. (Michelle)

## MICHELLE

Michelle was a memorable participant in several ways. She was one of the few that was not university educated but, in spite of that, she was the most senior of the women interviewed. She had been heavily involved with her union despite growing up in a right-wing environment. Her narrative could most easily be characterised by the number of times she experienced being “the first” or “the only”.

Michelle grew up in an industrial Northern town in a relatively well-off family. She attended, as seemed to be expected in her family, grammar school until A-levels. At school, she had become politically aware, joining the International Socialists and setting up a politics society in her school. She describes her political persuasions as being at odds with her “Tory voting family” and having arisen from “a sense of justice and fairness”.

Michelle left school with A-levels at 18, seeking independence. Much to her family's disapproval – her family believed that “working in a record shop was not at all a suitable career” – she took work in retail. However, family pressure resulted in Michelle joining the Civil Service: “In the end I think [family disapproval] got to me and I joined the Civil Service.” Due to her A-level qualifications, Michelle joined as an Executive Officer (EO), the rank below graduate trainee. The environment she joined in the mid-1970s was not one that encouraged women's progression: “In the whole of the region at the time there was only one women above EO and she was an SEO in personnel. She was the only one”.

Michelle joined a trade union immediately upon joining the Civil Service because she “couldn't imagine life not in a union” given her political outlook. She became very active

very quickly and progressed through the union hierarchy despite facing resistance from male trade unionists who were “horrified that I might go on and do more”. She moved into national union politics through women’s groups set up to give space for women to voice their concerns; and became a full-time union rep. She attributes her move into this position as down to luck that she was identified as having potential and was unofficially mentored by someone in a position of power within the union. However, she describes the environment she worked in as “intolerably shocking”, with the majority of [male] union representatives believing that minute taking was a more appropriate role for a woman.

After four years as a full-time union rep, although it was “deeply controversial for a full time union rep to go back to full-time work”, Michelle felt she “was losing some authenticity somehow...people were viewing me differently because I had been doing it for a while...so it was like “well that’s what you’d expect her to say isn’t it?””, and consequently decided to return to work within the Civil Service: “the big catalyst for change for me was there was an internal development scheme and I applied for that and got on it”. This marked the beginning of a phase of several moves around the country, the break-up of her first marriage and rapid promotion. As Michelle puts it “I have made choices and prioritised work”.

During this phase of career progression, Michelle often found she was overtly aware of her gender, being the first female district manager and the first female area director but, despite these successes, she reflects on her career with some sense of regret. Had it not been for being a woman she believed

It would have been a lot more comfortable, I think a lot of stuff I had to do was very uncomfortable. I think I would have got promoted faster, I don’t think it would have taken so long to get going. I think I might have ended up in a different place.

For example, despite working successfully on an Information Technology project, in what was “was very much a male driven world”, Michelle was discouraged from a career in IT. Following an application to work in a more permanent position within the developing IT

department, she was rejected without explanation by the director who: “just couldn’t believe that I wanted to move into this IT role and, basically said no”.

Ultimately, despite such setbacks, Michelle became a member of the Senior Civil Service, in charge of 28,000 people in an operational department. She considered her managerial position as being characterised by caring and seeking to do the right thing:

I had 28,000 [staff] but I cared about the people in the team and I very very much cared about the customers and what we were doing there and believed in that and didn’t do anything I didn’t think was the right thing to do

Throughout her progression through the ranks, Michelle had remained a member of the trade union she had worked for in her earlier career. She remained within that union long after she became eligible for FDA membership as she had wished to demonstrate solidarity with her staff. She did not consider her union membership at odds with her managerial position, believing that both the unions and managers wanted the best for both workers and the public in general.

However, following a “particularly rude and bruising encounter” with the general secretary of her own trade union, Michelle decided to join the FDA, describing this moment as “a big decision actually and I felt quite emotional about it.” Her union membership had been an important part of her personal and professional life and Michelle still considered herself firmly as one of the workers, viewing the FDA as representing those in policy rather than operational roles. As a consequence, although she remained a member, Michelle has never become active in her new union.

### 5.3.3 Ambition and Talent in the UK Civil Service

The majority of the women self-identified as “ambitious” or “driven”; this was perhaps unsurprising, given that the participants had either been identified as high-potential, were engaged in accelerated career progression, or had achieved significant seniority. However, with the exception of those who were close to retirement, almost all participants presented

this ambition through a desire to explore career paths and opportunities – both horizontally and on promotion – and develop new skills.

While it has been reported that younger workers have a preference for “portfolio careers” (Clarke, 2013; 2015), typified by regular moves and involving different employers, the younger participants in this study showed a strong level of commitment to the Civil Service. When asked about their future career, the majority of younger participants framed their responses only within possible Civil Service career tracks. The reasons given for this were threefold – firstly, public service ethos resulted in limited opportunities for job satisfaction elsewhere; secondly, the diversity of roles allowed young employees to have a portfolio career within the Civil Service; and thirdly, there are clear career trajectories available to graduate entrants. The below quotations from three women in their twenties (one trainee and two recently promoted Grade 7s) demonstrate that age range’s typical sentiment:

I think they’ve made career progression quite easy and straightforward, there is a desire to get to the next step; and I think I will probably find myself constantly chasing the next step (Debra)

I would stay with my employer for a long time. I would like to have tried working in a few different roles, possibly promotion at some point in the future, but that’s not top of my wish list. It’s more sort of getting satisfaction out of doing the job. (Daisy)

I think I could get a job at Grade 6 but it might not necessarily be a job that I want to do, not my perfect job, but then if I have got that Grade 6 eventually I might be able to move. Obviously I wouldn’t stop in that job then but I could move sideways into different roles. I don’t ever want to stay in the same position for too long because I am only 30, so I just feel like there are so many more jobs I could do... (Flora)

However, for many the extent of their ambition was capped by uncertainty surrounding the compatibility of life in the Senior Civil Service with family life, which is explored in more depth below in section 5.4.

As was discussed in section 5.3.2, ideas of management were contested amongst this group of women. These negative views of management, and a preference to avoid people management where possible, created a further cap on ambitions to progress through the hierarchies came from negative views of management as a role:

I just kind of want to do the job as opposed to fending off different people and keeping certain people happy. Essentially, I think you almost use all of your time doing that and that is not me. You have got to very much follow the party line all the time and I wouldn't be good at that. (Delia)

This quotation demonstrates how, for many participants, management roles involved activities and traits that were not seen as desirable or part of their identity, for example management roles were seen to be associated with compliance with more senior management, politics and “toeing the party line” (as opposed to critical thinking and technical expertise). As such, a transition to active management of people would be difficult.

## 5.4 Private Lives, Public Faces – The Intersections of Professional and Private Identity

The experiences of working life for these women was expressed, in part, through narration of identity work and the extent to which they believed felt “othered” in the organisation. Disentangling public and private identities was not possible as each impacted the experiences of working life, as did women’s perception of others and the environment more broadly. This section firstly discusses the working environment in which these women found themselves, secondly discusses the identity work involved in fitting in or standing out in such an environment and finally presented the way in which women’s gender identity in relation to motherhood heavily influenced their professional lives throughout their careers.

### 5.4.1 Homogeneity in the Senior Ranks

Participants were acutely aware of the fact that the workforce at senior levels is predominantly white, male and middle class. Awareness of the homogeneity in senior ranks

was frequently used as scene setting in participants' career narratives. This awareness was developed on two levels – firstly, through individuals' experiences in their day to day working lives, for example:

I was at a training course not that long ago, and there were four women, out of a group of sixteen, and five men called Richard – and one of them was bemoaning the fact that so many of them had taken early retirement, and there was no one around like him anymore! And I thought, they're all like you – look around; they're all like you! (Nicola)

And secondly, through their positions as senior members of an organisation. In the below quotation, the participant (a senior manager within a large operational department) speaks as a spokesperson, representing the organisation:

Because we're very keen, you know, in the Department, to look at why women are underrepresented at the senior grades, that I think it's 39% of Grade 6s and 7s are women, even though 60% of our entire workforce is women – so why is that different, there? (Eleanor)

Her words and message are similar to official statements issued by the Civil Service such as "we acknowledge that we need to do more, particularly at senior levels"<sup>9</sup> and demonstrate that the awareness of such issues impact on women at a personal level – through their experiences and interactions in the workplace – and also at a professional level through their work as managers and leaders in the Civil Service.

For women scanning career horizons, the lack of equal representation at senior levels raised questions and concerns in relation to their own aspirations:

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<sup>9</sup> Quotation drawn from UK Government's statement on diversity in the Civil Service available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/civil-service/about/equality-and-diversity> (accessed 25/01/2018)



Did you get there because you look a bit more like someone who we think of as being as a Senior Civil servant? And I think that's a really difficult issue – and we do now have one woman SCS – which is great – and I think puts her under a lot of pressure, actually – because, you know, if one woman is bad at her job, then women can't do that job – but if a man's bad at his job, well, that's just unfortunate and you can't really make generalisations, from one experience, and all that. (Nicola)

The above quotation shows such lack of diversity at the top can be seen to cast doubt over the fairness of promotions but also shows that women are conscious that achieving the highest-ranking positions within the organisation may result in taking on a set of challenges, and being held to a set of standards, not faced by their male peers.

This awareness of barriers to women's progression in the organisation was point of some consternation for women in this study, in part due to the disconnect between widely held views of the Civil Service as a "good" employer in regards to equality (see section 5.4.3) and the lived experiences of these women. The below quotation gives one example of how gendered disadvantage was recognised but the participant was reluctant to criticise the organisation:

I think there is a problem with the [talent] pipeline. There probably aren't enough good women to make an impact at the top but I wouldn't go down the route of saying its institutional sexism. I think that there is just an "appointing people in your own image" kind of thing, so men who have been successful at the level below are just more likely to get the promotion than women that have been successful doing similar jobs. (Holly)

A further component of women's lack of career progression was ascribed to the unequal valuing of types of work available in the Civil Service, with policy work prized over operational work:

I think the issues are: they are not promoted – I think there is an insidious process of leeching confidence out of women. Women get very run of the

mill jobs; they tend to be in the cutting-edge – I want to organise this; I want you to organise several teams; we have three thousand bits of paper. You know? Whereas the men tend to be on the policy side (Eileen)

The above quotation is from a woman towards the end of her career and this group were more likely to articulate women's lack of progression as directly linked to gender. Many participants described policies such as the one above as being historic, but then went on to describe other similar issues (including the expectation of mobility) as creating a barrier to career progression for them as individuals (as opposed to for women in general). This contradiction between their (and wider societal) perception of their employer and their actual experience appeared to create barriers to the articulation of such issues. Further, the fact that many women do achieve promotion again served to prevent the articulation of a glass ceiling, not only in the research interviews but also in the workplace:

I think a lot of my female colleagues wouldn't talk about it, because they don't want to be seen as making a fuss, and because I don't think it's as simple as people just not getting promoted. I think people forget that when you go to apply for something, and put yourself forward for something – you're not just looking at whatever that opportunity is, you're weighing up everything that would be involved, plus everything that's happened in the department or even in the Civil Service up until then; so I think it does make a difference. (Nicola)

In this above quotation, the complexity of gendered power structures in organisations is highlighted. As for a number of participants, the interplay between societal expectations, organisational structures and practices, and their own ambitions meant that navigating their career path was a constant balancing act. "Not wanting to make a fuss" silenced women and prevented moves to improve the situation for themselves and for other women.

## 5.4.2 Fitting in and Standing Out

Participants articulated a consistent and shared idea of a “typical” civil servant, grounded in concepts of class, gender, race and age, and representative of traits most commonly associated with privilege – white-male-middle-class. In their narratives, participants positioned themselves depending on the number of shared characteristics they had with “typical” Civil servants. For some, in particular those who shared class background with the “typical”, this enforced the sense of natural progression to a professional role in the Civil Service:

OK, I’m a classic Civil Service person really. The kind of person the Civil Service accepts as a graduate entrant. I grew up in Surrey. I suppose my parents are professional folk. I went to a mixture of grammar school and two years at a public school and then I went on to University College London to do Philosophy. (Maureen)

Class similarity or difference was most commonly discussed in the context of educational background when related to the individual themselves – although parental occupation was also raised as a contributing factor to “fitting in”. While the vast majority of participants were university educated, the type of university that they attended was significant in their identity work in establishing fit with the wider workforce. Women who attended less prestigious universities labelled their universities “ex-polys” or “not the type of university Civil servants go to”. The quotation below is from a recent entrant to the Fast Stream:

No one came to our university to try to sell it to us, it wasn’t that kind of university. (Debra)

The distinction between types of universities was frequently raised by those that attended universities seen as typical for civil servants. In the following quotation the participant (a senior lawyer who joined the Civil Service over forty years ago) indicated that her university education had provided some exposure to the kinds of people she would mix with in her Civil Service career and implies that this was a facilitating factor in adapting to the working environment.

In the 1970s and 1980s, it was Oxbridge, and having the right sort of people behind you...but I was exposed to public schoolboys at Oxford (Eileen)

However, despite attendance at Oxford or similar universities, some participants were aware that their background still limited their networks and their “fit” with the higher ranking Civil Service. Andrea, an Oxbridge graduate, explains why university alone did not erase all the discomfort she experienced upon starting in the Civil Service:

People were used to going to lunch with high court judges and politicians and the movers and shakers, and that was their background, and that was normal for them. But for me these people were somewhere distant and faraway; and that kind of socialising, and the knowledge of knowing those people and having that kind of background, was something I didn't have – so I didn't have the same ease at moving in the upper echelons of society. (Andrea)

The homogeneity of the Civil Service was noticeable for all candidates upon joining, whether forty years ago or five years ago. For early career professional women, the intersection of age and gender lead to both internal feelings of being part of an “out-group” (Alvesson et. al 2008) but also to being treated differently by colleagues. The youngest group of participants did not raise their gender alone as significant in shaping their experiences of work, generally perceiving sex discrimination to be something that happened in the past; and they were reluctant to consider their gender as a disadvantage in the workplace (with the exception of when related to maternity – discussed below in section 5.4.3). For this group, it was specifically the intersection of youth and femininity that was significant. The below quotations are typical expressions of this feeling:

I'm quite young, at my grade, so there are challenges from being young, and a woman, which you kind of get as a compound effect – because the Civil Service is made up of some very grumpy white men! (Brittany)

Being a young woman, who both looks quite young, and is a woman at the same time, I think that sometimes I'm received differently, within meetings or in dealings with colleagues. I think there's normally an assumption that I'm

more junior than I am. And often it's assumed that I am the minute taker rather than the person leading on a particular issue. (Holly)

The majority of participants had either joined the Civil Service as part of the graduate Fast Stream or joined development schemes later as internal candidates. Being identified and marked out as "high potential" by their organisation aided positive identity work. The below quotation, while delivered sarcastically, provides some insight both into the privileged position of graduate entrants but also into the tension between their potential and their experience, with consequent sense of false status, which some of these graduate trainees clearly experienced:

You know, I'd come in as a Fast Streamer, so that makes me brilliant, doesn't it?  
(Jennifer)

Being part of the Fast Stream programme also provided some insulation from the wider demographics of the Civil Service, allowing participants to engage with and identify with a younger, more gender-balanced group in their early careers. However, some identities remained a source of difference for some participants:

I started in the Inland Revenue in 1995, I joined – there were a group of 20 of us that joined in two sets and it was roughly 50/50 male and female. I was the only non-white person and there was a wheel chair user so there was a visibly disabled person. So for the first few years we were a bit like the poster children for the Fast Stream, we were in the magazine and all sorts of things.  
(Jennifer)

The above quotation demonstrates that even as some components of the Civil Service's homogeneity (specifically gender) were being broken down, whiteness and ability remained privileged. However, from this quotation it seems that issues of diversity were in organisational consciousness at the time, with the two "non-typical" Fast Stream entrants being showcased as champions of diversity. The above participant narrates her status as both "Fast Stream" and "non-white" as positive for identity work in the early stages of her

careers, with the two in combination creating a sense of her being “special” even within a “special” group of employees.

In later careers, the positives associated with a “special” identity, an identity that made participants stand out amongst their peers, were lost and replaced with difficulties such as poor treatment from colleagues and self-doubt, described by one participant as “imposter syndrome”. The higher up the grade system a participant was, the more acutely this was felt. The following quotation reveals the challenges of ascending through the hierarchy as a woman:

I was the first of a lot of things and that is quite tricky. So, for example, the first district manager of a group of offices, the first area director managing a patch as a woman and those ceilings were quite hard to break through. And there was lot of resistance, a lot of resistance from the people that, if you like, I was being promoted above.

*What form did that take?*

A lot of passive aggressive behaviour I would say. Ignoring me, talking about me. That does affect you and get to you eventually in one way or another. You might just decide to ride the storm or try and win them over, or move them out. I moved some of them out and I am sure I wouldn't have had to do that if I had been a bloke. In those days, there was always a prince. There was always someone who they thought was going to get the job, you know, the prince among the group and then when the prince didn't get it and this woman came in from outside it was quite big stuff for them. (Michelle)

The above quotation relates to a developing career in the 1970s onwards. However, while white women progressing their careers today are unlikely to be “firsts”, in the below statement it is clear that other deviations from the “norm” remain conspicuous; and in later, post Fast Stream career, being singled out as “special” in multiple ways (in this case race, gender and career trajectory) had become a source of concern and additional stress.

There are hardly any black women of above a certain grade so I am already different. And then I am from another department and that makes me different. Not many people go in like that, you know, you go in at the bottom and you work your way up, there is very little in and out ... Once you stop worrying about, you know, they are going to think this and they are going to think that, there is a degree to which if they are judging me on stereotypes or misinformation all I can do is carry on doing a good job and they will either change their mind or they won't but me changing my behaviour is not going to change their opinion. (Jennifer)

While an ongoing sense of difference did put strain on participants in relation to their work identities, affecting interactions with colleagues and their experiences of performing a senior professional role, many women performed identity work in order to incorporate their difference into their professional identities in a positive way. In doing so, they saw that they had more to offer the organisation than the “typical” civil servant.

The three quotations below demonstrate this identity work – for the first participant, her class background has enabled her to empathise more effectively with citizens; for the second, the combination of her race and gender has given her status as a “figurehead” thereby conferring additional responsibility; and for the third, her identity as a manager is enhanced through her ability to demonstrate to more junior women that it is possible to have a career and a family.

If you work in what remains, still, the higher echelons of the Civil Service, it is a very Oxbridge based community, very male dominated even now. That is what they lack – that is my unique selling point I think, I understand the citizens we are trying to serve. Because I come from a background of ordinary working class people. They don't have those networks. (Valerie)

I think for me, I've become – that sounds really arrogant, and I don't mean it like this – but I've become a bit of a figurehead, because there aren't many women/minority ethnic people at my level – both, I mean. So in Department X, I was the most senior black person; I was the only person they had ever

had, at Department X, at that grade. And that will probably be the case for some time. (Alice)

I think it is important to the women that I manage, to show that it is possible to have a career and a family, if that is what you want to do. I think it's good to show people that you can do more, because I've had some really good role models, when I first joined the Department, I had some very senior women, but actually I think only about one of those ten people I think of as being influential on my career had a family, a lot of women tend to get to those senior positions, but don't. So from that position, I think it's great to be able to role model it, and I feel privileged that I'm able to do that. (Eleanor)

The issue of disability in the workplace was raised by several participants. Participants raised the issue from the perspective of managing those with disabilities, having a disability or both. It was clear that disability had a profound impact on some participants' lives – both from a practical perspective but also in terms of identity formation and regulation. As with other elements of participants' identity in the workplace, disability was not experienced in a singular way.

I have had a lot of discrimination at work. A lot of discrimination outside of work. Even now, I still run into problems. If I have had to think about what my barriers have been, what the issues have been, they mostly revolved around my disabilities first. It has probably been the biggest barrier that I have had to get to where I am now but not because I don't deal with it well but because of people's perceptions and feelings and judgements about me. That is the problem and it always has been the problem. (Debra)

It's easier when it's something like the issues I had – where although it's not visible, it's physical. No-one wants to talk about bad news, but it's easier when there's a problem with my brain, rather than saying I'm depressed – and I think we're still very bad, at mental health issues. Getting better, but I think we've got a long way to go. But to be honest I think that would be the same wherever you go – I don't think that as a society we're very accepting. Yet. (Eleanor)



Eleanor speaks above as both an employee with a disability and a manager of those with disabilities. She suggests that culturally, within the organisation and in society more broadly, mental health issues are seen as dealt with less well than physical disabilities.

For those with disabilities, the attitudes of others, most significantly their line managers, were hugely significant in the way they were able to manage their working lives. The participants in this study generally felt able to manage their own symptoms, but the judgement or attitudes of others led to feelings of weakness and vulnerability, resulting in self-doubt, and in many cases, a curbing of ambition.

It did worry me, I thought “oh gosh, are they going to cater for my needs? How is it going to be? Can I cope with it?” They were worried whether I was going to cope with it and asked if I had thought about coming here and just mainstreaming into a standard job. But I thought “well no! I have fought hard to get to this scheme. I at least want to give it a shot before you write me off!” (Debra)

On the other hand, those with supportive managers felt empowered to continue working with support. For managers who had themselves experienced disability, this was incorporated into their work identities; that is to say, those who had experienced disability felt that a significant role of a manager was to facilitate others (especially those with disabilities) to work effectively and believed that personal experience was significant in their competence as a manager:

I’d like to think that my awareness of those things, and having been through some of those issues personally, makes me a better manager (Eleanor)

## ELEANOR

I was diagnosed with a disease, it took me quite a while to accept that as a limiting disability, to put that label on yourself, but eventually you come to

terms with it personally, and then I became more involved with work around disability [for my union]....I'd like to think that my awareness of these issues, and having been through some of them personally, makes me a better manager.

Eleanor's story is, predominantly, one of obstacles overcome. At the time of our interview Eleanor had been promoted to a senior management position in charge of a team of highly trained, senior staff. Her promotion came after her return from maternity leave with her second child and only a few years after she was hospitalised with a lesion on her brain and subsequently diagnosed with a non-progressive but limiting disease. Coping with this illness while navigating early motherhood and building her career is central to her narrative.

Eleanor grew up in a rural town and was engaged at 17. Despite this, she went to university and completed her degree. Upon graduation she returned to her rural town to marry. A lack of graduate opportunities in her home town meant that she joined the Civil Service at the lowest administrative level. After 3 years working in a low level job and being married to a "controlling" older man, Eleanor applied for the graduate development scheme, looking for a job "with opportunities to progress, that didn't upset the status quo", and was offered a place in the same office in which she had previously been working. Starting the graduate scheme marked a turning point in her life "because it was starting that which gave me the confidence to rethink my life".

The graduate scheme led to divorce from Eleanor's first husband (which, she stated, "opened up a lot of opportunities"). Following this, she met her second husband, achieved promotion, had two children in quick succession, moved across the country and gained a further promotion. This left Eleanor as an unusual senior manager given her relative youth, gender and her developing identity as a mother.

Eleanor's identity as a mother is complicated by her work identity. Her narrative shows significant ongoing identity work to balance the competing identities. Eleanor presents her children as the motivation for working; and her career as central to her identity. When discussing her move across the country she presents it as for her family (to be

closer to her parents-in-law); and, as an aside, notes that “it was also a great move in terms of my career”.

Eleanor took six months maternity leave with each of her children and then returned to work full-time. Her decision to return to work appears to cause her some discomfort. Initially, she suggests that returning to work was a personal choice: “I found that when I was on maternity leave, that because I wasn’t being challenged, I found that I was going a little bit mad!” During the interview I did not ask for any further justification but Eleanor was compelled to provide numerous further explanations for her returning to work – that she could not afford to do otherwise (although her husband is also a senior manager in her department), and that (perhaps more honestly) she wants her children “to have the best of me”. It is clear that much of this discomfort was caused by wider narratives on the role of mothers, both in the private and public sphere:

I got a lot of stick, coming back to work full time after I had both of my kids. Not just from family – which you kind of expect, when they’re an older generation – but from a lot of my friends as well, they think it’s quite disgusting, that I work full time, that I don’t look after my kids... [At work] there’s this sort of accepted thing, that you come back to work part time.

During the interview, Eleanor felt obliged to rebut this but it is clear that these experiences have left a lasting question in her mind: “am I a terrible mother for not wanting to spend the time with them?” It is this question that leads her to state: “I have absolutely no ambition at this point to progress further, to get to the Senior Civil Service. And that is as a direct result of my family life”.

While her identity as a mother was potentially career-limiting, Eleanor’s identity as a manager was positive and ambitious. This identity allowed her to leverage some of her less positive identity work (as a mother and as disabled) to boost her work identity and allow her to act as a “role model” both to show other women that they could have children and still be successful and to try to tackle cultural negativity around disability in the workplace.

Eleanor's disability was not evident upon meeting her and it would have been possible, albeit difficult, for her to prevent colleagues knowing about it. However, while she initially tried to avoid the label of disabled, she grew to embrace it as a part of her identity:

"It took me a long time, to talk about it, at work...but in my new role, I thought – well, actually, it's a really good thing, to try to positively role model, openness, around that".

Eleanor talked at length about both physical disability and mental health issues in the workplace, how these issues impacted on her as a manager ("I am always very aware of people's stress levels") and how these issues had led to her participation in her trade union.

Eleanor joined a trade union upon starting work, suggesting an innate union orientation linked to her family background: "I did that almost without thinking because my Mum's family are Welsh, and very working class". She was active from early on, initially on issues specifically relevant to graduate trainees (of which she was one) but she then, following her diagnosis, became very active in both the disability network and the senior women's network.

Eleanor's trade union identity and managerial identity were so closely linked that it was impossible to completely disentangle what Eleanor did in her capacity as a union activist and what she did in her capacity as a manager. In part, this may have been because Eleanor worked in an office with a strong and active union presence, leaving union and work boundaries blurred: "My boss is also a very active member – so again, I kind of have a lot of these discussions that aren't just limited to the meetings".

Her activism on disability and gender was carried out in tandem with attempting to create change as a manager. This activism was underpinned by a strong sense of injustice, and a feeling that society did not cater for people with mental health problems; she also felt strongly that this was damaging to society and her own work organisation, given the prevalence of mental health conditions. Eleanor's experiences of living with her own condition – which is primarily neurological, but with some physical symptoms – may seem an obvious source of this strong feeling, but when discussing mental health issues Eleanor

focussed more on depression and anxiety, distinguishing these from her own condition where “it’s easier saying when there’s a problem with my brain, rather than saying I’m depressed”.

The merging of trade unionist identity and managerial identity was linked to a clear, strong engagement and identification with the department. When talking about the department, she used “we” and it was clear that she strongly believed in a mutual gains approach to unionisation. Eleanor’s trade unionist identity was supportive to her managerial identity. For Eleanor, both roles were about doing things well and fairly: “being a manager, who’s also a union member, I’m so conscious that we’ve got to get this right”.

Her trade union identity was also seamlessly integrated with her career strategies and ambitions. She used the trade union as an opportunity to network both locally and nationally, attend and run workshops on career development as well as disabilities at work and ultimately exert influence over the running of her department. In these ways, Eleanor demonstrated the interconnected nature of personal, professional and trade union identities.

### 5.4.3 Gender and Motherhood

As was described above, gender identity was salient in the workplace in the sense it created difference between women in the study and many of their counterparts at senior levels. However, gender identity and its association with the domestic sphere, and particularly its links to motherhood, could be seen to have an impact on women’s experiences of work and their decision making throughout their careers.

At the beginning of careers, women saw the Civil Service - alongside the wider public sector – as a safe working environment, which could offer a working life compatible with personal aspirations such as having a family.

And OK, the pay’s never going to be fabulous, but you get flexi time, you get good benefits if you want to have a family – I have two small children. It works. (Adele)

The benefits of working for the Civil Service were considered as an overall package, encompassing intrinsic rewards (such as a sense of helping society), future job security, a career path, flexible working hours and pensions. These benefits offset the widely acknowledged lower rates of pay as compared to their private sector equivalents.

I felt that the rewards would probably fit into my lifestyle choices better – because I knew that at some point I would want children; and from what I could see, all the benefits of being a solicitor kicked in ten or fifteen years down the line, whereas it seemed to me that the benefits of being a tax inspector were more front-loaded, they gave better pay earlier on, and more responsibility earlier on – in those days, it's not the same now. I thought it probably fitted in better with what I wanted out of life... (Joan)

I thought, yeah, it is a job for life in a way, a career, what do they say? You know, a smaller risk of unemployment, and things like that, being made redundant. So yeah, I thought it was quite a good thing. (Flora)

While there have been dramatic changes in the Civil Service over the last few decades, it appears that the image of “good” (if no longer “model”) employer has endured. The participants quoted in this section are all different ages (20s, 40s and late 50s) and all entered the Civil Service in different decades. Despite these differences, they all see the Civil Service as a benevolent employer in terms of security and lifestyle benefits. Participants regularly contrasted the public and private sector and expressed a feeling of “luck” in having an employer tolerant of family commitments:

There are things which, as a civil servant, you don't get in the private sector, which I think that, as a woman, I am particularly aware of because you can come into it thinking that “Well, the salary is not what I would get if I were a defence solicitor” (Donna)

If you look at what you would get in a private practice, the salary is much higher but the benefits are much lower. (Adele)

This sense of “having it better” than workers in the private sector when it came to work/life balance and employer commitment to gender equality appeared to be powerful in restricting the extent to which participants were prepared to attribute disadvantages they had experienced in the workplace to their gender. At the same time, participants appeared to accept as a default a certain level of discrimination or gender inequality in the workplace, positioning the Civil Service as better than a perceived norm of discriminatory employer or organisation. As a result, they were reluctant to criticise practices which could impact negatively on them as women, even where they identified that this was the case.

While the Civil Service was seen as family or female-friendly due to policies such as flexible working hours, the active management of internal talent was highlighted as favouring men and those unencumbered by life outside of work. This once again challenged the idea of the Civil Service as a meritocracy, for example:

Because I’ve been here so long, I can see that, actually, it very much is a gender thing – because for years, you had to be mobile to get promoted, so you’d do the course, and then they’d just send you to some part of the country. And obviously if you’re a married woman, it’s not so easy to just go along with that. So for years – I mean, we used to say, there was a mantra that “It’s promotion on the basis of mobility, not ability”. So women just didn’t get promoted – it was just a fact that it was men who got promoted.  
(Emma)

Many participants were reluctant or unwilling to suggest that structural barriers existed for women in the organisation despite all participants’ belief that having children was a significant barrier to career progression (for women). Women with children had experienced difficulties in balancing work and family commitments; while women without children had borne witness to the negative impact of motherhood on their colleagues:

So I’m 31 now, and colleagues who I started with are going on maternity leave, and I think you start to see gaps opening up; and you see that women come back from maternity leave, and people make assumptions about their commitment. And they do it even in quite a nice way – “oh, well, we don’t

want to put too much pressure on you because obviously you'll want to go home to your children" and then men come back from two weeks off on paternity leave, and you wouldn't, unless they'd said "I'm going on paternity leave", you would not know they had a child. (Kate)

For the younger group of participants this was a cause of anxiety:

It does worry me because obviously my job is important to me and getting my career is important to me, getting promoted is important to me and I don't want to be almost left behind a little bit if I have children. But I think maybe I will be overlooked for certain things. (Flora)

I feel it would put me at a big disadvantage if I did have children. (Zoe)

Some participants reported that the detrimental impact of children on careers had, historically, been articulated explicitly by the organisation. For example:

In the Seventies, and Eighties – they actually had the damned cheek to ask me about my intentions around children. And it was obviously in the context of if you wanted children, you wouldn't get picked; wouldn't waste any training on you. That was very clear. (Joan)

Although participants agreed that such overt discrimination was no longer seen in the organisation, they nevertheless identified the impact of motherhood on their potential career progression and status within the organisation. As a union representative explains:

It does look like it is an attractive employer and I have to say, quite truthfully, a lot of opportunities are given to women, quite fairly, talented people, but it is whether those women, whether women, can actually take up these opportunities or not, you know, it is moving away the barriers to make it a level playing field. And that is it, it's about who your employer is, if you have got kids who go to school, the school day runs from 9 – 3 and what are you going to do? You can't necessarily stay at work to finish off that project til 6 o'clock every night but what I have tried to do with my discussions with the



employer is to get across that sense that working long hours doesn't necessarily mean you are working any better (Bev)

From an organisational perspective, we once again see that apparently objective and neutral workplace policies and practices are gendered, with access to certain development opportunities being limited to the "abstract worker" (Acker, 1999) who can easily prioritise work over domestic responsibilities. Women who made use of the family-friendly policies that made the employer attractive to them initially suffered career penalties when accessing initiatives such as flexible or part-time working. Their commitment to work was questioned and the need to maintain a profile at a senior level was increasingly challenging:

If you're only in the office half the time – so again, it's maintaining that sort of presence, if you feel that you have to double your efforts to get yourself noticed by senior management, or if people go "oh, you're not in the office that often, so what do you really do?" (Adele)

The practical implications of motherhood, in terms of working hours and other commitments, were not the only issue faced by women balancing careers and motherhood. The centrality of motherhood in the construction of femininity by wider society clashed directly with professional identity for many participants. This coercive gendering (Czarniawska, 2006) led to some participants questioning their own choices, as illustrated by the following quote:

I got a lot of stick, coming back to work full time after I had both of my kids. Not just from family – which you kind of expect it, when they're an older generation – but from a lot of my friends, as well, they think it's quite disgusting, that I work full time, that I don't look after my kids more. There's this accepted thing, that you come back to work part time. It wouldn't bother me – except there's always this residual guilt, are they right? And I don't think they are because I actually think that by working full time, it makes me a better mother (Eleanor)

Identity work to balance competing and contradictory identity ideals was present in participants' narratives. Women struggled with the pressures of metanarratives that painted the organisation in which they worked as gender neutral, caring responsibilities associated with motherhood as central to femininity and professional success as solely result of individual ability. Experience and evidence to the contrary emerged as confusion in narratives, confusion which led to self-doubt and the internalisation of career barriers as personal failures. This in turn prevented such issues from being articulated and challenged as discriminatory.

Ideas of motherhood were seen to have an impact on career decision making for women yet to have children as well as those that did. The clearest impact of ideas of motherhood on women in this sample was the restriction of career ambition:

My immediate focus is definitely that I want to get to Grade 6 and beyond that I am really not sure. Sometimes I think that SCS would be really good but then it is an awful lot of responsibility and pressure for exactly what in return? It is not pay so it is whether, would I want that? It depends what aspirations are in my personal life, you know, if I had children how would I manage to juggle that and things like that? (Flora)

I have absolutely no ambition at this point to progress further, to get to the senior Civil Service. And that is...a direct result of my family life. Because I work now with people who are in the SCS, and I get emails from them on a Saturday, and they stay late, and they do a lot more hours than I do.  
(Eleanor)

While motherhood was clearly significant in shaping gendered experiences of the workplace, it should be noted that in this sample, as we will see in chapter 6, section 6.6.3, a significant minority of these women did not have children or want children. Despite this, they still encountered gendered discrimination and expressed frustration with what they saw as the conflation of motherhood and (female) gender disadvantage by the union and the organisation, which it was felt belied the true nature of gender discrimination.

## 5.5 Employment Relations in the Workplace

# JENNIFER

“I think part of my union journey in those last 4 years was I came to a lot of realisations about my own identity. I came to a lot of realisations about things that have caused me to lack confidence or be uncertain about things. It made me realise that I was brought up by immigrant parents who obviously were trying to make sense of the UK...I grew up in Thatcher’s Britain in a time where there were riots, where it wasn’t that safe to be a black person walking round in London... So it [working in the Civil Service] was like “I am not really sure I should be here, there aren’t other people like me, people like me don’t end up here” and I think a lot of that probably affected how I behaved, how I came across. So I got more involved in the union, learnt more about myself”

Jennifer grew up in London, the daughter of immigrant parents who had moved to the UK as skilled public sector workers. Growing up in North London in the 1980s, it becomes apparent from Jennifer’s narrative that ethnicity, class and gender had a strong impact on her identity and consequently the career decisions she made in life. Much of her motivation seems to have developed through a sense of injustice; in Jennifer’s words: “my chip-on-the-shoulder story”.

Jennifer describes her early years of schooling as defined by moves to “nicer” parts of London. Her formative years were marked by contradiction – her parents were ambitious for their daughter to attend university, although they had little knowledge of the relative rankings “for them, university was university was university”, But, despite her relatively high level of academic performance, her teachers spent time discouraging her from academic routes including university, which Jennifer attributes to her ethnicity: “it’s easy now, to think, “well – that was obviously racial stereotyping.” but I can’t really explain it

any other way". This, despite reasonable A-level results, ultimately led Jennifer to studying law (a profession she and her parents considered "respectable") at a polytechnic university not far from home, popular with "foreign students and people who couldn't get in anywhere else".

Following rejection from solicitor training contracts after graduation, but still striving for respectability, Jennifer successfully applied for a graduate training position in one of the "Civil Services" large operational departments. The process of application to the Civil Service itself made salient Jennifer's identity as a non-white child of immigrants – she believes she was admitted with lower than typical marks as a positive action intervention and, even at the assessment centre, there were suggestions of this:

I got chatting to this guy some older guy who obviously worked for the department. He said "Well, you'll be all right" and I was like "Oh – thank you; thank you for saying that!" and he said "well, you're a woman, you're not white...you're bound to be all right". So that was my first experience.

Despite this, Jennifer accepted the job and enjoyed her training years, relishing her newly found status as one of the "golden children" of the Civil Service as well as the status of "poster child for diversity". During this period Jennifer made close friends at work, including her husband-to-be – a white British man from the north of England, with whom she would go on to have two children shortly after being promoted off the graduate scheme.

Jennifer had joined the FDA upon joining the Civil Service, seeing it as "more of a professional association" than a trade union but would have joined in any case as her father had been a trade union representative. Her formal participation came very early on as a Fast Stream representative because she "tended to volunteer for things" but the tipping point between casual involvement and full activism was, for Jennifer, her pregnancies.

At the time of her first pregnancies, Jennifer was formally marked as "talented" by her organisation and consequently would be assessed for promotion yearly. Returning from

her maternity leave she discovered this marker had been removed. She contacted her union and was assigned a personal case worker who later became both the president of the union and a personal friend. Later, following a second pregnancy, she found herself unhappy in the job she returned to, and a conversation with this friend/ union president led to her taking on an increasing number of formal union roles. Jennifer explained:

I think she was on the lookout for talent, people who were interested. And she said “oh – we should be doing more on equality” – because I’d always been interested in equality, and she said “let’s do some work on that”. And so gradually, I sort of did bits and pieces and then she said – “I’ve got a full-time post; the President is full time, and then they have an assistant – so why don’t you come and be the assistant”.

This role ultimately led to full time work for the union, which Jennifer did for six years, leaving her Civil Service role (although still paid by her department) to focus on equality issues. During this time, despite the union straying away from what Jennifer termed a “professional association” and becoming “more of a proper union”, characterised by embarking on and succeeding in ballots for industrial action, Jennifer brought in a series of equality initiatives that she believes are still seen as one of the union’s greatest successes. Working on such issues was also a time of great personal reflection and empowerment - working with other, marginalised identities in the union and workplace led her to meet other people “like her” and feel that she had both skills and influence that were, at least partly, attributable to her own identities and lived experience, which left them unique in her environment.

Throughout these years of self-reflection, Jennifer also reassessed her class position: “Up until I had all of these epiphanies, I thought it was impossible for a black person to be middle class.” Her focus on equality prompted a reflection on her own positions of privilege. She cites her pay and professional connections as well as her marriage to a white man and her British children (she herself remained unsure of her Britishness until the London Olympics in 2012) as factors that mitigate some of the disadvantages her own background may cause her.

These glory years were ended for Jennifer when, despite her heavy and successful involvement in the union she was not elected as deputy president. She notes that a black woman has never been elected into a post, although contested elections are a rarity:

In no time that I know of has the President been elected; it's always a tap on the shoulder, or a bit of persuasion. We haven't stopped anyone standing but, no one else has opposed the President.

Given this situation, the act of standing against her could have been seen as either a highly confrontational move or as a vote of no-confidence by the union committee. Either way, for Jennifer, this brought a realisation that her best efforts would not be rewarded by the union and she withdrew from the committee to concentrate again on her career, explaining what happened in a way that links to, but avoids explicit connection with, her gender and race:

They didn't want anyone who was going to rock the boat, they didn't want anyone who wasn't going to do things just as they always had done them in the past and so a part of the reason I am like that is because of my race and my gender.

When she returned to the Civil Service, Jennifer did not move back to her original specialism, instead taking a senior HR role with a focus on equality, stating that skills she'd learnt as a union rep had both supported this move and made her better able to cope with the sometimes hostile environment. She believes she would not have been able to do the job she now does, had it not been for her time in the union, where her process of self-reflection taught her both a toughness and a calmness she did not possess as a younger, angrier woman. However, despite this apparent fit in skills and concerns, Jennifer suggests that working conditions in the Civil Service have become unbearable and as a result she is looking to move outside the Civil Service for her next job.

In discussing their working and union lives participants all raised employment relations issues. During the discussions on some of these issues, the current turbulence of employment relations as experienced at an individual level was revealed. Participants described themselves as "angry" and "frustrated" at the government as an employer, and

expressed various negative emotions such as mistrust, anxiety and apprehension over changing terms and conditions in the Civil Service as well as more fundamental feelings of misgiving around their own professional identities and how they continued to fit in to the organisational ethos. For some, the strength of negative emotion around working conditions meant that a sense of duty to serve the public increasingly became insufficient as a motivator to work in the Civil Service:

I love being a public servant, I love the idea of what I do but this government want to drive the Civil Service into the ground and you know, I haven't had a pay rise for two years, I have had a pay cut for the last two years and I am going to have another pay cut this year and all of those things would be tolerable if I could do my job. Doing my job is really hard, I don't mean job x, I mean I go in and I would say 10% of the time the computers don't work.  
(Jennifer)

The most commonly raised issues were issues which would typically be considered to be under the remit of trade union and collective bargaining agreements. Specifically, women identified changes to the performance management system, changes to terms and conditions – particularly in relation to leave and sickness provision – and pay and pensions. Changes to the performance management system in the form of the introduction of a “guided distribution”, in which 10% of the workforce would be considered to be underperforming each year, provoked a particularly strong reaction in the sample, with all participants raising it as a significant issue.

The frequency with which this issue was raised, and the strength of feeling typically expressed by participants when talking about it, is interesting and even surprising; in the context of considerable change and cuts to terms and conditions, this particular issue could be seen, from the outside, as relatively trivial with only a small proportion of the workforce affected. However, the sense of unfairness surrounding the system and distrust in the system appeared universally felt, with participants describing it as “illogical”, “unjust”, and even “stupid”. Ultimately, it appeared that this system had come to represent all that was wrong with new employer initiatives (including the on-going drive towards New Public

Management) and was a direct challenge to civil servants' identities which were grounded in ideas of fairness and objectivity.

Further to general objections on the grounds of principle, many women linked changes in terms and conditions directly to their specific, gendered, positions in the workplace, highlighting how many changes to Civil Service HR policies would have a disproportionately negative impact on women:

Going back to the part-timers, you find that only very very very few, if any, part-timers are in the top box marking. They are all "good". Part-timers who have worked for me have generally done a full-time job in part-time hours but I think, the [organisation's] assumption is a part-time commitment, which is just not the case and it is an ongoing battle. And as I say women are hit by it so it is indirect discrimination. (Bev)

For many participants, the perceived unfairness of the changes is exacerbated by career development constrained by gendered roles in domestic settings, as illustrated by the following quotation, on the subject of one department's decision to amend its terms and conditions, including holiday and sick pay, but only to apply these new conditions to new entrants or promotees:

Terms and conditions would be downgraded when you are next promoted. Well you know, blow me! I've been struggling to get a promotion whilst I was managing my home life – I am also a single mum and have the traditional pressures from that – and when I am finally in a position to actually apply for a job and successfully get it on promotion I now have worse sick pay provision, I don't have my privilege days that I previously had this time last year. I feel extremely aggrieved about that because I do feel it is masking the discriminatory practice. Suddenly as your children get older and you are suddenly able to progress your career, you are given a blow to your terms and conditions for the pleasure. (Joan)

While employment relations issues were frequently connected to gender in the workplace,



participants did not articulate an expectation that their trade union would deal with them as such. Instead, while many expressed emotional distress at their circumstances and considerable fears that related specifically to their position as women in the workforce, this was considered an individual concern. There was an expectation that the trade union should mobilise on such issues, but the disproportionately negative impact of such changes on women (who make up the majority of the Civil Service workforce) was not seen as a central component of the argument for resistance to such changes.

Where women did consider that the union should be more active on issues of gender discrimination, there was a sense that the union was not wholly effective:

The Civil Service has admitted women for almost 100 years. But women above my grade immediately fall in proportion to the number of posts. And therefore, for 100 years, there has been this promotion, by men, of people like them; and very, very small movements are trumpeted. I found unions – and I appreciate the legal difficulties – reluctant to take on discrimination, in itself, because discrimination cases have a reputation for being expensive and difficult to win. (Eileen)

## 5.6 Conclusion

The findings in this section present strong evidence for the continuing powerful influence of public service ethos in the UK Civil Service. Public service ethos as a prevailing discourse was a key resource for professional identity development, which builds on values these women believed to be at the core of their own personal identities. In this way, public service ethos bridged gaps between personal and professional identities. However, public service ethos was viewed as in direct conflict with the discourse of New Public Management, a battle that NPM seemed destined to lose due to its seemingly incompatible position in relation to these women's "core" values. The rejection of NPM directly impacted professional identity development in that the role of management was undermined and delegitimised leading to widespread disavowal of the role. As we will see in Chapter 6, this also has implications of the development of trade unionist identities.

As Acker (2006) suggests, despite organisation rhetoric regarding the gender blind nature of structures in the workplace, the public and private spheres cannot be separated. For this reason, as we saw in section 5.4, personal identities were salient in the workplace and resulted in simultaneous experience of privilege and oppression for many women, as disadvantaged personal identities came into direct conflict with their privileged organisational position.

Gender identity was an area in which the interactions between the public and private sphere and the oppressed and privileged identities was particularly stark. Gender identity in the private sphere impacted on women's career decision making in the workplace while coercive gendering by the organisation (structurally, in the form of caring provisions directly solely at women, and more subtly in the assumptions made by colleagues regarding a woman's priorities) dictated gender identities in the private sphere. This led to identity conflict for women as they struggled to successfully perform their gender in a way that also allowed them to pursue success in a white, male, middle class world. For young women in this sample, a belief in the power of individual agency appears to exacerbate identity conflict as they struggle with competing discourses that are androcentric in nature: organisational discourses that paint those with the most time to give to an organisation as possessing more potential to become leaders; and societal discourses that emphasise women's identity as entwined with bearing and caring for children. For these younger women, the interaction of these discourses is complicated by their recruitment into the organisation as "high potential" graduate trainees: the organisation has explicitly identified, recruited, trained and promoted them for their ability and potential to reach senior positions; yet at the same time is coercively gendering them away from access to those positions.

Coercive gendering related to the construction of the identity of mother by the organisation did not solely impact upon women with children. Women without children recounted experiences of overt gender discrimination by the Civil Service in the 1970s and 1980s. These women found themselves dealing with gender stereotypes which so strongly linked femininity to motherhood that their gender in itself became conflated with an assumed need for "family friendly" offerings such as part-time working. In this way, the practice of coercive gendering recast the practical implications of parenting as not purely related to

parenting, but instead as specifically “women’s issues”. This combined with the perceived risk of women bearing children (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011) limited career prospects for women irrespective of their intention to have children.

This chapter then presented findings related to employment relations issues for this group of senior civil servants. The findings highlight the importance of professional identity and its relationship to collective organisation. The key issues raised as employment relations issues were, at least in part, related to the challenge of NPM to professional identities grounded in the values associated with public service ethos. The findings in this section also highlight the contested nature of privilege – the imposition of a strongly opposed performance management system demonstrates a lack of power in the management role, while the gendered impact of NPM highlights further vulnerability in these women’s position. Chapter 6 will explore how these women sought to mitigate some of their vulnerability through their union membership.

Finally, this chapter included vignettes of three participants’ narratives. These narratives showed the ways in which these women’s privilege was always experienced through the interaction of multiple identities. Disadvantage in some spheres both constrained women’s privilege in others as well as impacting on how these women actually performed their privilege – career decisions and professional identities were built through the constant (re)negotiation of privilege (and oppression) in order to maintain a coherent and seemingly authentic self. The leveraging of lived experience of oppression (in Jennifer and Eleanor’s cases, professional expertise in the management of diversity became a component part of their managerial identities) was made possible for some women by the specific organisational context and their privilege within it. This will be further explored in Chapter 6.

# Chapter 6: Participation in the FDA Trade Union

## 6.1 Introduction

While the previous chapter explored the working environment and the way in which women developed their professional identity, this chapter explores the motivations and barriers for professional women participating in trade unions. As such, it presents findings related to the second and third of the research questions set out in section 1.3.2:

2. In what ways do professional women identify with, experience and act within trade unions?
3. What are the barriers to, and the motivations for, women's trade union participation?

The chapter begins by providing more details of the FDA in order to place the findings within the specific context of this trade union. The following three sections (6.3, 6.4 and 6.5) discuss the enablers and motivations for women's trade union participation. In section 6.3, we see the impact of professional identity on trade unionism and the trade union's positioning of itself as a professional body. In section 6.4, women's requirements for traditional trade union functions are presented; while section 6.5 considers how personal identities are positively enacted in a trade union context, leading to participation. The chapter then moves on to explore the barriers to participation, illustrating how homogeneity within the senior ranks of the trade union perpetuates androcentric norms within the trade union, creating and maintaining a culture which facilitates the inclusion of some workers and exclusion of others.

## 6.2 The FDA Trade Union in Context

The FDA was founded in 1918 as 'the Association of First Division Civil servants'. The organisation was founded to protect the interests of senior civil servants, who were at that time known as the 'first division' within the Civil Service hierarchy<sup>10</sup>. While the Civil Service and employment relations within it has gone through much change in the intervening years,

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<sup>10</sup> See [www.fda.org.uk](http://www.fda.org.uk) for their own account of the union's development.

the FDA's key aims and goals have been consistent throughout its existence in that it seeks to represent high ranking civil servants through collective bargaining arrangements as well as protect the status of the Civil Service as a whole (O'Toole, 1989). Reflective of the Civil Service's commitment to impartiality and union members position within the Civil Service, the union is not active in the trades councils' movement and is not affiliated to the Labour Party (or any other political party).

Today, the FDA's key aims as stated by the union are as follows:

We **work closely with employers** on the issues that matter - pay, promotion, skills, and fairness at work.

We also seek to **influence public sector policy** - punching above our weight with the media, think tanks, MPs and other trade unions. Our aim is to help make public services, and the people who deliver them, the best that they can be.

(FDA (2018), emphasis theirs)

The FDA has a federal structure consisting of branches, which represent particular workplaces, and sections, which broadly represent particular professional groups. Each section has an executive committee and reserved seats on the national executive committee. The Association of Revenue and Customs (ARC), as well as being a section of the FDA, is a union in its own right and has its own elected president and executive committee. The FDA General Secretary serves as General Secretary of ARC.

Today, the FDA trade union has around 18,000 members, spanning the senior and professional ranks of the Civil Service. In 2012, according to the SERTUC report, 47% of FDA's members were women, 6% of members are black, 4% disabled and 3.2% are considered young. There were 10 paid national officials, three of whom were women (30%), 10% black, 30% disabled and 20% LGBT. The FDA's Executive Committee had 29 members: 28% women 3.4% black, 7% disabled and 3.4% LGBT.

There are no reserved seats on the national committee for equality strands but a national officer for Equality and Diversity deals with all aspects of equality, supported by other officials, one of whom has responsibility for race equality within the union, and another who deals with age (SERTUC, 2012). There are also no formal structures in place for equality

strands although there are informal women's networks, black and ethnic minority members' networks, disability networks and LGBT networks. In addition, the FDA runs 'into Leadership' events for its women and black and ethnic minority members, which are also open to non-members. For disabled members, the FDA has run courses on, for example, disability awareness, but these are not aimed at union reps rather than disabled members themselves. The FDA also runs events to mark Women's Day, Black History and LGBT History Days<sup>11</sup>.

## 6.3 Professional Identity and Trade Unionism

In this research, professional identity was shown to be highly significant in influencing both what women wanted from a trade union and the ways in which they chose to participate in the trade union. This section presents findings on women's motivations to participate because of the operation of the FDA effectively as a professional body; because of their specific needs as managers; and because of the trade union's role in communicating and disseminating information.

### 6.3.1 The Trade Union as a Professional Body

For participants in this study, the trade union was a significant source of professional identity. Through delivering technical training, career development advice and, to some extent, acting as a gatekeeper to the Civil Service, the FDA disseminated and reinforced ideas of what it is to be a civil servant. This function was desired by participants alongside more traditional union functions such as negotiating favourable working conditions and other terms and conditions covered by collective bargaining agreements.

The below quotation, from a tax professional, demonstrates typical sentiment towards professionalism and the trade union and indicates the different levels at which identification can develop and be maintained. This also clearly demonstrates the simultaneity of collective and individual motivations for membership where collective issues were taken up by the union and learning for individual development was provided.

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<sup>11</sup> See [www.fda.org.uk](http://www.fda.org.uk)

It is a sort of loyalty to a group thing, that you are part of a group of people who are interested in the job or in the department. I don't mean socially but supporting community. The particular professional community of which I intended to be part. Because they lobby for your interests, so it is recognising that you could be on strike for something that affected you.

There was one more reason, oh yeah, professionalism. At the time, the union did do quite a bit on technical work, it used to have a magazine which had technical articles in it so it was part of the technical information education. That was quite an important part of the union at the time. (Pauline)

The significance of the trade union acting as a professional identity resource and as a source of specialised knowledge was universally identified in the sample. Younger members of the workforce wished to use such resources to establish themselves within a profession, while already established individuals still relied upon learning and development opportunities offered by the trade union, to maintain their status. Networking opportunities presented by the union were seen as uniquely advantageous, especially for younger, more junior workers. This may be a result of the relatively rigid grading system within the Civil Service that typically prevents junior employees working directly with very senior professionals in their day jobs.

Learning and development opportunities not only provided the impetus to join the union but were strongly associated with greater identification with the union. As such, there was an overlap between joining, identifying and participating as women joined in order to participate.

A participant recently promoted to Grade 7 explains:

It is partly a developmental thing and partly a knowledge thing and partly a networking thing. So those are the three main areas where I would say I have done stuff but I have found it really valuable (Holly)

Networking was seen as the greatest advantage of union membership in terms of career development. The contacts made through union events were seen as advantageous in day

to day working life, and networking also offered an opportunity to hear from high profile speakers and to learn more about specific areas of the organisation – for example, the workings of Whitehall<sup>12</sup>, or of specific professions.

When I came down to London, the reason I did more is because it was a networking opportunity. At that time it was a place you could go in the evening to meet people who were in the organisations, meet interesting people, listen to interesting speakers and it was a really good networking opportunity and I got caught up in that. (Valerie)

Opportunities to network were particularly desirable for new recruits to the Civil Service and those in the earlier stages of their careers, as they had yet to develop their own networks to draw upon and so union participation provided a shortcut to this.

It was not just protection, but networking and development opportunities there as well. Which also felt very important, as I was on a graduate development scheme. (Flora)

The credibility of the union as an organisation was also enhanced through the perceived quality of their learning and development offering. These events provided an easy route to contact with the union that did not rely on any belief in collectivism; in fact, the desire for this offering was generally borne from the individualistic desire for personal development. However, such provision often stimulated identification with the trade union, encouraging or strengthening participation:

I think that something good the FDA does is the FDA Learn programme where they offer learning, development and training opportunities, a couple of which I have been on and I am planning to go on another one in January so it

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<sup>12</sup> Whitehall is the road which runs from Trafalgar Square to the Houses of Parliament, past Downing Street, and the head offices of many government departments, including HMRC, HM Treasury, the MoD, and the Cabinet Office, are located there. The term “Whitehall” is commonly used in the UK to refer generically to this head office or policy function of government departments; although many departments have now decentralised, Whitehall’s proximity to Parliament and hence Ministers means that a certain amount of activity continues to be centralised in these offices.



is running..... It can be on dynamic leadership and communication skills and that sort of thing and they are certainly very good value for money. (Nicola)

Members also looked to take up positions in the union as a way to develop skills and seek empowerment. The development of trade union skills was closely aligned to career development with there being a high-level of overlap between the skills needed in trade union work and professional work. In very active members, this led to dual careers in which, at times, there was little distinction between their role as a trade unionist and roles in the Civil Service; and, of course, for some trade unionism had effectively become a career.

### 6.3.2 Unionised Managers

For many participants, being a manager was cited as a reason in itself to join a trade union:

I think I maybe never joined [a trade union] straightaway when I came into the Civil Service, but definitely when I became a manager, where you had any management responsibility. (Claire)

Joining the FDA as opposed to any other union was also related to managerial status within the organisation:

My initial inclination was to join what is now called Prospect... but because of the level at which I have been appointed I was told it is not appropriate, as you are going to be managing people, and you might end up in a situation where you and the people you manage are all in the same union; so you had better go to the FDA (Lilian)

Union participation was seen as particularly complementary to, and compatible with, management roles due to the need to understand HR and employment relations processes. Participants also believed that their awareness of issues was enhanced through their union membership and that this would improve their managerial skills:

It's quite useful – it means I'm better at doing my job. And whenever I'm dealing with HR issues, I'm more aware of some of the process around that,

through having dealt with casework issues – so I can be more careful about things. (Helen)

It has been widely documented that organisations with a trade union presence have a reduced number of employment tribunals (Darlington, 2002). The participants' narratives of their union involvement make it clear that for this group of senior and managerial staff, the trade union performed a large part of the Human Resource function within the organisation, and supported professional members of staff with managerial responsibility. Levels of trust in the trade union also appeared greater than the levels of trust in the organisation's HR function, with participants in managerial roles stating that they would often "check" with the union on HR issues before implementing changes in their own area.

For some women trade union participation provided the only way to develop themselves – in both confidence and skills – in order to effectively take on increasing managerial responsibility:

I have had to acquire, over the years, various management responsibilities and I am now running a department here. That might have happened sooner but for the usual glass ceilings and so on that afflict women in all sectors, so, in that respect always having been a member of a union ... that work enabled me to develop an understanding of how things run, how things are remunerated and how things work, how to negotiate. That was often blocked to me in terms of getting training and enablement in terms of developing a career. (Andrea)

The risk and responsibility of managerial and senior positions was a common concern amongst the more senior participants (those not in training positions). High profile cases of senior civil servants being publicly named and blamed by the government weighed heavily on participants' minds. The potential for grievances to be made against them by junior staff also prompted managers to look to a "consultancy union" (Boxall and Haynes, 1997), which could provide HR, legal and procedural advice.

Recent changes to HR systems in the Civil Service created tension for managers – the potential to be pressurised into carrying out “unfair”, “unjust” or “stupid” actions that would negatively impact their staff was particularly worrying to many participants. In the below quotation, Eleanor discusses the implementation of a new performance management system, suggesting that should she be forced to treat staff members in a way she felt was unfair, she would seek union representation:

Being a manager, who’s also a union member, I’m so conscious that we’ve got to get this right and yet it’s really difficult to get it right. I certainly wouldn’t say that somebody was “must improve” if I genuinely felt that they weren’t sort of in that zone, if you know what I mean. And if I was forced to do that, then I would bring the union in. (Eleanor)

Despite the participants’ seniority within the organisation, many indicated feeling a lack of influence in their day jobs, a sense of “not being taken seriously”. With an extensive hierarchy, seniority remains relative and, when such seniority intersected with characteristics or identities which lacked authority (such as youth or femininity), legitimacy became a greater struggle. For some, union activity conferred legitimacy through having knowledge at a higher organisational level as well as a more extensive network than others at the same grade.

I think [my manager] looked at me as the new person on the team who wasn’t going to be useful to her, and wasn’t very interesting, and she didn’t really care about me. But now that she knows about me, and knows that I’m on ARC [Committee] and I have some influence there, she’s more interested in discussing issues with me, and asking my opinion on things. (Gemma)

This access to greater networks and organisational knowledge was often described as empowering; and fed into women’s identities, allowing them to take on activities or roles that they may not have felt confident in doing based on their professional identity alone:

I was then being invited to meetings of a quite different level than I was invited to as a member of staff so I began to see, began to understand the

politics and economics of the institution and how things worked and how to get things done and that, on a personal level, was very important to my confidence and my willingness to speak because in that context I could speak as a union representative as opposed to speaking as myself and I was much braver, I had a role, a duty as a union member which I had previously found it, you know, quite difficult to take on. That is possibly a very personal thing to me or women of my age. (Andrea)

For some participants, formal union roles provided a sense of empowerment that was absent in their day jobs. The quotation below demonstrates the sense of empowerment provided by union activity. This participant became a national officer when the office she managed closed; and having been unable to stop the closure using her professional seniority, she turned to the union to gain influence as well as to continue to use skills that she felt she would no longer use in her day job.

That's at the time when I first became a lot more involved with the union because having lost that sort of control, if you like, of being in charge of an office and just suddenly being back being a run of the mill inquiry officer, I could see I wasn't using all my strengths and I think the union does give you the opportunity to do that in an informal environment (Beryl)

As we will see under "Personal Identities and Action" in section 6.5, a sense of empowerment was a common outcome of union participation.

### 6.3.3 The Union as Organisational Communications

Across all participants and all levels of participation, the union was seen as an important source of information; and having access to this information was a key motivator for participation. Informal participation in the form of attending meetings and reading union literature was a way that nearly all participants felt they could access the information they wished to have. As a newly promoted technical specialist explains:

Yeah, so my union involvement is really going to the meetings, I get the emails – there's quite a lot of emails from the union, get the union

newsletters and read those, just try and keep abreast of what is happening  
(Flora)

While information regarding issues related to employment relations was important, participants also looked to their union for information about day-to-day organisational issues as well as issues relating to their profession, demonstrating that the identity of the union as a professional body was instrumental not only in encouraging membership but also in encouraging participation both at an informal and a formal level. An early career professional and national committee member describes how her union involvement improves her knowledge of her organisation:

I know more about what's going on in the Department; I know more about who does what, who has what responsibilities so I think that makes things make sense more – so you get an announcement, and you think – I know how this affects me. (Gemma)

The need for an information source providing both information about organisational changes and analysis of organisational messages challenges assumptions of management as a homogeneous body with interests that are aligned with those of the organisation. Individuals in privileged positions within organisations remain vulnerable to organisational changes that may disadvantage them personally and, as the below quotation demonstrates, may not fully identify or trust others with greater privilege.

I volunteered to be on the Committee, to be the rep for (Northern Town X) – just to be in the know, if you like; just so that I could find out what was going on. Because quite often, the messages don't come down through the management chain. I find out more, from the union Committee meetings, than I do through my management chain, as to what's going on in the background (Joanne)

For participants who did not hold formal positions within the union hierarchy, union meetings provided the opportunity to hear and input into discussions on important issues. The atmosphere at meetings was significant in whether those who attended saw them as a

useful way to gain such information. An “informal” atmosphere was key to facilitating discussion and allowing participatory democracy. A young trainee describes union meetings:

They’re quite informal. And there’s not huge numbers there, so you’re not intimidated to speak up, if you wanted to input. (Sophie)

Further to this, in locations with higher attendance levels, the meetings involved a social side that increased identification with both the profession and the trade union.

Finally, an effective union strategy for engaging members at meetings related to the attendance of trade union leaders. The opportunity to hear directly from leaders within the union contributes union commitment, union trust (Goslinga and Sverke, 2003) and the perception of union instrumentality (Klandermans, 1986) all appeared to act as a motivator for participation, as demonstrated by the below quotation.

And I didn’t actually get involved at all until, I remember one Leicester meeting when I was working in Leicester and I remember the union rep from committee coming down, he’s left now, and I didn’t like him at all. I am still not very fond of him. But I thought, “oh right, they do do things then”  
(Jennifer)

## 6.4 Employment Relations and Union Strategies

Alongside women’s engagement with the trade union as a professional body which aligned with their professional identities and career aspirations, participants also engaged with the trade union based on its work as a traditional trade union. This section considers two classical functions of a trade union – mediating in workplace disputes and personal causes – before looking at how union activity and recruitment strategies were visible to, and impacted upon, the women in this sample.

### 6.4.1 Workplace Disputes and Personal Causes

Perceived group injustice in the workplace proved a compelling reason to join a union. This was further compounded by group identification as part of a profession and the amalgamation of the union’s role as traditional trade union and professional body.

The below quotations demonstrate such perceived group injustice. It describes a (now) senior lawyer's initial experiences and joining motivations during the late 1970s.

We were outraged! At the conditions they expected us to work on Saturday; to go and do a full court and yet only paid us by the hour. Which in my case, because pay was quite low, meant that for taking up the whole of my Saturday morning, getting to court – because they didn't pay travel – I earned 15 pounds for doing highly complex work. So we all decided, particularly in London, because it was very difficult – so we all decided we wished to withdraw our labour. But we all decided that it would be certainly safe, safer to do so, under the aegis of a union. (Eileen)

The perception of union instrumentality (Klandermans, 1986) was significant. The quotation below, from a woman who had joined the Civil Service within the previous two years directly at a senior level, that management to employer discussion would be ineffective; consequently, union intervention was required to achieve security for both the group (“fairly senior staff”) and the individual.

There was also a bit around the Olympics, where fairly senior staff were being asked to go out and man the borders; and that made me a bit nervous. I thought, if there was ever a challenge on what I did, because I was not doing my own job, but doing a job on the border, I would want to be covered by some kind of assurance, that whatever I did to the best of my ability was going to be supported by somebody. And I rather got the impression that it wouldn't be by my Department (Anna)

As with membership motivation, workplace disputes provided impetus for members to become active in the union. Disputes associated with specific recognised groups of workers (such as those within a particular professional group, or trainees) were reported as being well handled by the FDA trade union and consequently increased perception of union instrumentality and members' trust and commitment to their union.

For some participants, formal union participation was directly precipitated by a sense of group deprivation (Kelly and Kelly, 1994), with the group being female employees. In these cases (as against those described above, where groups were designated based on

occupational or professional status), the perception of union instrumentality was more mixed and therefore motivation to participate formally in the union came, in part, from a desire to create internal pressure to challenge the union agenda (see Heery, 2005) and ensure that underrepresented groups' issues were part of the discussion. The two quotations below provide examples:

And I think that the more of the detail I knew about the proportion of women that worked there, the number of offices that had closed, the proportion that were part-time was higher than the national average, you know, all of that – the data behind it, was making me more angry rather than more rational about it and at that point I decided that yes I will stand for national committee for ARC because then I will, well, the battle may have been lost for Stockport but I would at least like to use the same arguments for future business decisions. So that was nearly two years ago and I have been on the national committee since then. (Beryl)

I wouldn't necessarily have become active, were it not for the fact that I applied for promotion, with another woman, of my experience – because I was a very experienced lawyer – and that we were both turned down for promotion, whereas all the men who applied were promoted. So although Yvonne and I had say, thirty years' experience, between us, the men actually – five of them! – had less. And I rang up the full-time organiser, who was a woman, who was hostile, dismissive, and I thought "right, you cow; you're not going to get away with this, I'm going to be convenor; and I'm going to make your life very very difficult, because you're not doing your job." (Eileen)

The above quotation makes specific reference to the fact that the barrier to these women's effective representation was a woman herself. This highlights how women may be reminded of their subordinate position in the organisation by both women and men (Fotaki, 2001) as well as how a narrow trade union agenda may prevent women themselves from perceiving gender as a significant workplace issue (Kirton and Healy, 2003).



While gendered inequalities were a prompt for participation for some members, the acceptance of the “abstract worker” and of organisational procedures and processes as gender neutral (Acker, 2002) created barriers to participation for women feeling aggrieved on this basis. Participants often expressed discomfort with raising issues which were not seen to be core to the union’s purpose or activities. However, other identities experienced as salient in the workplace did provide a platform for action, with personal experience of issues associated with such identities giving a greater sense of legitimacy and drive to ensure such issues are recognised by both the union and the Civil Service in general.

## 6.4.2 Union Activity and Recruitment Strategies

Unsurprisingly, union activity and presence in the workplace was a very positive influence on the membership motivation. Having active local representatives, and colleagues involved in the union, increased the sense that the union was relevant and created a sense of collective identity amongst members.

Up until the recent past, having a high union density and visible officers was a common experience in the Civil Service:

Everybody that you worked with was in the union, and the union rep worked in your office, then. So you knew them, and it was very much discussing issues that were relevant to your job; so it seemed a lot more relevant...that was probably why I joined. (Emma)

Being encouraged to join by colleagues or managers was a significant motivator. In addition, having local reps highlighting the role of the union provided impetus to join.

I’m very typical of a lot of people; I joined because I was asked. I was asked by a local rep, you know, “Do you know about the union?”, “No”; “Would you like to know more about it?” “Yes”; “Do you want to join us, you pay a subscription and this is what you get out of it?” and I said yes (Beryl)

The social side of union activity, which established collective identity at a local level, also provided encouragement for membership as, in active locations, numerous social events were run by the union.

A lot of the people I was working with were quite active in the union. We have, three times a year, a union meeting for the area and we combine it with a lunch. And it's socialising really (Joanne)

Clearly, local union activism – and strategies for maintaining the profile of the union within the workplace – were effective in motivating participants to join. However, the above quotations were all taken from women nearing the end of their career and describing their working environment in the 1970s, 80s and early 90s. Younger women in active centres described the visibility of union activity as a similarly compelling reason to join but far fewer early career women had had the experience of working in such an environment.

Formal and targeted recruitment was cited by participants as encouraging membership for a number of reasons. It created an impression of union instrumentality (Klandermans, 1986), as the union was aware of and understood issues directly impacting on the targeted section of the workforce. For graduate trainees, whose day to day working experiences and status differed quite significantly from the general workforce, this was particularly compelling. For such groups like for like recruitment was effective as it served to further increase perception of union relevance.

Here a trainee that had previously worked in the private sector explains how she was invited by union officials to a union meeting:

It's a bit weird because I have come from an environment where the senior grades are like "bloody union". Here, we were invited to a meeting, we went to a nice restaurant for lunch, this is just kind of completely different in the fact that they were very welcoming of trainees. It was clear from the outset that they would support trainees and that they wanted to take trainee issues forward, just the attitude was completely different; so I thought I'd give it a shot. I mean, I might as

well join and see what it is all about. And yeah, completely different from what I am used to, from my experience. (Delia)

The above quotation also illustrates that these recruitment initiatives could serve to challenge and ultimately undermine previous negative impressions of trade unions. Direct union recruitment in the workforce indicates a partnership approach to employee relations in the workplace, as in order to hold formal recruitment events for new starters there must be implicit employer agreement.

It should be noted that all the participants in this study were full-time employees at the point of joining a trade union, and so any analysis of the effectiveness of such recruitment strategies for individuals working part-time or non-standard hours was not possible.

From the data collected for this research project, it appears that the most influential factor on whether an individual within this group of professional women made the leap from informal to formal participation in their trade union was simply being encouraged to do so by another trade unionist. The women who were asked directly by the trade union to consider a formal position went on to have dual careers as both trade unionists and civil servants. The below quotations present typical experiences:

I was approached by the national officer, who I knew from when I was a Fast Stream rep, she had now moved to be the women's and inequality rep, she approached me and asked if I would like to be copied in on this stuff, the communications side. And again, I thought "why not? It's interesting".  
(Danielle)

I think, looking back, they were grooming me because he must have known that - he left the Civil Service soon after- and I think he knew he would be leaving. He was already looking for jobs to get out. And I think he saw me as a successor..." (Alice)

I think I was very lucky in that there was a bloke who was a bit of an unofficial sponsor/ mentor for me and he saw me and thought he'd seen a lot of potential. (Michelle)

It is clear that direct recruitment in this way is a powerful tool to achieve active participation of certain select trade union members. However, while this had evidently led to formal participation for some women, dominant social constructs that exist in organisations surrounding gender roles mean that women may less frequently be seen as suitable for roles, especially those involving power and authority (Acker, 1992; Alvesson and Billing, 2009). If left unchallenged, like-to-like recruitment or cloning as part of succession planning for union positions serves to perpetuate unequal representation.

As discussed in the previous section, direct recruitment by the union appeared to be the most effective way to encourage members to stand for formal positions. Exceptions to this occurred when participants perceived a lack of instrumentality and were sufficiently frustrated with lack of progress on issues to challenge:

When committee came up for election, in the following year, in 2009, I thought – I think I can do a better job than they can. So I nominated myself. (Eileen)

However, this was very much the exception rather than the rule, and participants generally perceived elections to be daunting and akin to a personality contest. As such, encouragement and “having the backing” of the existing committee was important in breaking down barriers to stand and developing confidence in potential committee members. Below, a participant describes her feelings about the election process:

It was quite nerve racking! The thought was scary, really – when John said, “I’d like you to do this job – but you will have to stand for election...” I was quite reluctant to start with – until him and Bob, who was the previous President, and who I had also worked with twenty years ago – they persuaded me to stand. And I was quite surprised to get elected, to be honest, because I wasn’t a well-known name or anything. But I did squeak in. (Alice)

While nervousness around the election process was common across participants contemplating taking on trade union roles, the reality of practice within the trade union

meant that contested elections at all levels of the hierarchy were rare. The process of filling positions is explained below:

The way that we elect, or get a president, is never usually by election because it is not normally contested but what it does require is that everyone behind the scenes is supportive.

*How is that support confirmed or otherwise?*

I think it is just by conversations that get had so, it is not, it is not very democratic I suppose and I don't think we have ever had an election for president. We could, it is in the rules for that to happen but I think by convention people don't like standing against each other, they don't want to be in that position because it is very personality based, people don't do it. So what that means is that you have to gather people's confidence behind the scenes so you can be moved into the role but that might be difficult depending on who you are and who you get on with (Becky)

The circumstances of being picked out for encouragement varied across participants, with participants frequently citing friendships and other personal connections as well as specific characteristics or experiences that would be particularly useful in a trade union context. These included having useful knowledge in a certain area, being younger, or being able to represent a specific employee group such as trainees. However, in the past, and as will be discussed under "Segregation of Union Work" at section 6.6.4, selection based on desired traits did at times lead to less desirable work.

The involvement of established members in shaping and developing members' activity remained significant once a member had sought out a formal position, and often directed their progression through the trade union hierarchy. The below quotations show how established members shared their networks, made introductions and smoothed obstacles, thereby facilitating newer members' ascent:

And I think he saw me as a successor; so he actively encouraged me to come along, see what was going on in the branch in London and have conversations

with people. He would encourage me to go out to local Home Office sort of satellite offices, and do union meetings with people from London and I think that was to just get me into the swing of what it would be like to be a union rep. (Alice)

And the vacancy came up for the group executive and he, I'm sure you know how unions work – there are political groups within unions and the leading political group at that time when I was involved were the communists so the communist party of Great Britain caucus were in the union, of which Angela and Peter were both lead members and the influential ones and I think Drew, that's the guy who sponsored me, went to them and said "you should get Michelle involved" so I never joined the Communist Party but I got their backing which was required and I got on the group exec that way. (Michelle)

## 6.5 Personal Identities and Action

For these women, personal background was a key reason for joining a trade union. This appeared to have two main components: family background, and their own personal politics and principles.

When discussing their family background, participants often drew on parental identities – whether personal or professional – to explain their own propensity to join a trade union. Responses such as the below were typical:

I joined the union as soon as I joined the Department; so I joined PCS – Public and Commercial Sector – in 2000, and I did that almost without thinking because my Mum's family are Welsh, and very working class, they're very union-oriented, and would always say join the union if you have the opportunity. So I just joined (Eleanor)

And my grandmother brought me up. I make this point because she was, what I would call, a very left wing Scottish woman who encouraged me to join a trade union which is probably why I ended up being a trade unionist. Because of her values. (Alice)

I've been brought up to think that trade union activity is just good... I think had I gone home from work and told my dad that I had decided not to join the union, I would probably have been in trouble! (Kate)

It felt very natural for me, growing up I was – especially with two doctors in the house – I was very well aware that they were members of the BMA; and that was an element of the protection for them (Brittany)

Clearly, the family environment is an important site of the development of trade union values. Participants' predisposition to union membership typically drew upon second-hand experiences of the workplace: some explicitly presented their backgrounds as working class or industrial; others referred to their parents' workplaces as being somehow naturally unionised (statements such as "my mum is a teacher and she is obviously in a union" were not uncommon); and a third group drew upon regional identity as a motivating force, with Wales, Scotland and the North East of England specifically cited as having certain historical and social characteristics and a certain predisposition to unionisation.

These explanations appeared to allow the participants, who would generally be regarded as middle class, to reconcile this status with their trade union membership. Aspects of their background or upbringing – whether related to their parents' class, unionisation, or geographical location – were presented as significant reasons for having joined a trade union.

In general, older participants – from whom the quotes below are drawn – saw trade unions as associated with other political movements with which they identified. Younger participants were less likely to view trade unions as representative of wider social justice, instead seeing them as only significant in a specific workplace context.

I was associated with International Socialists. I used to sell the paper round the streets, which is a thankless job, I can tell you! So it never occurred to me that I wouldn't be in the union. Now where that came from, I mean, it wasn't my parents, quite the opposite, they were quite Tory I think. It was a sense of justice and fairness. (Michelle)

I think a lot of people who were involved in the trade unions, were involved because of a feeling of fairness. And certainly – I had been part of the Women’s Liberation movement in the early Seventies, gay rights, various things around freedom issues, if you like; and so I took that into my workplace. (Rebecca)

This clear connection between age and ideological attachment to trade union values perhaps reflects the difference in prevailing culture during participants’ formative years. Older participants were more likely to have been active in social movements in the 1970s and 1980s, whereas younger participants had grown up in a post-Thatcher era with minimal industrial dispute and low unionisation; as a consequence, they did not tend to associate trade unionism with their own political or ideological beliefs in the same way

### 6.5.1 Leveraging Disadvantage

Personal identity and individual experiences relating to personal characteristics provided a clear impetus to act within the trade union. Linked to participants’ views of trade unionism as connected to wider issues of social justice and equality, participants did often see the trade union as a platform from which they could begin to address such issues:

So when I began here the hierarchy was very masculine and my place was made quite clear to me and I didn’t like it much but I couldn’t see a way to break through it. I was a union member to address these inequality issues (Andrea)

Indeed, personal experiences of difficulties faced in the workplace fed into participants’ opinions on how and where they felt they could best influence their work environment. In the following quotation, a senior woman who had recent experience of being diagnosed with a hidden disability describes how she had used her own experience to inform her own union activity and to focus on the issues she wished to influence:

And I’ve just been involved in things like promoting how family members can support you through and around disabilities – obviously my family were a huge help to me around this, and at the time I didn’t have my kids – thank god! – but there have been times when I’ve had little relapses, and when



they've come along, they've been really supportive to me. But also the Department's been really supportive to me – really flexible, at times, around the work I could do, and how I could do it. So that's the kind of thing that I've influenced (Eleanor)

This personal understanding of an issue being used to inform activity was significant to many participants. Lived experiences became specialist knowledge that participants were able to use and in doing so, this gave rise to more confidence over their purpose and role in that area:

I guess doing things before, has often been through diversity routes – so joining LGBT committees, because it's an issue – I see where I belong. Whereas I'm not sure what our main issues are. And I don't really understand the pensions – no, I kind of understand the pensions thing, but I feel that you'd have to be useful in combatting pensions and rights, you'd need to understand bits of law, rather than just thinking “well, I think this is a really bad thing to happen.” (Chloe)

The link between identity and participation described above was facilitated by various networks and groups run by the union, and the department, aimed at specific groups of workers.

Participants highlighted the existence of the senior women's network, the BME network, disability network and groups based on religious belief. Participants generally saw these as a positive aspect of the organisation within which they worked, but feelings towards their own personal involvement in such groups was extremely mixed across participants.

To an extent, and perhaps unsurprisingly, participants' views appeared to vary depending on the identity anchor of the group and the individual's willingness to self-identify as part of that group. For many women, therefore, while the existence of diversity networks in the workplace was viewed positively, concerns over being defined by certain characteristics acted as a deterrent to active participation.

In the below quotations, although there are different ultimate outcomes, the unwillingness to be labelled as disabled can be seen:

Because I just see it as - it's just a group of disabled people getting together, do you know what I mean – so I don't want to label myself, by getting involved in it. Do you know what I mean? I mean, I fill the information in on the intranet, and obviously people know that I need help getting around – but I don't want to just be thought of as a disabled person on a Committee about disabled people. (Joanne)

It took me quite a while, actually, to accept that as being a limiting disability, that you don't like to sort of put that label on yourself, you know, but eventually you kind of come to terms with that personally, a little bit – and then I became more involved with the work and disability, for [the union].  
(Eleanor)

However, for disability networks, there was some evidence that the more tangible, and legal, practicalities of living and working with a disability meant that those affected believed they had specialist knowledge in the area that could be directly, and usefully, applied to union and workplace management of such issues. Although anchored in self-interest, this outlook was often narrated as a mobilising prompt to action, turning an individual concern into a collective and organisational issue. This element of disability networks, perhaps in conjunction with the explicitly protected legal status of those with disabilities, also appeared more durable even in an environment where cuts and time pressure meant many other groups had ceased to exist:

So the carer's network has gone, the religious belief one is gone and the women's one has gone and there was a disability network which has kind of continued but partly because of the need to have someone to deal with requests for reasonable adjustments and things like that. It was never quite the same as the other networks, it was more of a legal thing that they had.  
(Pauline)

For some participants, self-organised groups provided an opportunity for reflection and also to find support. This was particularly significant for those women who were seen as “firsts” in their professions, whether through gender, age, or, as in this case, race:

I got more involved in the union, learnt more about myself, also I met 3 or 4 other black women in HMRC and we started a black women’s network...But that was really really empowering. We had that connection and the difference when you are working with people who support you and want you to succeed is tangible and I had never had that before and I suppose that is what really made me reflect on all the other things. (Jennifer)

Within the FDA and its branches, numerous women’s groups and networks have been created. Most participants were aware of the “senior women’s network”, which was jointly run by the union and the department. Other smaller networks had been set up by activists to tackle specific issues; in the below quotation, this was the underrepresentation of women at senior levels in the union:

One of the ways we have tried to understand the needs of women at a senior activist level is that each of the women in this committee term, as I said there were 7 which was a record number, so it was worth getting together as a subgroup of our own to try and sound out how we felt about things, what support we needed from each other, if there were practical things standing in our way like the location of meetings (Beryl)

Many women in this study questioned the salience of gender as an organising factor, despite universal acceptance that their gender had impacted, or would impact, negatively on their working lives. This made gender inequality as a platform for action a more difficult route than identifying with other groups, primarily professional or occupational groups but also groups defined by identity characteristics such as race, disability or sexuality. Younger women in particular questioned the usefulness and necessity of women’s groups and network, and were unwilling to define themselves into a disadvantaged group, even though they universally appreciated the structural disadvantages women faced in the workplace.

However, in general, older women and those who had been involved in such groups considered them as positive and, in some cases, essential.

The most dissuasive factor preventing women's organising was a reluctance by some participants to consider the essence of gender discrimination to be gender alone, rather than personal choices made in relation to gender – such as the decision to have a child. In addition, the view that “special”, favourable, treatment for women was unfair was somewhat commonplace. As such, many participants expressed a desire to avoid association with this, seemingly fearing that even the suggestion of difference between the sexes may be construed as sexism. The following quotations demonstrate the sentiment of a significant minority in the sample:

Sometimes I think, “does it matter – why should you have these things for senior women?” I know we're thought of as a minority, in senior management we are – within the Civil Service there's probably a lot more women than there are men, in the low grades – but I just think, “well, these things should be made available for everyone, shouldn't they, not just for women”. (Joanne)

I think that the organisation is sufficiently gender-blind, that it wouldn't necessarily matter; because I work with male and female colleagues all the time, and it just doesn't make a difference. It's just that person doing that job. So I don't have a strong feeling that a woman's network would help. (Zoe)

Because I don't really think life should be different because you're a woman. I think life should be even – for either sex. At least, I think your opportunities should be there. So I don't think, from now on, my sex will make any difference to any of the work that I do or any of the perceptions that people have of me. (Sophie)

As previously discussed, a belief in organisational meritocracy was much more prevalent in younger women in the sample; and the younger the women were, the stronger this belief

was. However, the below quotation demonstrates how such attitudes appear to change with age or experience:

I think I'm probably changing my mind about it – I think five years ago ... it wouldn't have been something I'd have encouraged, because I thought – why segregate, do you know what I mean? If you want everything to be equal then actually segregating yourselves won't bring that about. But I think my attitude to that has probably changed... the older I get, the more aware I get of women's issues. Five years ago I would probably have said that I didn't think we had an issue with gender, in this country. Bizarrely! But now I don't think that at all. (Kate)

Even women who were active and positive about women's organising were keen to demonstrate equality of opportunities and to point out that men were welcome to attend and that they were not "losing out", demonstrating some unease with the idea that women specifically need support in the workplace or through the union, or perhaps reflecting opinions or perceptions which they had heard expressed by others:

I think I first got involved simply by seeing the advertising about the women into leadership one day development conference, aimed particularly at women but obviously men are welcome to go along as well. (Kate)

And although it's aimed at women, I always send out the invitation to men as well – say, if you want to come along, because there might be stuff you get from it as well, you're more than welcome to... (Eleanor)

The above quotations are both from younger (mid-thirties) participants who appeared nervous about explicitly naming gender discrimination as an issue either the workplace or the union. However, some trade union activists believed that problems in women's organisations came, at least in part to the ways in which male activists viewed such activity:

And I think there's often reluctance to do that, because I think that women don't want to be picked out as "special";... it can be dangerous to have any suggestion that they might be there through any sort of positive action –

positive action is not only good for them, it's actually necessary, if you're not going to go, "well, we'd like to have a more diverse workforce," but I don't think the men would like it... (Eileen)

There are things like the senior women's network – and that's for not just women but men as well, in terms of networking, mentoring, training – so there's a lot of hands-on work going on... but you see – I think it's very easy if you're a white middle class male, aged fifty, to become very defensive about the fact that you're a white middle class male... (Danielle)

The resistance to women's self-organisation by male trade unionists was something that female activists reported having experienced most commonly in the 1970s, 80s and 90s. Michelle described the overt nature of resistance to women's groups in the 1980s:

I organised a number of women only meetings in the workplace when I became branch secretary and I had some union reps picket those on the basis that it was sexist and they didn't want it to happen. (Michelle)

However, when reporting present day experiences, participants more commonly indicated that attempts to self-organise were met with ambivalence by senior male trade unionists, although the fact that women were so keen to underline the fact that men were not excluded from women's events would perhaps suggest that some level of (male) protectionism remained present.

For women who did engage with women's networks, a driving factor was related to networking and development opportunities rather than reasons of collectivism or activism:

It was really interesting, because it was the first time I really got exposure to people working in the same sort of local area as me, but who were doing much more senior roles than me – so it was a great opportunity to listen to a little bit about people's career progression, the kind of work that they'd been involved in, tips for how to get along, you know, in the Department, or in general... (Helen)

And I enjoyed that as a networking opportunity and hearing from different women around government was really a nice breath of fresh air. (Maureen)

However, the purpose of networking with women alone was questioned by some participants. For those that viewed such networks as purely a learning and development opportunity the idea of restricting their access to the most senior group in the organisation, that is to say men, was incompatible with their career goals. One participant commented:

If we are networking with each other should we not be networking with the people who are already in charge? (Joanne)

A further complication for women considering whether or not to participate in such groups and networks came from how they self-identified in the workplace. Numerous women suggested that they did not feel “senior” and therefore did not think that a “senior women’s network” was suitable for them:

But yeah, I read about [the senior women’s network] and think it seems really interesting but I don’t consider myself to be a senior woman, even though it is frightening that if I was working in a local tax office I would be managing more than a hundred people. (Nicola)

This sentiment was particularly strong in younger women, those who had been recently promoted and those working in very highly graded, specialist teams. In these cases, as we see above, although women did objectively know their grade was a senior one they did not identify with labels of seniority.

Women who had been active in women’s groups saw multiple benefits including allowing a safe space for women to discuss what matters to them in the workplace. Many participants also suggested that women’s groups were also instrumental in gaining flexible working, childcare in the work place and maternity rights that went beyond the statutory requirements.

But my experience of that was that being a women’s only group meant that things were raised that there was no time or space to raise, for whatever

reason, in the mixed meetings. So, for example, sexual harassment came up pretty regularly at that time, I don't know whether it still would but in women only meetings people would start to talk about it and then you would find out that actually they were being harassed by the same flipping security guard at Gateshead, for example. But it just wasn't talked about and it wasn't seen as a union issue. (Michelle)

Finally, both in present day and in the past, women used such groups as a route to develop their union careers and as a platform to developing a campaigning portfolio:

My first move into national union politics was via a women's group and that was looking to put some things on the agenda – like part-time working, like childcare, like things that seem so obvious now and there was a huge resistance to that. (Michelle)

Women also developed an interest in issues of equality through these groups and the “safe space” that allowed women to discuss issues; and these groups helped to develop confidence and foster a passion for action, with many women describing their involvement as “empowering”. In this way, despite the mixed feelings of participants, women's self-organising could be seen as a positive force in raising participation levels.

### 6.5.2 Leveraging Privilege

Many participants took on roles within the union in order to help their colleagues as well as to help their own department, the Civil Service or even society more broadly. The three quotations below demonstrate the different levels at which individuals believed their union activism could help:

I talked earlier on about wanting to be a people person and it gave me, whatever your job is, however you go about dealing with VAT or whatever, as a trade union rep you can be of use to people, be of use in the broad sense by negotiating terms and conditions or in the personal sense with personal cases. (Brenda)



I still see it as a privilege, because I still see it as representing members, and as trying to work towards the greater good for all of our members, and the greater good of HMRC. (Bev)

We are, relatively, really well-paid, well-educated, privileged people, in our job; so we have a responsibility, to improve things where we are, because the trickle-down is only ever going to come from where we are and so you can't – you know, all the other things will stay the same, if the better professions don't get better. (Jennifer)

## 6.6 Identities, Agendas and Structures of the FDA Trade Union

The above sections of this chapter discussed the reasons why women were motivated to and enabled to participate in the trade union. Below, the barriers to participation are discussed in three main themes. Firstly, how homogeneity in the senior ranks of the union undermines perceptions of union instrumentality for many workers. Secondly, how some women experience the trade union culture and procedures can create a hostile environment for some groups of workers. Thirdly, how the trade union agenda both persists in considering female worker's needs as in some way atypical and coercively genders female workers into caring positions. Finally, the section presents women's experiences of the segregation of union work, which limits their ascent through the trade union hierarchies.

### 6.6.1. Identity and Difference - the Homogeneity of Trade Union Officials.

Participants' hesitation in taking formal positions in the trade union was related to their "othering" within the trade union, which impacted on motivation to participate in two ways. Firstly, the apparent homogeneity of union representatives and leadership brought into question the union's relevance and instrumentality for "othered" workers. Secondly, organisational power structures which reproduce and reinforce privilege associated with certain social characteristics – namely being male, middle class and white – are replicated and potentially intensified within trade union structures.

So we have got our rep here, who is good, he is civil servant – white, middle aged, that kind of thing and all the members here are, except for the Fast Streamers, are middle aged, white, the usual kind of people because it is the senior civil servants and they are all the same kind of people. Which is fine but then I think, how relevant is it to what I'm doing? (Debra)

I'm not going to say the Committee was all men, but it was mostly men – and they were 90% white men, of a certain age, I was in my twenties; I'd be amazed if any of them was under 45. If any of them were under 50...

(Jennifer)

The above two quotations demonstrate how participants were acutely aware of the homogeneity of trade union representatives and leadership. Both participants drew attention to the difference in ages between themselves and the union's visible leadership and this seemed particularly significant when linked with the trade union's agenda and its focus on pensions. It is worth noting that the FDA's first ever strike in 2011 was called due to changes in pension arrangements but newer and most often younger recruits into the Civil Service had already only been offered reduced pension benefits and as such these younger members already saw a generational divide in their terms and conditions, and may have felt that significant union resource was being used on an issue primarily relevant to the most privileged section of the workforce: older men.

It is also interesting to note that the above two quotations bring up whiteness as a privileged identity, albeit an identity that the two quoted participants shared. However, it appears that in the eyes of these participants, the union representatives' whiteness, in combination with their maleness and age underlined their position as "the usual kind of people" whereas their own whiteness did not align them more closely with the "abstract trade unionist" when combined with their gender and youth.

Alongside gender and age, class identity was raised as an obstacle to participation, in the sense that those from "atypical" or working class backgrounds felt intimidated by the high numbers of those from middle and upper class backgrounds.

I was scared, if I am brutally frank, that a working class girl like me would be surrounded by posh pointy headed men who were everything I wasn't.

(Valerie)

The above quotation makes explicit reference to class identity, but this was more commonly raised through reference to class markers such as accent. As was presented in the previous chapter, class identity was often salient in the workplace and was often seen by participants both in terms of whether you were a "typical" civil servant, from a middle-class, professional background; and in terms of the types of networks you had, often defined partly by the type of university you attended. The way class could be seen to operate in practice was through the ease with which individuals navigated power structures, accessed networking and development opportunities, and ultimately climbed the organisational hierarchy. With the union drawing its membership from only the senior ranks of the Civil Service, the union environment itself became more rarefied than its members' working environments, in which individuals interact across ranks and social classes. Consequently, the privileging of upper and middle-class identities could be said to be intensified.

Finally, physical disability was raised as a barrier to participation, but in this case more commonly from a practical perspective. While understanding the everyday working-life difficulties faced by those with both physical and mental ill-health or disabilities often acted as a prompt for participation, it became a barrier to climbing the union hierarchy due to the level of travel involved. Consequently, as we can see from the below quotations, individuals who were interested in being involved in principle were restricted in practice by union operating procedures.

But – I thought, no – I'm not really that bothered about getting involved.

Because I have trouble travelling around, if I got involved in anything, say on the national Committee, I'd have to go down to London for meetings and stuff, and I just can't be bothered. It doesn't appeal to me, at all... (Joanne)

Again, it is a London base and I can't get in as often as I'd like. They are very different from me. We had that specialist field in common but they are probably twice my age, they live in London, they have kids, you know, it is a

completely different demographic that you are dealing with. It was interesting working with them but you don't really have that much in common and you are looking with completely different perspectives on issues and things. (Debra)

In the latter quotation, the participant describes her identity as a disabled worker as the "specialist field" she has in common with other members of the disability network; but goes on to highlight that one identity alone is not always enough to bind together a group of people in collective action.

It was not uncommon for participants to question the union instrumentality in light of the current political environment. For some, while they professed an ideological commitment to collectivism, they did not believe in the effectiveness of it for the FDA and therefore did not believe that change would be achieved through their own participation. Below is a quotation typical of this sentiment:

OK, it would be good if everyone were called together but having seen how unions function or having seen how the officials function I have become a little bit, well cynical is probably too strong a word but it kind of tells you a little about what my feeling is. Also, in terms of bargaining power, unions seem to have not recovered from the erosion of support, power or whatever that happened during the 80s and 90s and therefore from that point of view, their ability to bargain on wages has also been eroded. Having said that, they just leave a vacuum, nothing has taken its place (Audrey)

For other participants, particularly those who did not come from a family background of trade unionists, previous, formative ideas of trade unionism were both negative and associated with the working classes. This created some reluctance to identify with the union. For these participants, the image they had of trade unions before joining the FDA was based on clashes such as the miners' strike and general Thatcherite anti-union sentiment. A negative stereotype of a trade unionist is described below:

It was very very stereotypical of the image I had in my head of what a union was.

*OK, and what was that stereotypical image of a union?*

They were, the union reps were all men, predominately quite old, generally pretty overweight, the majority of them had quite poor personal hygiene and...were very very vocal and very intimidating. (Beryl)

Traditionally masculine traits were strongly associated with trade unions and, when combined with associations with the working class, were often described using negative terms such as aggression, hostility, disruptiveness and violence. For some this led to a perception of the trade union environment as unwelcoming and intimidating.

I suppose – that’s the kind of class and history thing – so I suppose a broad view of what trade union leaders are is kind of brash, argumentative, shouty, committed. I guess, trying to stir up a class hatred but in the FDA, I think it’s much more measured. (Donna)

However, when applied to the FDA as a specifically “middle class”, managerial or professional union, the descriptors were more positive and commonly named traits were assertiveness, confidence, decisiveness, passion, commitment and intelligence. These traits were often aligned with ideas of traits needed to be successful in a professional context and perhaps reflected on positive professional identity work carried out by participants.

However, the contradiction between traditional images of trade unions representing the working classes and the FDA did not result in an entirely smooth route to participation. Frequently, individuals’ own identities as trade unionists, which was in large part developed from positive working class imagery, would jar with the FDA’s position as a professional and managerial union, ultimately resulting in class dissonance being keenly felt by potential activists within the FDA environment:

When I was in the PCS, the PCSA in the old days, they used to take the mickey out of the FDA and say, because you have branch executive committees

(BECs), and the little joke would be “wine and cheese, not BECs” because it was all sort of senior poshos standing around having a wine and talking about their children’s private schools (Rebecca)

I saw the FDA as exemplified by various senior inspectors, who floated around the place occasionally, doing general inspections of offices etc – and were very, very pukka – so I saw the FDA as a very pukka place, with tales of glory from Oxford days... (Pauline)

Further to class differences, the worker/manager dichotomy, so frequently seen in industrial relations, did not go unnoticed by FDA members and could cause tension in developing trade unionist identities.

The members are senior people who are dealing with ministers all the time, trying to push through some of these radical reform agendas, so I appreciate there is almost like a conflict of interest sometimes between what their members are trying to do in their day jobs and the impact on the members on what they then do in the day job. (Audrey)

I went to FDA and in the join up package was an offer to sign up for BUPA and I was absolutely appalled that I was joining a union that offered me a cheaper subscription to BUPA! (Lilian)

The latter quotation not only demonstrates the tension between managerial positions and trade unionism felt by participants but also hints that individualistic offerings made by the union to attract members may sometimes jar with the commitment to collectivism and traditional values associated with unionism by a large numbers of members.

It is possible that many of the tensions between professional identity, class identity, trade unionist identity and the FDA’s own identity as a union come from the identity work that is reportedly required by those experiencing changing class status or upward social mobility (Lawler, 1999; Mellor et al., 2014). One trade union activist gave the following explanation for a membership uneasy with the class position of its union:

A large proportion are working class people made good who can't quite believe they have ended up in this quite good professional job and they feel quite insecure about their sort of, their success I suppose, they don't really like the idea that they are middle class, or they do like it but they feel a bit ashamed of it. So I think we have very screwed up members (Jennifer)

In any analysis, it appears that, perhaps uniquely for the FDA, it must find a way to position its organisational identity as both sufficiently trade unionist for some and distancing itself from traditional, working class imagery for other potential activists.

### 6.6.2 The Trade Union Culture and Procedures

In section 6.3.3, it was discussed how participants, in general, felt union meetings were a good opportunity to engage with and participate in their trade union through sharing their own concerns and opinions. However, in spite of the participants' predominantly positive experience of trade union meetings, it is significant to note that there were times that participants did not feel able to engage in this form of participation.

When you get into a [union] meeting and you've got say 15-16 people there and they're all very passionate as well with louder voices than me and they're the core members who go all the time it is almost like "little me, can I just say something?" and if they just carry on it feels more normal just to sit back then and say "yeah yeah, I won't pursue this any further". (Flora)

The difficulty of this form of participation came in part from the atmosphere in meetings, in which louder and more experienced unionists rose to the top of the local informal trade union hierarchy and were better able to express their feelings on issues. The difficulty of speaking up in meetings was felt most keenly by younger women who were less established in their career.

Aggression, which was often presented as characteristic of the trade union movement was reported as present in higher level union meetings as well as at a local level. In the quotation below, Valerie describes a national committee meeting during a time of industrial dispute:

I mean, alright we are in an industrial dispute so people are going to be a bit “grr” but I was surprised how much of a bullying environment there was, it felt quite aggressive. You know, “You will do this! You will do that!” (Valerie)

Women activists also reported behaviour that had made them feel very uncomfortable. While these forms of behaviour were mostly described as being set in the past, the effect of such experiences still impacted on how women viewed trade unions. Alice shared a memorable example:

I remember one time a couple [of union officials] came back saying they had been to a strip club in Vauxhall where a pint glass had been passed around and you put money in. But talking about that in front of me, it is not great. (Alice)

Although discomfort in union meetings was most commonly reported by younger women, the youngest group of participants, trainees, did not indicate that this was a problem, instead suggesting that the union was welcoming to trainees and aware of their specific needs. It appears, therefore, that those who identify with a group of workers with specific needs as recognised by the union are more able to offer opinions as a spokesperson of that group. Trainees in the sample appeared to have a protected identity within both the organisation and the trade union.

However, women who had been promoted out of their training positions described an enhanced sense of vulnerability as while, objectively, they have gained status through promotion, their identities as younger women become more salient in a group dominated by older men creating a feeling of difference (Bourdieu, 1999) while at the same time these identities become unrecognised by the union, which seeks to homogenise the qualified workforce into “abstract workers” (Acker, 1992) without specific needs.

The domination of the trade union by certain groups went beyond trade union meetings. Many participants, including senior activists, suggested that the union could still be seen as a “boys’ club”:

*That boys’ club, how does that play out?*



It could be off-putting or intimidating if you don't feel that that is the type of organisation you want to be involved in. There is quite a lot of going out for drinks and that kind of thing that happens together with the union business and I think that is fun and entertaining but actually it might not be something that you can fit in around your life just to be in a boys' drinking club. And you shouldn't have to either so perhaps it does appeal less to some people than other people. (Becky)

While the activists in this sample had all been actively encouraged by the trade union, awareness of this practice made others question whether such opportunities were available to all and reinforced the idea of an "old boys' network":

I don't mean the ability to pick up the form to apply – I mean the opportunity to have been groomed, and then elected and given the experience.

Regardless of whether I have children or not! Then these are the men, who are part of the problem, aren't they? (Eileen)

A lack of flexibility in union operations meant that many participants saw the union participation at national level as incompatible with family life: national union meetings were almost always held in London, and long hours or a culture of presenteeism appeared to be prized by the trade union:

I think there is this idea of "well, Dads have done it for years, been around and been late home" and they wear it as a badge of pride. Our Deputy President turned up to one meeting and made a big show of saying how it was his son's 13<sup>th</sup> birthday, and he'd missed birthday breakfast, and he was going to miss present opening that night. And he said it in a "look how dedicated I am" kind of way, and I'm sorry, but if that had been me, I would have been at home. (Gemma)

While cultural elements of trade union operations presented barriers for some women, the most significant barrier to participation raised by participants was connected with time constraints and the trade union's operating models. These constraints were complex and

multidimensional, involving private and professional struggles which were intensified by broader changes to their work environment precipitated by ongoing changes to the working environment under the guise of New Public Management and the impact of austerity. The below quotation demonstrates a sentiment typical of participants when asked about how their union participation and working life:

I easily average a 45, 50 hour week – I was working over the weekend; I worked until nine last night – so doing union stuff becomes harder and harder, in the sense of – you want to pick up cases, you want to help people, but if I'm here, I was in the office for over eleven hours yesterday – and that's just me trying to do the day job. (Brittany)

Work-life balance was frequently raised as a significant concern for participants. Work-life balance has often been conceptualised in terms of role conflict experienced through the tensions of balancing work and caring responsibilities (Gregory and Milner, 2009; Emslie and Hunt, 2009). Gendered domestic roles inevitably impact upon professional public roles (Kanter, 1977) resulting in intensification of role/identity conflict for professional, ambitious women. This phenomenon was present amongst the participants in this study, including, interestingly, those yet to have children. This group of women clearly foresaw the potential for role conflict and a future struggle to maintain work-life balance:

Not unless I could get actual formal facility time for that, to be honest. Because like I said – the day job is just so busy. I mean, you know – it's not unusual for me to do half a day's work on the weekend. And at the moment, I don't have kids, but obviously if my personal circumstances change, I'm going to have to really grapple with work life balance as it is – so unless I can get actual, paid-for facility time. It's not that I don't want to do that, it's just how it is. (Nicola)

The above quotation reveals the complexity of time constraints experienced by one early career professional. Work intensification was reported by participants working across all areas of Whitehall. Pressures from reorganisation of work, and cuts to staffing levels, led to long working hours; and this, in turn, created role conflict for these women across life and

career stages as they struggled to maintain identities of professional, ambitious women who were able to consciously develop and control their career trajectories. Active participation in the trade union presented an additional demand on time that, for many of these women, was simply not available.

Unsurprisingly, for part-time participants (all of whom had children) who had attempted to achieve work-family balance through adopting part-time working patterns, opportunities to participate in the trade union formally or informally were limited. For those who did play an active role in the union despite their part-time hours, changes introduced to facility time in the Civil Service prevented them from continuing in their roles:

You know, the restrictions on facility time that are being imposed. I won't be able to do this role any longer – and nor would anybody else be able to do it, because the new rules mean that nobody is allowed to do more than 50% of their working hours... whatever those working hours are. They're not allowed to do more than 50% for the union. Whereas, when I started this role in 2010, they said it was fine for a part timer to do all their hours on facility time – because my hours are so short. Because really, these new restrictions will discriminate against part timers. Because it's hard enough, you know, when I was doing 15 hours in an HMRC office, it's quite hard to actually do all the mandatory things, like doing the training and keeping up to date, and then doing some actual work as well – whereas if you salami slice that down even more, it would just become impossible (Bev)

The effective prevention of part-time workers taking up roles in the union is a significant blow to union attempts to achieve equal representation and will inevitably impact disproportionately upon women, effectively silencing large sections of the workforce. The introduction of the Conservative Government's Trade Union Bill<sup>13</sup> would mean this issue

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<sup>13</sup> The Trade Union Bill was ultimately enacted as the Trade Union Act 2016, and included changes to turnout thresholds required for a strike to be declared valid, as well as changes to access to facility time. At the time of the interviews, the Bill was still under discussion. A copy of the Trade Union Act 2016 can be found at <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2016/15/contents/enacted/data.htm>

would extend beyond the UK Civil Service and impact heavily on the workers in low paid, precarious positions across the UK.

### 6.6.3 “Women’s Issues” and the Trade Union Agenda

I think unions have been really poor on the whole in the past in representing women; it’s desperate, really, when you look at it, the extent to which they aren’t interested in representing women who’ve been underpaid. I’m talking about unions in general, so I think anything which gets those issues, somewhere on the agenda, then it’s useful...if there was something that would encourage me to get involved, it would be the fact that women who’ve faced blatant discrimination, because they’re working in women’s jobs, have not been well-represented by unions; and I think that’s outrageous. (Eileen)

Just as the historical association between trade unions and class struggle prevented participation for some participants, others associated trade unions, in general, with a lack of support for women and a reluctance to tackle the issues that negatively impacted on their everyday experiences of working life. The reasons for such reluctance were mainly ascribed to a lack of understanding rather than an unwillingness to help:

If you’ve got white middle-class, middle-aged men, at the helm, they just don’t see it. I don’t think that they have a problem promoting it; I think it’s just not on the radar. And they’re very busy doing important things, I’m sure, like doing their best with our pensions, important things like that which benefit everybody. (Valerie)

For others, the union was seen to understand or be interested in the issues of certain sections of the female workforce. In this way, the union was seen to homogenise women’s issues and fail to understand the diversity of women’s experiences.

Because all of unions' focus is on childcare and on flexicare. Now women have a very long working life. Whether you have children will actually occupy a very small proportion of your life, you know? So, although I don't decry flexitime, or arrangements for children, I do think – in fact, I know – that there is a tendency to assume that is the problem. (Eileen)

In the above quotation, the participant complains of the union's tendency to conflate woman with mother. This participant, along with others, did not have children and was at the end of her working life. During the course of the interview she reflected upon repeated incidents of discrimination based on her gender and lamented the fact that the union had only ever sought to address such issues based on provision of child friendly policies. In many cases, younger women without children in particular also associated gender issues in the workplace specifically with motherhood and gender disadvantage as relating to the *choice* to take time off work to care for children.

In this way, many participants viewed gendered disadvantage as an individual rather than collective issue; consequently, the degree to which women wanted the union to, or felt it could, directly act on such issues was mixed, even though nearly all participants had either experienced or feared sex discrimination.

Further to the differing ages and domestic responsibilities across the sample, the ways in which women viewed themselves in terms of seniority influenced whether or not they felt the issues approached by the union were relevant to them. As was seen in the discussion of women's networks, many women in the sample did not identify themselves as "senior women" and so felt the FDA would not represent their specific needs.

Of course, the thing about the FDA is that they represent the more senior bits of the Civil Service so to that extent, a lot of the women agenda is being driven by senior women. So there is a certain amount of elitism driving the gender agenda, but at the same time a rising tide benefits all grades. (Anna)

## 6.6.4 Segregation of Union Work

It was noted by more senior activists that vertical segregation of union work was recognised in the union:

Because we recognise that the representation doesn't accurately reflect the membership. We've got quite a high proportion of women members – I can't tell you what it is, but probably half, or more – and it's just not reflected on the committee. It's been better, this time, this term, but it's something you need to continually work at – and also, getting people into the Officer posts – so the more senior roles within the committee. So getting people onto the committee is the first step, but then people need to put themselves forwards for the more senior roles. (Beryl)

The reasons for this were complex, and appeared to be connected to the numerous barriers to participation discussed in this chapter. However, in addition, the agenda of those selecting and recruiting to positions could create barriers for progression throughout the hierarchy, when their agenda turned out not to be aligned with the women's own agenda. Participation of atypical members such as women and younger workers was reported as being encouraged by the Civil Service unions as far back as the 1970s, but these workers were more frequently encouraged to take on roles seen as suitable for, for example, young women – such as note taking. As we see in the quotation below, moves into other roles were met with some resistance:

There was always a role for someone to do the minutes and that was my job but the guys, I remember the branch secretary really being quite horrified that I might go on and do more and potentially do more than he had done. That was really shocking for him. (Michelle)

In addition, active women were encouraged towards pastoral roles or emotional labour. In some cases this led to women feeling overloaded with work:

If a member came up who was upset – well if he or she was upset, they would send them to me anyway, because I was female and can deal with

tears – but if someone just came up for advice or something, or just to talk through an issue, because I was physically there, then I would get the case and they wouldn't because they weren't there. So there was never any fair allocation of work in that sense. (Alice)

However, for others, it was felt that access was restricted to work they wanted to do and this meant that their original motivations for joining and participating in a union (i.e. having the ability to influence or help) went unfulfilled.

Finally, some participants who had been encouraged to take on active roles in the union, later felt that the personal characteristics used to select them into roles also limited their influence once in roles e.g. their relative youth and ability to “bring fresh ideas” to the committee was perceived as “inexperience” once in post, suggesting a certain level of tokenistic appointments. Below, one participant expresses how her youth and potentially her gender meant that in initially taking on a formal position, she became a pawn for other, more established unionists:

It became clear to me that they regarded me as a figurehead and I think that they wanted me to do their bidding. They wanted to do the real work, they wanted me in that role doing what I was told by them but also, crucially, blocking other people from being branch secretary. And I think they felt, she is young, she is probably malleable and we can get away with what we want to do. We have got her doing it and she'll do what she is told. And I didn't.

## 6.7 Conclusion

This chapter has presented the findings regarding how and why female senior women in the UK Civil Service identify with and participate in the FDA trade union.

For these women, their professional identity was deeply powerful, as it created a collective identity. In this context, their trade union acted both as a resource to professional identity development and then as an instrument to leverage collective power as a profession.

As was presented in Chapter 5, the management roles in the Civil Service were highly contested; women in the sample experienced managerial responsibility negatively and

considered it a burden and distraction from their core job role. In addition, they saw management as carrying additional risks, leading them to directly seek unionisation in order to mitigate such risks. This finding therefore strongly suggests that the traditional manager/worker dichotomy of industrial relations scholarship is at best incomplete and arguably directly unhelpful in explaining how such managers identify with and interact with trade unions.

Along with risks specifically identified as part and parcel of the management role, this group of women were also well aware of their position as employees and as such were motivated to participate in the trade union due to traditional employment relations issues and the union's role in collective bargaining.

In considering motivations for joining trade unions, many participants identified personal identities, drawn from personal or family background; or from geography, or class. Personal identities traditionally associated with disadvantaged positions could be leveraged within the trade union context as expert knowledge, giving women impetus and power to act in the specific context of the FDA trade union. However, this experience was not equally true for all identities associated with disadvantage, or for all women at all times, suggesting it was the result of the intersections of privilege and oppression played out within specific times and contexts.

Despite the apparent association between lived experiences of disadvantage and trade union participation for some women, the white middle class masculine norms of the trade union operations which persisted in the FDA created barriers to participation in both tangible and more subtle ways.

Time was a very significant barrier to participating at a formal, national level and the FDA's operating model fitted clearly into a masculine-neutral framework. At the time of the data collection, the FDA and its HRMC branch ARC always held their national executive committee meetings in London and these meetings nearly always involved an overnight stay for those traveling from outside of London. This had a number of effects on participation levels. Participants in regional offices frequently questioned the FDA's position as a national union given its London-centricity, thereby reducing identification with the union; the time commitment for activists outside of London was dramatically increased; and the



practicalities of travel itself made national activism impossible for some members, particularly those with disabilities and young families.

Homogeneity in the senior ranks of the union was also problematic in relation to perceptions of union instrumentality, with women questioning the extent to which the FDA represented them or could negotiate on their behalf. The trade union environment was reportedly hostile to some members, particularly those that experienced multiple disadvantages in the workplace. The union practiced gendered segregation of work which limited women's ability to climb the union hierarchies. The complexities of certain disadvantages experienced in the workplace either went unacknowledged by the trade union or were considered secondary, private concerns which should not be central to the union agenda.

Gendered concerns occupied a particularly problematic position on the union agenda. Women's internalisation of gendered issues as outside the remit of the collective agenda prevent the issues being raised in key forums, while the union's single-fold analysis of gendered disadvantage as related to motherhood ignores the complex ways in which organisational structure confer or deny power along gendered lines. Finally, this single-fold analysis of gendered disadvantage plays out in the union's practice of coercive gendering in which the FDA seeks to alleviate gendered disadvantage solely through the provision of family friendly initiatives aimed at women, thereby endorsing the organisational messages that the burden of care belongs with female members; and allowing their male counterparts the freedoms of the abstract worker and trade unionists.

## Chapter 7: Discussion

### 7.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the findings presented in chapters 5 and 6 are discussed and examined in light of previous understandings of the key issues and debates relevant to this thesis. The intersections of multiple identities and the interconnectedness of different spheres – domestic, Civil Service, trade union – are considered throughout the chapter. In doing so, the chapter highlights the key contributions that the study of professional women’s participation in the FDA trade union has provided to the fields of industrial relations and gender studies. The chapter is organised around key contributions as follows:

Firstly, the links between professional identity and trade unionism are explored within the context of the competing discourses of NPM and public service ethos. Participants in this study see management as an unspecialised and emotional role, similar in stature to childcare. Significantly for the field of industrial relations, the section also notes that for these women, the traditional industrial relations dichotomy of manager versus worker is no longer relevant.

Section 7.3 builds on this, drawing on concepts of gender and considering the role gender places on the development of privileged identities in the workplace and the experience of work itself. The ways in which organisations and trade unions come to shape gender identities at home and at work are then considered in specific relation to the role of parenting in gendered identity construction. The intersection of youth and femininity in a trade union context is discussed, and the research clearly shows the need to consider these together, and illustrates that this is a critical, and under-researched, intersection. This section also notes the continued practice of selection by established officials of “favoured” individuals to progress through the hierarchy, and finds that the apparent unavailability of certain groups of workers – in this case, women – for progression reduces diversity at senior levels, and contributes to a clear sense of frustration and disengagement within the sample.

In section 7.4, the significance of class identity in both the construction of professional identity and in trade unionist identities are discussed, with particular reference to the

challenge raised by this research to single-fold analyses of class and the worker/manager dichotomy; and specifically the fact that for younger workers, use of class as a mobilising mechanism may be ineffective. A key contribution of the research is the finding that for these participants, class, family background and public service ethos were inextricably linked, and formed an identity resource on which they could draw as they navigated their working identities.

Section 7.5 examines the simultaneity of privilege and oppression, highlighting the contextual and temporal nature of privilege. The dynamic interaction of spheres of life and identities and its impact on experiences and action in an organisational and trade union context is then considered.

## 7.2 Professional Identity and Trade Unionism

It has been widely reported in research that those employed in the public sector have a tendency to display certain characteristics associated with altruism and a commitment to fairness, commonly termed “public service ethos” (Gabris and Simo, 1995; Coyle -Shapiro and Kessler, 2002; Diefenbach, 2009). This research provides strong supporting evidence that this public service ethos is prevalent amongst civil servants; and that the associated values influenced professional identity construction from the outset of careers.

Public service ethos was a key motivation for joining the Civil Service, with participants citing the desire to “do something meaningful” and help society. As Horton (2006) suggested, these values are further entrenched through the development of professional identities – organisational recruitment strategies and training programmes firmly placed professionalism within the ethic framework of public service ethos. Significantly, the values associated with public service ethos were, by participants in this study, considered strongly compatible with the values they associated with trade unionism (collectivism, justice, fairness).

The higher level of unionisation amongst public sector workers has frequently been explained by advantageous structural factors (Schnabel, 2013) – low organising costs associated with large organisations, and a history of employer support, or at least tolerance, provides a good environment for union recruitment and organising in the sense that it is

clear that for most workers opportunity (in the broadest sense) does exist. However, this research suggests that some of the advantages go deeper and that the complementary values of public service ethos and trade unionism result in a workforce with a seemingly natural propensity to join a trade union.

For participants in this research, trade union work became an extension of public service – in the same way public service ethos encompassed a sense of fairness, justice and altruism, trade union work was considered in a similar vein. In this sense the FDA’s motto of “You look after the public, who looks after you?” was played out in individuals’ participation. This sample may be particularly predisposed to altruistic behaviour (assuming the link between public sector employment and altruism (Houston, 2005)) and an association between altruism, social justice and trade union participation has long been recorded in research (Allen, 1966; Riley, 1997; Snape and Redman, 2004). This long historical association may therefore be a contributory factor, alongside structural factors, in explaining why public sector union density has remained higher than in other areas – an overlap in ethical and ideological frameworks of trade unionism and public service ethos may result in a workforce predisposed to trade union participation.

While participants’ values aided professional identity construction within a public service framework, the competing discourse of New Public Management was problematic for this group of fairly senior civil servants. In 2009, Simms found that management roles were not seen as legitimate in the Civil Service and that management discourse not widely accepted. This study shows that little has changed and, in fact, the discourses of public service ethos and New Public Management are seen as fundamentally incompatible by many civil servants. This incompatibility leads to considerable resistance to New Public Management amongst senior members of staff.

### 7.2.1 The Disavowal of Management

New Public Management (NPM) can be seen as a trigger for identity work (Thomas and Davies, 2005). A key part of the introduction of NPM in the public sector has involved an attempt to change professionals into professional managers (Evetts, 2011). The attempt to create a target-based culture can be seen as an attempt to de-professionalise public sector

workers, which has created ethical dilemmas due to the conflict between public service ethos and entrepreneurialism (Hoggett et al. 2006). Within the Civil Service the legitimacy of the role of management has been seen to be contested (Simms, 2009), with civil servants dismissing the role of manager as empty and lacking in technical expertise.

Participants in this study prized professionalism, in the form of expertise, alongside morality, as fundamental components of their professional identities. In line with Simms (2009) many participants saw the role of management as simply “toeing the party line”. They viewed the organisationally prescribed role of management as being in direct contrast with the ideas of honesty and integrity so prized within their value framework. The data for this research was collected between four and six years after the publication of Simms’ work, suggesting that the failure of NPM to culturally embed itself within the organisation remains an issue within the Civil Service, putting strain on individuals working within the organisation as they seek ways to resist and navigate two contradictory frameworks.

Drawing from a clear ethical framework associated with public service (Horton, 2006), women in this research grounded their professional identities to specific specialisms, reflecting Thomas and Davies’ (2005) study which pointed to the vocational nature of public sector workers’ identities. Positive identity work was derived from the “complexity” of their work, the intellectual challenges and the wider positive impact of the work they did. In this way, participants declared the importance of the enactment and validation of professional identity (Dent and Whitehead, 2002), presenting their technical or specialist profession (such as tax inspector, accountant, or policymaker) as both institutionally legitimate but also compatible with their personal identity. This enabled these women to act with authenticity, which can be seen as central to positive identity work (Eccles, 2009; Brown, 2015).

Managerial discourse highlights autonomy, power and rationality. However, these participants frequently questioned the rationality behind many of the activities associated with management roles. For example, participants strongly expressed objections to the quantification of staff’s performance through the introduction of “guided distribution” for staff performance rankings (see section 5.5). As Duncan (2001) points out, public sector workers have been known to place a higher value on “quality” rather than “quantity” of work; and the conflation of meeting predetermined targets with overall job performance

(Marsden and French, 2002) was seen as disempowering and demotivating to staff by the managers in this study. Marsden and French (2002)'s report highlighted the increased levels of stress experienced by staff in the Inland Revenue due to the introduction of such performance management systems, and Marsden (2004) drew attention to the complex and problematic position of managers in this system due to their position as both subject and object of the system. The current study suggests that the negative consequences of such performance systems have not alleviated in the passing years. Instead, in this research, managers and senior staff in general demonstrated very high levels of stress associated with such systems, which clearly impacts negatively on their identity work. Clarke et al. (2009) demonstrated that managers may feel they face an ethical dilemma in carrying out "rational" duties on behalf of the organisation which may have negative consequences for friends and colleagues. For the women in the current research, in response to such an ethical dilemmas, managers were able to cast the implementation of such a system as unethical and detrimental to colleagues and staff and ultimately as an irrational action on behalf of the organisation. As a consequence, the discourse of New Public Management was further undermined.

The managers in this study embarked on a clear process of identity work when it came to their managerial roles. It has been reported that women taking on managerial or high-status roles may attempt to emulate masculine styles of management (Fearfull and Kamenou, 2006) in an attempt to gain authority or power, traits typically associated with masculinity (Collinson and Hearn, 1994). This was not reflected in the experiences of the participants of the current research; instead, this group of women tended to characterise the role of management as one of caring for, developing and protecting less senior workers. This could be considered a feminisation of the role, and certainly these "maternal" aspects to management were a highly important element of these women's managerial identity.

While the apparent "softening" of the managerial role may allow, to some extent, the roles to be conducted with a public service framework, the alignment of management with typically feminine traits also highlights the low status of the role in the Civil Service. As in other organisations, traits typically associated with masculinity are generally prized over the feminine (Acker, 2002) – authority and (cold) rationality are particularly prized. A key

contribution of the current research is that management is seen as an “emotional” role: unspecialised and lacking in expertise, it is more commonly cast as similar in stature to childcare.

Despite persistence in the attempts to introduce NPM into the Civil Service, the lack of status associated with the managerial role goes unchallenged by organisational reward systems. The relative lack of extrinsic rewards for the extra responsibility and risk involved in management conflicts with the unitary approach of NPM, allowing the management responsibility to remain a burden rather than a reward. Clarke et al.’s (2009) “rational manager”, profiteering on behalf of the organisation in the belief that they too will benefit does not reflect the realities of managerial roles for the women in the UK Civil Service.

Resistance to the role was displayed through various means seen in previous studies such as distancing themselves from organisational decision making and inflating the extent of the hierarchy that exists above them (Collinson, 2003). However, resistance was not confined to the micro level; both managers and senior members of staff sought individual protection, and collective representation against the perceived burdens of management, from a trade union.

### 7.2.2 Managers’ Need for Trade Union Representation

As was presented in sections 5.3 and 6.3, women in this research saw seniority, and management in particular, as carrying additional risks; and sought strategies to mitigate against such risks.

Past research (Waddington and Whitston, 2007; Waddington and Kerr, 2015) has suggested that the primary reason for joining a trade union in the UK is support at work and representation in the event of disciplinary action or grievances. This is strongly supported by the current research: “personal protection” was universally presented as a reason for joining. However, past studies have shown (Schnabel, 2013) that those with higher education levels or higher organisational status feel more able to deal with workplace disputes and consequently feel less need for union protection. Therefore, this group of participants’ membership of a trade union in itself represents some departure from

previous understanding. In order to consider this, attention must be drawn to the Civil Service context as well as the characteristics of white collar, professional trade unions.

In a heavily unionised environment a large number of participants' subordinates are represented by the PCS, a large and vocal trade union. As such, any grievances brought by staff are likely to come with substantial trade union support behind them; and as a consequence, these women recognised the need for their own support network in the form of a trade union. Knights and Willmott (2002) highlight that power is integral to the management role; it is precarious and never absolute (Thomas and Linstead, 2002), and so the negotiation and renegotiation of power is critical for individuals in a management role (Knights and Willmott, 2002). It is therefore logical for women whose power is limited and precarious to seek assistance in negotiations through a collective body such as a trade union. It is perhaps more surprising that there are not more reports of managers seeking to collectivise in response to their own precariousness.

Recent developments in the employment relations between the government and high-ranking civil servants have also led to an environment in which participants feel an increasing risk and need for protection. The increase in the "naming and shaming" of civil servants involved in high-profile failing projects<sup>14</sup> creates insecurities at both individual and collective professional levels; and as such it appears that little has changed since Shlakman (1950) pointed out that white collar unions must provide protection for members, at both an individual and professional (collective) level.

Research from the 1950s (for example Shlakman, 1950; Goldstein, 1959) drew attention to the links between professional identity and professional unionism. This work suggested that in order to understand white-collar, professional workers' relationship with trade unions, it was key to appreciate the definition these workers had of what constitutes a trade union. For them, a key part of a trade union's function was to propagate the ideals and reputation of the profession itself; and for the women in this study, this remained a key facet of professional trade unionism today. Group identification as part of a profession and the

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<sup>14</sup> See, for example, the case of the three civil servants suspended and named over concerns with the bidding process for the west coast rail franchise (<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2012/oct/05/west-coast-civil-servant-transport> (last accessed 15/10/2018)).



amalgamation of the union's role as traditional trade union and professional body (Goldstein, 1959) meant that participants saw the trade union's role as defender of the reputation of the Civil Service. In addition to the specific changes in terms and conditions, participants also felt that they, as members and representatives of their profession, the Civil Service, and general concepts associated with "public service ethos", were under attack from negative media coverage; and the FDA was expected to provide the counterbalance to this coverage.

A further way in which the trade union could be said to act as a professional body was in the identity regulation of those within the profession by the collective organisation (Goldstein, 1959). As was presented in Chapter 6 (section 6.3.3), participants looked to the FDA to provide information and updates which would impact upon their professional practice; and sought learning and development opportunities directly from the trade union.

Learning and development offerings have been seen to increase union commitment, particularly for women (Kirton and Healy, 2004); and the findings from this study suggest this may be particularly pertinent within the context of white-collar, professional trade unions. While across all organisations employees display a desire for individual career development opportunities (Kelly, 1997), in white collar professional unions the scarcity of members' skills is a key asset for employees when negotiating career development opportunities (Crompton, 1976) and joining the FDA provided a way to access additional training and networking opportunities to consolidate or further develop this advantage.

In addition, the trade union as a tool for professional development may be a particularly attractive for professional women. For the participants in this research, their skills and professional status are a key component of their professional identities. However, despite their apparently objectively privileged status within the organisation, women tend to have more limited access to development opportunities through traditional organisational channels (Heilman, 2001; Agars, 2004) and as such must cast their nets wider in their search than their male colleagues, meaning learning and development provision outside of organisational structures may be particularly valuable.

Boxall and Haynes (1997) suggested that professional workers look for a form of “consultancy union”, which works collaboratively with employers. In addition, Blackburn (1967) suggested that white-collar unions are less “unionate” in the sense that they are less militant and may not have clear political affiliation. This, now dated, analysis of white collar and professional workers’ identification was neither supported nor refuted by this research. Instead, the importance of personal identity differences between professional workers and the significance of political context was shown to be influential in affecting the expectations of workers when it came to their union’s function. Within this sample, the FDA’s lack of “unionateness” attracted both praise and criticism.

A number of women believed, perhaps reflecting their professional identities, that the FDA was in fact particularly effective due to its apolitical approach. The production and dissemination of non-biased information is a core function of many Civil Service roles, and the FDA was seen to reflect this – members view the FDA as a calm, reasoned and rational organisation that works in the interests of both their members but also of the Civil Service more widely.

However, as tensions have increased between the government and the Civil Service, some members had begun to seek a more militant approach, whether in line with their formative images of a trade union or in response to a perceived lack of effectiveness of the FDA’s approach. This was particularly true for women who reported some form of affiliation to the working classes and framed their membership as based upon concepts of class struggle.

While the professional, white collar nature of the FDA trade union meant that much of its effective organising was centred around its identity as a professional body (Goldstein, 1959), elements of traditional trade union identity also created opportunities for creating identification with the trade union and attracting new members. Having active local representatives, and colleagues involved in the union, increased the sense that the union was relevant and created a sense of collective identity amongst members (Waddington and Kerr, 2015). Personal contact with trade union representatives is a powerful membership motivator and visible activity is also shown to enable participation (Waddington and Whitston 1997; Waddington and Kerr, 2015). As would be expected, for participants who worked in offices with a high density of senior graded staff, joining was more assumed and

participating more appealing, reflecting the impact of availability of opportunity and exposure to the trade union (Waddington and Kerr, 2000; Kirton, 2005).

While these traditional factors in participation levels were effective for this group of workers, due to the level of seniority amongst this group of members, a key contribution of this research is that traditional definitions of forms of participation were not relevant to this group of workers due to such their overreliance on the traditional worker vs manager dichotomy so prevalent in industrial relations research.

As discussed in section 3.5, Fosh (1993) distinguished between formal participation and informal participation, while Kelly and Kelly (1994) suggested participation could be classed as “easy” or “difficult”. In both cases, a distinction was made on the basis of the extent to which union activity was visible to employers or management. Clearly, in the case of the FDA trade union this classification of participation is not wholly useful. Firstly, senior members of staff’s presenteeism is not monitored in the same way as their junior colleagues – they have a significant amount of control over the way they organise their working days and as such the lines between being at work or otherwise may be blurred. Working at home or away from the office is commonplace and it would not be unusual, for example, to answer work emails during a union meeting. Secondly, in managerial or professional trade unions such as the FDA, members’ own managers may well be attending trade union meetings and consequently, dependent on the specific work environment, it may be that difficulty could be created as much by lack of attendance as by attendance.

This highlights the need to move away from dichotomous understanding of workers and managers in industrial relations, as it limits the field’s ability to fully capture the dynamic interactions between experiences of work and trade unionism. In turn, this reduces the field’s credibility as being “practically orientated” (Heery et al., 2008:1), as the experience of large swathes of workers and members may be overlooked.

### 7.3 Gender, Management and Trade Unionism

Gender identity has been shown to have profound implications for women across all spheres of life (Acker, 1990; Alvesson and Billing; 2009, Billing, 2011) and this thesis furthers understanding of the ways in which gender identity plays out in the workplace and with

trade unions. Firstly, in this section, the intersection of management and gender is considered; secondly, the construction of female gender identity around the concept of motherhood and its impact on the careers' of these senior women is explored; thirdly, gender in specific relation to trade union participation is discussed; and finally, the impact of generational differences is examined.

### 7.3.1 The Intersections of Gender and Management

As was discussed in section 2.3.2, gendered segregation of work can be seen in organisations at both a vertical and horizontal level (Acker, 1990). While moves have been made by organisations to address gender imbalance in the upper levels of the hierarchy, the issue of a disproportionately low number of women occupying the most senior positions persists (Alvesson and Billing, 2009; Billing, 2011), including within the Civil Service. This research shows that the persistence of such gender imbalance impacts upon women's career ambitions, challenging their belief in organisational meritocracies and undermining their confidence.

Horizontal segregation can be considered a more subtle form of reinforcing existing power structures in organisations. Certain professions and roles are considered more suitable to those displaying masculine traits such as competitiveness, aggression and rationality (Acker, 1992; Kirton and Healy, 2013a,b); and these professions may attract a greater salary. Equally, roles within these professions may allow development of skills that are deemed essential for promotion. In the UK Civil Service, a distinction was made between the more prestigious policy jobs, which at least in earlier decades were considered more suitable for men, and operational roles, considered more feminine. Certainly, women in the sample saw policy roles as more likely to result in promotions, but as more challenging for women outside of London to take up, in part due to organisational structures which meant attempts to access such roles would mean long hours and extensive travel.

As Thomas and Davies (2005) suggest, New Public Management must be seen as a prompt for identity work and as highly gendered in nature. This research provides further evidence to suggest that elements of NPM have a disproportionately negative impact on female employees.

As was discussed above in section 7.2.1, managerial roles were viewed negatively by the women in this study. Alongside problems created through the incompatibility of NPM and public service ethos, management responsibilities created strain that was gendered in nature leading to a heavy emotional toll; descriptions of the work as “personal” and “overwhelming” were common amongst those with management responsibility. In line with previous research (see, for example, Thomas and Davies, 2005), rising through the hierarchy entailed additional strain in the form of high levels of work intensification. Work intensification is highly gendered in nature: as Acker (2006) suggests, organisations put higher value on workers with no other commitments.

Priola and Brannan (2009) have described how in order to achieve a coherent identity, women in senior management positions are likely to have made significant changes to their domestic life and consequently have experienced the negativity of breaking gender norms in both arenas of life. Many of the women in this study had never had children; but those with children typically either had worked, or continued to work, part-time in order to accommodate childcare. These women believed that managerial roles were particularly incompatible with part-time working due to the high levels of administration associated and the need to maintain the “personal” elements of it. Specifically, these women noted the importance of face to face meetings with staff to understand what was happening in their lives and pre-empt additional administration in the forms of absence through stress-related ill health.

In section 7.2.1 the imposition of performance management systems based on a system of “guided distribution” was discussed in relation to its negative impact on managerial identity work and acceptance of NPM discourse. It must also be noted that the imposition of such systems have highly gendered consequences, with disproportionately fewer women and part-time workers being awarded the highest ranking. As we saw in chapter 5 (section 5.5) women were not unaware of this and this once again challenged their perception of their employer as “fair”, created questions and insecurity about their own status in the workforce and further contributed to the rejection of NPM as incompatible with public service ethos.

### 7.3.2 Gender and the Notion of Motherhood

The notion of motherhood is a persistent constituent of feminine gender identity, linked to essentialist concepts of gender, defining women's social role (Gillespie, 2003) and often leading to negative consequences both for those who conform to such definitions, and for those who defy them. Motherhood has long been seen as central in debates about gender inequality in the workplace. This research supported the fact that the connection between maternity and femininity was indeed highly influential in women's experiences at work. However, significantly, this was not limited to those that had children – in one way or another all participants in this study were impacted by the notion of motherhood and its inextricable links to their own feminine gender identity.

Czarniawska (2006:234) coined the phrase “coercive gendering” to describe a process of “doing gender unto the other”, making gender “a coercive prescription, a forced property of situated conduct”. Organisations are a key site for the development of identity – professional identity is developed using identity resources including organisational discourse around what it is to be a worker. While organisations may have a legitimate role in the construction of worker and professional identity, this research suggests that, certainly for women, their role in identity development and regulation goes beyond the professional, public sphere and into the private sphere, particularly in determining what are appropriate parental roles according to gender. In this study, Civil Service “family friendly” practices were perceived as being directed towards female employees and not at their male counterparts, reinforcing the idea that parenting was a woman's responsibility and suggesting that as mothers they “should” sacrifice at least some time in the workplace (and consequently economic capital as well as career development opportunities).

The FDA trade union is arguably complicit in this coercive gendering through its own targeting of “family friendly” policies in the workplace and trade union at women, both firmly placing the burden of childcare onto women, homogenising women as mothers and propagating a single-fold conceptualisation of motherhood which ignored the temporal changes in its impact on women.

The impact of motherhood was experienced very differently by women depending on their age and stage of career. For women embarking on their careers, the possibility of motherhood influenced their early career decision making – the need for family compatible work/life balance was a factor in decisions to apply for the UK Civil Service well before any children were present.

Historically, the public sector was seen as an exemplar employer (Duncan, 2001; Morgan and Allington, 2002; Bewley, 2006; Howell and Givan, 2011), with the conceptualisation of “model” employer based on ideas of equality of opportunity and pay, as well as high levels of job security (Beaumont and Leopold, 1985; Duncan, 2001). Equality of opportunity came with provision of maternity leave and flexible working hours, aimed at allowing women the opportunity to have careers and families. This historical image had a strong influence on the women in this sample, who associated the Civil Service with better working conditions for women (as compared to those within the private sector). In exchange for this, these women accepted the lower pay offered by the public sector. Many women joined the Civil Service either having had children, with plans to have children, or at least conscious that they might one day want to have children. As such, these women sought to combine their role as mothers (or mothers-to-be) with a fulfilling and secure career.

The integral nature of maternal identity as a component part of women’s gender identity, meant that, for many women, promotion from graduate training schemes came at a time when fulfilling a maternal identity was becoming an increasing concern (most women completed training schemes in their late 20s or early 30s). Women’s increasing seniority made their gender (or lack of maleness) more salient (Priola and Brennan, 2009) and their awareness of lack of gender representation made them question their previously held beliefs about the benevolent nature of their employer. These factors created a complicated and challenging process of identity work (Fearfull and Kamenou, 2006) which women were forced to embark upon if they wished to fit into organisational elites, or fulfil private ambitions. For some women, this led to the disavowal of one identity or another – some women chose not to have children, while others significantly capped their ambitions, significantly reworking their professional identities.

Mavin (2006) noted that women in positions of power may seek to position themselves outside “othered” identities within organisations and as such seek to portray motherhood as an individual choice that women make at the expense of their careers (Hakim, 1993). The combination of some women having made a choice to reject feminine identities such as motherhood in favour of establishing themselves in leadership positions and other women embracing motherhood as defined by societal and organisational discourses (i.e. motherhood requiring presenteeism and career sacrifice) meant that for the few women who did not choose one role over the other, identity conflict was particularly poignant. As was noted by Mavin (2006) and Fotaki (2011), women themselves frequently played the most overt roles in undermining full-time working mothers, who were (sometimes explicitly) told they were neither fully committed workers nor fully committed mothers. In this way, the conflicting nature of mother and worker identities (Wajman and Martin, 2002) caused significant emotional distress. Assumptions around a “natural” female propensity to act as carer to children meant that returning to work full time or actively pursuing a career after having children broke acceptable domestic gender roles and consequently, as Priola and Brannan (2009) reported, women experienced their gender negatively in both public and private spheres.

Women with children faced barriers to progression as they found themselves in a position of comparison with the “abstract worker” (Acker, 1999; 2006). As Acker (ibid) explained, the abstract worker is unencumbered by any responsibilities outside the workplace and as a consequence could commit completely to long working hours and significant travel as well as after work socialising. In these women’s working lives the “abstract worker” was also viewed by their employer as having significant potential, manifesting particularly in their willingness and ability to network, and “work outside their comfort zones”. In line with a significant body of research (see, for example, Oakley and Cracknell, 1981; Becker, 1991; Gregory and Milner, 2009; Watts, 2009; Emslie and Hunt, 2009; Rubery, 2010; Lewis and Humbert, 2010) many women in this sample were constrained to some extent by responsibilities in the private sphere and consequently could not take up development opportunities as readily as those without. Women with children described themselves as “playing career catch up” or having been “held back”, providing evidence that the Civil Service has not avoided the phenomenon of women receiving fewer development



opportunities and slower promotions than their male colleagues (Heilman, 2001; Agers, 2004).

Significantly, and as noted in chapter 5, while all participants considered motherhood a significant barrier to career progression, many (particularly younger) women were unwilling to suggest that any structural barriers existed that conferred advantage to men over women. This contradiction between belief and experience appeared to be at least partially related to their own internalisation of the masculine norm of the “abstract worker”. In this way motherhood became separated from femininity and appeared to become a “choice” (Hakim, 1993) that women made. In this construction, their choice creates an additional burden on the employer, but women themselves would (and should) bear the brunt. This internalisation of women and mothers as “the other” (Thomas and Davies, 2005) in organisations led to anxiety and upset, particularly for younger women seeking to balance their future personal and professional identities. The emotional response of these women casts doubt upon the idea of motherhood as a purely personal choice for women – while these women are highly likely to have control over the biological processes of becoming a mother, a key finding of this research is that the “mother” identities available to them clearly conflict with their developing professional identities, suggesting external pressures as well as internal desires.

From the 1980s onwards there has been some discussion of the move away from collectivism towards individualism (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1993) According to Giddens and Beck, modernity has led to individuals removing themselves from forms of collective categorisation, no longer restricted by structures and power dynamics that have long played a part in identity politics. As Giddens puts it: “we are not what we are, but what we make of ourselves” (1991:75). Giddens’ original discussion was framed around the breakdown of class consciousness. In this study it is apparent that traditional identity politics do not resonate with young, professional women; and this impacted on women’s understanding of gender as well as class. A belief in individual agency over structural constraints and the myth of gender equality having been “more or less” achieved (Scharff, 2012; Gill, 2016), appear to have been internalised by younger workers. However, this reliance on the promise of individualism can be seen to create self-doubt and lower confidence: as Tafjel (2010) notes,

social comparison is used frequently by both organisations assessing staff and by individuals assessing themselves relative to their peers. A reluctance or inability to untangle structural issues from individual performance, in an environment where even the possibility of motherhood impacts on decisions, is likely to reduce confidence and lead to worse career outcomes for women (Wade, 2001; Heckert et al. 2002; Babcock and Laschever, 2009).

Women later in their career and with non-dependent children were acutely aware of the career penalties they had suffered. As Bobhitt-Zeher (2011) suggested, alongside the tangible disadvantages of motherhood in the workplace, negative stereotyping of women as “risky” employees impacts upon women irrespective of their intention to have children. As a result, women who never had children also felt they had suffered career penalties associated with motherhood. However, the continued presentation of family friendly policies as a panacea to gender equality by the trade union and the organisation did little to assuage their feelings and instead left them with no support with which to redress such injustice.

### 7.3.3 Women’s participation in the FDA Trade Union

Union instrumentality (Goslinga and Sverke, 2003) is based on the perceived effectiveness of a trade union. Members’ (and potential members’) perceptions of a trade union are closely related to how its senior officials appear to members (Waddington and Whitston, 1997). For women in this sample, the apparent homogeneity of senior FDA members damaged participants’ perception of its instrumentality. The senior ranks of the FDA Trade Union, not surprisingly, mirrored the senior ranks of the Civil Service. That is to say the majority of activists were male, white, middle aged and middle class. The disproportionate ability of this demographic to climb the organisational hierarchy appeared to be magnified in the FDA, where although a significant proportion of possible members were women, they were significantly underrepresented in senior positions.

Homogeneity within senior ranking trade unionists in the FDA was clear to women in this study. The impact of this was seen in the ways that women (particularly those whose gender identity intersected with youth, non-whiteness, working class or disability) questioned how a group of people with whom they had so little in common could understand or accurately

represent their needs. This significantly damaged their perception of the FDA's instrumentality, as well as providing a barrier to their further participation.

As was highlighted in chapter 6, (section 6.6.2) participants considering trade union participation universally cited time constraints as an issue. It should be noted that, as has been discussed (see sections 2.6 and 3.8), it has been suggested that all civil servants are experiencing the stresses of work intensification (Thomas and Davies, 2005); and that climbing organisational hierarchies also comes with additional responsibilities and likely additional time pressures. However, these time constraints must also be seen in the light of the gendered domestic arrangements which constrain the choices of women both in terms of careers and in terms of trade union activism (Heyes, 2012).

Participants' narratives in this study strongly echoed participants in Kirton's (2005) study, who struggled to balance their multiple roles as wife, mother, employee and trade unionist. Part-time workers in this sample were particularly disadvantaged in terms of access to trade union roles. Women comprise the vast majority of part-time workers, both in the Civil Service and in the workforce in general (Tomlinson, 2006; Gregory and Milner, 2008). A large proportion of trade union activity in the Civil Services happens within standard working hours leading inevitably to a situation in which, for a certain number of members, attendance at meetings may be impossible as they are not held within their working hours. This limits this group of employees' access to information exchanged at such meetings but also quietens their own voice, restricting their opportunity to raise specific concerns.

The FDA's assumptions about ease of travel and freedom to stay away from home can be viewed as within the context of trade unions' traditional masculine-neutral norms which prize presenteeism and long hours cultures (Guillaime and Pochic, 2011; Heyes, 2012; Kirton and Healy, 2013b) and see this as a sign of individual commitment rather individual freedom. For the women in this research, these barriers were significant in limiting the extent to which they could, or would, increase participation from local activism to national roles in the trade union hierarchy.

Research has suggested that the trade union environment influences participation levels of disadvantaged groups. For example, Greene and Kirton (2003) suggested that trade union

meetings could be seen as hostile environments, in which the views of the loudest were often accepted through intimidation of quieter, less confident members of the group. For the majority of women in this study, attendance at meetings developed union commitment as the social aspect of meetings created a sense of collective identity and increased the utility of the union as an identity resource (Waddington and Kerr, 2015). In addition, attendance at meetings allowed women to hear about and discuss changes to their organisations and working life. Hearing from prominent figures in the union also contributed to members' perception of union instrumentality and trust (Klandersmann, 1986; Goslinga and Sverke, 2003). However, although meetings were generally considered empowering, in the sense that women gained useful information, some participants – once again, predominantly younger women – felt they lacked power in the meeting itself, being unable to raise the issues that were significant to them. This discomfort appeared to be linked to the extent to which the union agenda allowed for discussion of such issues. It was predominately younger women who expressed discomfort in trade union meetings, but the youngest and most inexperienced women, graduate trainees, did not express such sentiment. The discomfort appeared to be most acute amongst women recently promoted from the graduate training scheme and who remained disadvantaged by their age and gender, without the explicit protection and legitimacy conferred by their status as a “privileged” trainee. This significant intersection – of age and gender – is under-researched in the literature, but the current research makes clear it is important to look at both together in order to understand how these women experience their working and trade union lives.

Research (for example, Sayce, 2006; Guillaume and Pochic, 2011; Kirton and Healy, 2012; 2013 a,b), highlighted the mirroring of gendered work organisation from the workplace to trade unions, where certain tasks and roles are considered most suitable for men and others for women. Horizontal and vertical segregation were closely interlinked, with horizontal segregation of trade union activity preventing women climbing the trade union hierarchies.

Women activists in the FDA had experienced both vertical and horizontal segregation of roles both historically and at the time of the research interviews. The horizontal and vertical segregation of work were closely linked in this trade union setting – beginning at local level,

women appeared to be pigeonholed into pastoral roles, or disproportionately given tasks such as minute taking. This meant that women did not have experience of key roles such as negotiation (Sayce, 2006; Guillaume and Pochic, 2011), which lessened opportunities to progress through trade union hierarchies.

As shown by previous research, direct recruitment by the union was the single most effective way to encourage the transition between informal and formal participation. Of the participants in this study who developed trade union careers, all had been directly approached by a more experienced union representative. These more experienced representatives acted as sponsors or mentors and, just as is seen in literature on careers (see, for example, Durbin and Tomlinson, 2014; Durbin, 2016), this was a significant factor in propelling women into more formal and ultimately more senior trade union positions. However, this form of recruitment suffers the same drawbacks as we may see in organisations considering candidates for promotion – “like for like” recruitment, while successful in encouraging membership and participation (Sterling, 2005) risks homogenising trade union activists; in the same way that managers have been seen to clone themselves (Watson, 1996; Van der Brink and Benschop, 2012), union representatives recruit in their own image. In addition, the selection process lacks transparency, reducing trade union trust. This phenomenon did not go unnoticed by FDA members who wished to become more actively involved or climb the trade union hierarchy but were not “selected”. Active women interviewed were aware of the low rates of female progression through trade union hierarchies and attributed this, at least in part, to “cloning” (Alvesson and Billing, 2009) by senior male trade unionists. The lack of transparency in the selection of officers and more senior representatives further increased a sense of the FDA trade union operating organisational norms which allowed the sense of “a boys’ club” to develop, thereby restricting access to posts for many members.

Over 30 years ago, Booth (1986) reported that only certain groups of workers were targeted for recruitment by trade unions, with those seen as peripheral (women, part-time workers) overlooked. This study suggests that this remains an issue – in the case of the FDA, it is not clear that the issue lies with recruitment so much as with provision of opportunities or mentors to encourage the development of this participation. However, the effect is that

certain groups of members are deemed to be unavailable for progression through the union hierarchy, reducing diversity at senior levels and leaving some members understandably frustrated and disengaged.

### 7.3.4 Youth, Femininity and Trade Unionism

Throughout this discussion, as well as in Chapters 5 and 6, attention has been drawn to the attitudinal differences within the sample, most commonly arising as a result of generational differences.

It has been reported that trade unions have seen “millennials” as inherently unwilling to unionise due to their widespread individualism (Peetz, 2010) and that younger workers feel that unions only represent the interests of older workers (Cregan and Johnston, 1990:85; Standing, 2011:77), creating a difficult relationship. This research did not have the scope to investigate the FDA trade union’s specific approach to its younger members. However, a number of the women who were interviewed as part of this study fell into the generation often termed “millennial” (those born between the mid 1980s and 2000 (Hershatter and Epstein, 2010)). In terms of professional, personal, political and ideological beliefs, and in contradiction to reports of an individualistic generation (Peetz, 2010) these women reported many of the same sentiments as older women – they believed that justice and equality were core principles that guided them personally and professionally, they very often demonstrated left leaning political affiliations and a belief in collectivism. However, significant differences emerged in how each group viewed trade unionism as a movement.

While both groups drew from historical images of trade unionism in order to position trade unions as positive organisations, millennial women considered the remit of a trade union to be significantly narrower than older women. Millennial women considered trade unions only to operate at an organisational level and did not see them as engaged in wider social movements. Clearly, the unusual and apolitical nature of the FDA trade union may have influenced this significantly. Although a large number of these millennial women will have only been members of the FDA, many new entrants to the workforce have grown up as “Thatcher’s children” (see Hodder, 2015) and while this may not have led to a loss of collectivist attitudes, they have grown up in an era where trade union power has been

significantly reduced (Heery, 2005) and as a consequence view trade unions' influence as limited.

It is clear that class identities remain highly significant as a motivation for professional women's trade union activism. However, this is also complicated by generational differences within the sample. Younger women were more likely to view the trade union agenda as being exclusively work-related and as such valued specific representation on issues that related to them as in their specific position as, for example, trainees. This narrower view of a trade union's role suggests significant difficulty in unionising younger workers who are not conveniently situated within explicitly stated groups within the workforce. Collectivism for this group was created through their understanding of themselves as a separate group of workers, as defined by their organisation.

Despite an apparent belief in collectivism, some collective identities were rejected by younger women as identities upon which one could organise. Gender identity as an oppressed identity was particularly problematic for younger women in this research. As was discussed in section 7.7.3, many young women, despite their own experiences, believed that gender equality had been near enough achieved in the workplace; or that it only persisted due to historical anomalies which would in time be eliminated. This belief, combined with a belief in equality, meant that many younger women were uneasy with women-only groups or training programmes directed specifically at women because they believed this to be "unfair" to their male colleagues. In an individualised, neo-liberal environment, young women have come to strongly believe in the existence of meritocracy and consequently in their abilities to transcend structural barriers to career progression (Aune and Holyoak, 2017), rejecting any victim narratives.

At the same time, the image of feminism as "man-hating" (Scharff, 2012) has, in the eyes of many young women, aligned it with ideas of inequality, specifically in relation to the special treatment of women. Certainly, for this group of younger women, they have entered the workforce at a time when more women than men attend university (UCAS, 2015) and have been given the prestige of being marked out as high potential by their organisation, reinforcing the idea that feminist ideas of collectivism are no longer relevant to their working lives (Scharff, 2012; Gill, 2017). The research only provided a snapshot in time –

interviews took place only once with each participant. However, the data suggested that as women aged, they were increasingly sceptical of the “death of feminism” (Aune and Holyoak, 2017), increasingly experiencing gendered disadvantage. A critical time for the need for union representation appeared around the years immediately post promotion from the graduate scheme, a time when many women faced direct conflict between professional ambition and their personal lives and a point in time at which they witnessed increasing gender gaps in pay and progression. However, after an early rejection of women’s groups and the segregation of the public and private still apparent on the trade union agenda, it was unclear if there were appropriate avenues for challenging such inequalities available.

## 7.4 Class

Experiences of class are inextricably linked to working life (Acker, 2002; Jones, 2003) and concepts of class have long been considered as significant to the trade union movement (Hyman, 2001; Moore, 2011). In this section, the complexity of class is discussed, firstly in relation to professional identity and secondly in relation to modern day trade unionism. Through this discussion, this thesis updates understanding of the mobilising nature of class identity, highlighting the need to revisit the worker vs manager dichotomy so frequently drawn upon in Industrial Relations research.

### 7.4.1 Class and Professional Identity

The Civil Service, as well as an employer, is also an institution – a middle-to-upper class institution operating “above” wider society, in the sense that it creates and enforces the rules that govern. Through the institution’s own class positionality, it represents ideas of not just morality (as associated with “public service ethos”) but also the respectability associated with the middle and upper classes (Lawler, 1999). As such, joining the Civil Service may be viewed as a means to gain or maintain middle class respectability.

The process of joining the Civil Service can itself be considered an experience of class, with class identity salient to those from an atypical background but going unnoticed or uncommented upon by those with class advantage. McDowell’s (1997) study of the banking sector demonstrated how the embodiment of middle class and upper class identities helped



graduates from elite universities appear to “fit in” to the banking sector. The leveraging of these identities to gain advantage in the recruitment process was also apparent in this sample and was facilitated by the Civil Service’s targeted recruitment of “elite” universities. This form of recruitment left some women in the sample at a disadvantage when joining, as they had been forced to rely on their own research to access information on the recruitment process. Others experienced an advantage; those women who had attended elite universities had access to face to face meetings with established civil servants, for example, and could draw on previously established networks to facilitate their access and induction.

Externally, the sample appeared homogeneous in terms of socio-economic class, when basing this assessment on occupational or professional status. However, in what could be described as a rarefied environment, class distinction was drawn along very fine lines. While educational attainment was almost universally degree level or above, the type of university attended was a significant part of fitting in or standing out. The embodiment of class background through, for example, regional accents created a sense of “difference” (Bourdieu, 1999) for some recruits that impacted on their confidence in the workplace. Despite such difficulties, in the Civil Service context, organisational discourse and individual positive identity work from such differences permitted some women to see their class background as their unique selling point, allowing them to work more effectively with those below them in the hierarchy and also to understand the public they sought to serve.

Acker (2006) has argued that class in organisations is made invisible through constructs such as leadership, management and supervision to the extent that “workers in lower-level, non-management positions may be very conscious of inequalities, although they might not identify these inequities as related to class”. In this analysis Acker reduced class relations to the traditional dichotomy of manager versus worker, which is commonly used in industrial relations research. The data from this sample, however, suggested that those in “management” positions are aware of class distinctions and that experiences of class lie on a spectrum determined by individuals’ past and present class identities.

Social class and family background was an influential factor in the development of professional identity even before the participants had begun their careers, as women

sought careers in which they maintained their authenticity. Authenticity, understood as loyalty to one's past, was important in understanding participants' professional identity work and career decision making, supporting Beijaard et al.'s 2004 study of teachers, which suggested that career motivation was strongly based on personal background. Participants in this research also had a strong desire to remain loyal to their past and their families' past, which meant that ideas of class positioning became significant in narratives that justified their career choices. For those with family members already active in higher echelons of public services, class identity appeared to interact and combine with "ways of being" (Lovell, 2000). "Ways of being" can be described as the ways in which individuals act as well as the expectations and values they hold. Such ways of being are internalised through primary socialisation and reinforced through interactions with classed institutions such as schools and later workplaces (Ely and Padavic, 2007). When expectations and values are considered as markers of class, and "public service ethos" is considered a value, then we see that public service ethos is, in itself, classed in nature and can result in the reaffirming of class positioning through career choice – in the case of participants in this study, to continue the family tradition of high level public sector work.

The centrality of public service ethos to authenticity and to an individual's understanding of their "core selves" and professional identity has been somewhat discussed in literature (Thomas and Davies, 2005; Diefenbach, 2009). However, it has not previously been explicitly linked to family and class background. For this group of participants, notions of class, family background and public service were inextricably linked; and formed a resource on which they drew for authenticity, whether as a way to navigate the conflict between their middle class profession and working class roots, or as a means to explain their ongoing commitment to public service.

Class identities are relational and temporal and achieved, at least in part, through identity work. An individual who changes their class position does not simply become middle class – with all the taste and dispositions that that may involve – at the point of accepting a "middle class" job. They may instead find themselves partly occupying two class positions but fitting into neither (Lawler, 1999; Mellor et al., 2014). This unclear class identity is termed by Lawler (1999) as "disrupted habitus", and leads to identity work in which individuals

attempt to redefine themselves in alignment to dominant middle class discourses. In this sample, individuals who experienced upward class mobility through their entrance into and progression within the Civil Service, used “public service ethos” as an identity resource, allowing women with such “disrupted habitus” to realign themselves within the middle classes without “turning their back” on their working class background.

Ideological values in the form of political belief could also be seen as connected to public service ethos and authenticity in the form of loyalty to family heritage. Left-wing political beliefs and trade unionism have long been associated. Some participants attributed their families’ left-wing political beliefs as contributory factors in their own development of public service ethos and consequent decision to join the Civil Service. Public sector workers’ left-leaning voting tendencies have been previously documented (see, for example, yougov, 2017), and it is perhaps unsurprising, particularly within a sample of unionised Civil servants, that left-wing values are strongly associated with ideas of morality and fairness.

#### 7.4.2 Middle Class Trade Unionists

Concepts of class have been significant in the trade union movement (Hyman, 2001; Moore, 2011), with trade unions seen as representatives of the working classes. This association could be considered problematic for the trade unionists in this research: their position as high ranking Civil servants provides them with high levels of economic capital and their educational background (all but one participant was educated to at least undergraduate degree level) are just two factors that differentiate them from what would be typically associated with the working classes. In fact, many of these women could be categorised as part of an “elite” (see Richards, 1996:199) based on the level of power and influence they hold. In order to make sense of such apparent contradictions, participants used family background as an identity resource to explain their own propensity to join a trade union.

Despite their current positions, for many women a “working class” identity remained salient when linked specifically to trade unionism. This continued affiliation with working class identity, when stated explicitly, was attributed to their parents’ class or occupational status, supporting the idea that family is a form of “class socialisation” (Bradley, 2007) which remains significant even when upward class mobility has been achieved. Significantly for the

FDA trade union, links to the working class allowed participants to comfortably commit to a trade union movement that was still deemed as representing “the workers” rather than “the managers”. Olin-Wright (2002) suggests that theorising middle class identity is complicated by the decoupling of class status and ownership of capital in post-Marxist analyses. The ambiguity of middle class status allows some individuals in this sample to occupy a middle class position, allowing for the accumulation of capital and consequent alignment of their interests with those of the capitalist classes, while simultaneously claiming working class identity based upon their position as wage earners. This suggests that for these women, experiences of middle-classness in an organisational setting are characterised by the precarious, contested and contextual nature of their privilege. In turn the contested nature of class privilege in its specific relation to managerial power allows participants to position themselves as in resistance to the exploitation of workers, even in cases where they are required to act as the exploiters.

In 2005, Kirton’s study of women in male-dominated trade unions demonstrated that strong motivations to join trade unions lay in previously held beliefs and values. This was reflected in this research to the extent that many participants felt that joining was not an active decision, but rather something that was simply “done”. As previously mentioned, family background was a significant identity resource, providing participants with a sense of their “core” self, linked to strongly-held political and ideological positions. Growing up in pro-union families was instrumental in developing this union-orientation, suggesting that a pro-union family environment prompts a high level of internalisation of trade union values. Many participants described a family background of trade unionism, and their awareness of the trade union movement was at least partly based on their parents’ own union membership and activism and second-hand work experiences.

Giddens (1993) suggested that collective identities pertaining to class were increasingly irrelevant for individuals, which if correct, creates difficulties for unions leveraging class identity. In a simple analysis this could be said to have been borne out by this research. Younger participants were significantly less likely to use explicit terms associated with social class or label themselves or their families as “working” or “middle” class. However, participants drew upon identities that could be linked to class identities and which justified

trade union membership as a “natural” step upon joining the workforce. Regional identity was cited by younger members as a determining factor in their decision to join a trade union (see Booth, 1986). Participants specifically mentioned Welsh, Scottish and the North East of England; arguably, this could be considered a proxy for class consciousness, as these regions have long been associated with heavy industry, high levels of trade union density and a Labour voting population. In this way, it is clear collectivism based on class identity is still relevant and useful for trade unions mobilising on such as basis. However, and for younger women in particular, images of class struggle and ideas of social justice remain compelling but the explicit terminology of class may be ineffective as a mobilising mechanism.

## 7.5 The Simultaneity of Privilege and Oppression

Privileged identities, when discussed by intersectional or, to some extent, industrial relations scholars, have frequently been conflated through use of terms such as “the white, middle class” (Levine-Rasky, 2007), suggesting a homogeneity of privilege. However, this research suggests that even within a predominately white middle-class sample the experience of privilege is highly diverse, with the interaction between oppression and privilege key to understanding the experience and enactment of privilege.

In organisations, including trade unions, hierarchies place individuals in positions of power relative to others, meaning no one individual is in a position of absolute power (Collins, 2000). In this way, the power of both managers and senior union representatives is restricted (Thomas and Linstead, 2002). For women in senior positions, their grasp of power may be an ongoing process and the identity work surrounding it complicated by domestic and gendered identities. The sample group is privileged in relation to the overall organisational hierarchy, but they are likely to experience their working and trade union lives differently to their male peers (Wajcman, 2000).

For some participants, the relative lack of power in relation to their objective status as managers or senior-graded professionals was compounded by intersecting identities. Youth when combined with femininity became indicative of naivety and weakness (while youth combined with masculinity appeared organisationally associated with talent, intelligence and potential), rendering leverage of their hierarchical power particularly difficult.

The trade union agenda has been criticised for focussing solely on the public arena, that is, the workplace (see Munro, 2001), irrespective of the fact that for many workers (particularly women) the public and private spheres cannot be so easily separated. The interactions between public and private spheres described by women in this sample highlight the ways in which such interactions are dynamic in nature and create temporal and contextual changes in the experience of privilege and oppression for women in the sample.

In this research, women's lived experience of trade unionism was heavily influenced by the extent to which the interactions between their positions within the work organisation, trade union and family life conferred or denied privilege. For young women who were graduate trainees, a clear collective identity recognised by the trade union conferred privilege and allowed a greater voice within the union. Furthermore, both the trade union and their employer placed them in a privileged position – they had access to extra training and development opportunity, were labelled talented, and had specific union representatives within the FDA as well as specific HR contacts. However young, recently promoted women appeared to lose that privilege at the point of promotion. Where, objectively, they should have gained privilege, they faced greater difficulties arising from the interaction between their public and private lives (see section 7.3.2) at the same time as losing their protected status within the union. There is no formal acknowledgement of this by either the trade union or the organisation, making voicing such concerns an uncomfortable experience.

In this study, it was also demonstrated that senior and trade unionist women were often able to leverage disadvantaged characteristics to create power in certain contexts (see section 6.5). Identities frequently associated with disadvantage (such as disability or race) were at times used to aid positive professional identity work; and they also facilitated the development of trade unionist identities. Activism related to disadvantaged identities recast negative experiences as specialist knowledge and this, combined with seniority, allowed women to leverage power as “experts” and “change agents” both in their formal roles as managers and senior members of staff, as well as in their capacity as trade union activists. This was particularly true for those identities that remain small minorities within the senior Civil Service, such as non-whiteness and disability; gender and class were identities which held less power. Again, the use of “lived knowledge” brought a sense of legitimacy to trade

union activity. This, however, was in all probability only possibly due to the specific ways in which disadvantage interacted with their privileged organisational status – acting as a “role model” is, for example, only possible with such privilege.

Gender identity – while salient in the workplace – was generally not considered, particularly by younger women, to be an identity around which one could organise or leverage power. As was seen in section 7.3, the organisation (and many women themselves) considered many of the duties around childcare to be a woman’s responsibility. For younger women, this was broadly considered a choice that women made, although it was clear that when personal and professional identities were juxtaposed it was not a choice that sat comfortably. However, the internalisation of such ideas meant that for many women feared diluting collectivism if their own workplace experiences were brought on to the trade union agenda – private arrangements, while clearly disproportionately impacting upon them in the workplace, were considered simply private. As a result, women’s positions of privilege in the workplace and the trade union were constrained.

## 7.6 Conclusion

This Chapter has discussed the key contributions made by this research project, drawing on themes which have emerged from the findings, and setting them within the conceptual framework established in the literature chapters.

Firstly, professional identity in the Civil Service was discussed, demonstrating the ways in which this research supports previous evidence of public service ethos as a powerful resource for collective identity. However, significantly this research also provides strong evidence of individual and collective level resistance to New Public Management within the Civil Service. Individually women in this sample reject managerial identities which remain illegitimate in the Civil Service (Simms, 2009). This rejection of New Public Management allows for, and promotes, trade unionism within the higher echelons of the Civil Service as a form of collective resistance to unwelcome organisational discourse. The dual identity of the FDA trade union as professional body and trade union further facilitates this form of resistance.

Thirdly, gender identity in a work and trade union context was discussed, demonstrating how gendered disadvantage constrained organisational privilege and created barriers to trade union participation. Particular attention was placed upon the notion of motherhood and the ways in which the relationship between femininity and motherhood negatively impacted women in this sample throughout their careers, irrespective of their actual status as mothers or otherwise. The negative impact of the association between femininity and motherhood was in part due to the ways in which the organisation, facilitated by the trade union, practiced coercive gendering in its approach to family friendly provisions, placing caring responsibilities firmly with female members of staff. The homogeneity of the senior ranks of the trade union and the Civil Service allowed androcentric norms to dominate both areas, limiting access women's access to opportunities in both arenas.

Following this class identity was discussed in relation to professional and trade union identities. The discussion highlighted the ways in which previous understandings of class privilege (both within an organisation and at a personal level) fail to capture the complexities and ambiguities of managerial and middle-class identities.

Finally, the simultaneity of privilege and oppression as experienced by senior female civil servants is discussed. Viewing the experiences of these women in light of their position as the "sometimes privileged" (Atewologun and Sealy, 2014) allows for a more nuanced understanding of power relations, and suggests that the experience of and enactment of privileged is heavily influenced by the intersection of privileged and oppressed identities in different contexts.

The implications of the above discussion will be discussed in chapter 8, the Conclusion.



## Chapter 8: Conclusion

### 8.1 Introduction

Since the early 1980s, there has been very little scholarly attention paid to the changing demographics of trade union members. Despite the fact that professional women now make up the majority of trade union members (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2016) they have remained an invisible group when it comes to academic discussions of trade union participation. Industrial relations scholarship has been historically disinterested in the experiences of women and their interactions with trade unions (Munro, 2001; Hunt, 2011). Trade unionists and industrial relations academics have persisted in the use of a dich

otomous understanding of class identity (manager versus worker) to both analyse and to organise, with little attention paid to the large number of unionised professionals who may occupy more complicated class positions. Feminist scholars within industrial relations have tended to focus their attention on women in precarious or low paid positions, reflecting the tendency of intersectional feminist academics to concentrate on the intersections of multiple disadvantaged characteristics, and to study those who appear to occupy 'the most' oppressed positions.

In order to take a fresh look at trade union membership and participation, this research focussed attention on unionised, professional women. With a view to contributing to the debate about women's inclusion and participation as a central union revitalisation strategy, the research sought to develop new understanding of women's participation in their trade unions. The research questions were as follows:

1. How do professional women experience working life within the UK Civil Service?
2. In what ways do professional women identify with, experience and act within trade unions?
3. What are the barriers to and the motivations for women's trade union participation?

In this final chapter, the ways in which the findings from this research project answer these questions will be presented. Implications of this research for both trade unionists and

industrial relations scholars will be discussed, together with the limitations of this research project, including questions left unanswered by this project and which suggest further avenues for research. Finally, some reflections on the research project and the experiences of the researcher will be offered.

## 8.2 How do professional women experience working life within the UK Civil Service?

The UK Civil Service has been seen as a “model” employer, with the conceptualisation of “model” based on ideas of equality of opportunity and pay, high levels of job security (Beaumont and Leopold, 1985; Duncan, 2001). The attractiveness of this to potential employees must be seen through a gendered lens. Women in this study were attracted to working in the Civil Service based, at least in part, on the expectation that they would be able to balance personal and professional ambitions. These women entered the Civil Service with a high level of education and sought to capitalise upon this but, for many, motherhood (current or prospective) was a factor in deciding the most suitable environment within which to develop a career.

The research also suggested that values aligned to the concept of public service ethos (fairness, justice, or wanting to “make a difference”) were held by participants prior to joining the workforce, and that this resulted in these women identifying the Civil Service as an attractive employer. Public service ethos was then reinforced through development of professional identity. The data from this study supported previous studies (for example, Duncan, 2001; Thomas and Davies, 2005) which suggested that public sector employees prize technical expertise and value the quality of their work over quantifiable measures. This combined with public service ethos has made, and continues to make, changes in the Civil Service (particularly in the form of New Public Management) problematic.

The introduction of New Public Management has included attempts to transform professionals into professional managers (Evetts, 2011). This study demonstrates that this is particularly problematic on a number of levels. Firstly, this research suggests that for Civil servants the concept of “management” is viewed negatively. Management, for the participants in this research, was viewed as a burden which distracted from the core,

technical elements of their work. Management was seen as carrying additional risks, both from above and below, without attracting any additional reward. In this way, any privileges traditionally associated with management (status, additional remuneration) were negated. Secondly, as in organisations more widely, work can be seen to be segregated both vertically and horizontally along gender lines. While in most academic research on the topic, management has been associated with masculinity (Alvesson and Billing 2009; Billing, 2011), this study suggests that the specific Civil Service organisational culture has resulted in management being recast as requiring characteristics most commonly associated with femininity, which in turn has supported its reduced status. Participants suggested that highly technical roles (such as within policy development) carried significantly higher status, and were more male dominated, than operational management roles. Management was considered pastoral in nature and involved high levels of emotional labour. The emotional labour involved in management described by women in this study required high levels of presenteeism in order to develop and maintain the personal relationships required. This meant that many women found it challenging to give the time required for such a role due to their responsibilities in the private sphere, particularly in relation to motherhood. The combination of part-time work and management was seen as particularly problematic.

Motherhood in general has been raised as a significant factor in determining how women experience their working lives. This research suggests that the close association between femininity and parenting results in young women embarking on a process of identity work prior to having children, which incrementally lowers their ambition as they work to allow the co-existence of the identities of “mother” and “professional woman. Coercive gendering (Czarniawska, 2006) in the form of directing “family friendly” initiatives solely at female employees compounded the sense of need to lower their ambitions for women who wanted children; and to some extent this was reinforced by trade union agendas which similarly characterised such issues as “women’s issues”. Women who did not take up part-time work, for example, were questioned by colleagues and family over their commitment to motherhood, while women that did lost out financially and in terms of career development opportunities, and women who did not want children still experienced the assumption that they would be more interested in “family friendly” working patterns or other similar initiatives, than their male peers.

Further to gender influencing experiences of working life in the Civil Service, class identity was shown to be significant to women in the higher ranks of the Civil Service. The Civil Service is a classed institution – both its purpose (regulating wider society) and its senior ranking officials (disproportionately drawn from middle class backgrounds (Andrews and Ashworth, 2013)) position it as a middle-to-upper class environment within which to work. The majority of participants in this sample could be said to be drawn from two backgrounds – those from working class backgrounds, and those from middle class backgrounds with a family history of public service.

For women from the former group, class identity was a salient and sometimes painful identity in the workplace; and they noticed their difference in comparison to their colleagues. Class identity in the workplace could be drawn down very fine lines and included the type of university attended and the extent of the networks available.

For women from middle class backgrounds, meanwhile, public service ethos was clearly developed in the home, drawing on family (parental) identities as well as on geographical identities. Continuing to operate in such an environment maintained authenticity in their professional identity.

Despite the disadvantage conferred through a working class background, many women were able to leverage the identity positively due to the nature of the work in the Civil Service. Some women believed their “lived knowledge” gave them better insight and therefore ability to effectively serve the community; and this was also the case with some other disadvantaged identities such as non-whiteness. Significantly, this research suggested that public service ethos provided a key resource with which to bridge the potential identity conflict experienced with upward class mobility – women were able to operate within a distinctly middle class environment without turning their back on their working class roots.

### **8.3 In what ways do professional women identify with, experience and act within trade unions?**

The FDA Trade Union can be considered a “consultancy union” (Boxall and Haynes, 1997) in the sense that it engages collaboratively with employers. In addition, it performs many

functions associated with a professional body, for example, regulating professional conduct and propagating ideals of the profession.

For these reasons, it seems that women identify with the FDA trade union in two ways: due to an identification with the trade union movement; and due to collective professional identity.

For many women, trade unionism was associated with ideals of justice, fairness and collectivism. In the same way that family background provided a site for the development of public service ethos, it was also highly influential in terms of trade unionism. The values of public service ethos and trade unionism are highly compatible and as such many women considered their propensity to join trade unions as a “natural” or “core” part of their identity. It is well-documented that public sector trade unions enjoy some structural advantages (Schnabel, 2013) such as large sites, a well-established tradition of union recognition and collective bargaining agreements; however, this research suggests that many women in the Civil Service would have unionised wherever they found themselves, and, that in fact, it was partly the values they associate with trade unionism drew them to work for the Civil Service.

For women who grew up without a background of family trade unionism, their identification with the FDA came predominately from the collectivism developed as part of their professional identity. While perhaps individualistic initially, women sought career development opportunities, personal protection and the protection of professional status. Clearly, this research only provides a snapshot in time; but it appears that irrespective of original motivations, engagement with the union fostered a sense of collective identity, which supported union participation and nurtured trade union values. The FDA’s strategy of positioning itself as a professional body as well as a trade union challenged negative views of trade unions, allowing identification even amongst women who had previously been critical of the trade union movement.

However, the ability of the FDA to perform both trade union and professional body functions while remaining apolitical in light of current employment relations in the Civil Service may be called into question. The non-militant, apolitical stance of the FDA is

celebrated by those women seeking a professional body, while other women, particularly those that identify as working class seek a return to a more traditional form of trade union as a response to their increasing dissatisfaction with terms and conditions.

Women's experiences of trade unionism have changed, for the most part positively, over the decades. Participants in this study reported a hostile environment, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s. Overt sexism was reported, manifesting in everything from trips to strip clubs, assertions that only women had children and restricted roles meant that progression through union hierarchies was difficult. During these decades, women's groups developed as a space to allow women to voice their concerns and create some internal pressure to address issues.

While women's experiences of trade unions today is not as starkly hostile as in earlier years, gendered structural disadvantages that exist in the workplace are replicated and intensified within the trade union. In the same ways that responsibilities in the private sphere constrain women in the workplace, they constrain women's trade union participation. A masculine culture of long working hours, presenteeism and significant travel away from home was reported by women who formally participated in the union. Structural disadvantage could be said to be magnified within the union as participation was only available to those who had time within and on top of their job role. This factor looks to be increasingly problematic as the Trade Union Bill is introduced and further restricts the ability of women (particularly part-time women) to access and participate in their trade union.

Within the trade union, women sought to make a positive contribution to their workplace, in various ways. They used both their professional skills and their lived knowledge to contribute at various levels. For many women formally involved, identity characteristics most commonly associated with disadvantage were positively recast as areas of expertise, prompting participation focussed on addressing such inequalities in the workplace. While these identities were powerful in prompting active participation, they did not provide a springboard to progression through the trade union hierarchies. Firstly, a perception of such roles as niche and not core to trade union activity prevented women being seen as natural predecessors to higher ranking union representatives. Secondly, the roles did not provide experience of skills such as negotiating which were seen as key to progression through the

ranks. In this way, union roles became both horizontally and vertically segregated along gender lines.

#### 8.4 What are the barriers to and the motivations for women's trade union participation?

Many of the motivations for trade union participation recorded in this thesis mirror other research – empowerment and altruism were key themes in women's narratives, and women were encouraged through direct recruitment. Motivations could not be easily separated into purely individualistic or collective categories – for example, skills developed through union activity could help women's career development and to use in their union roles.

While the theme of empowerment had been highlighted in previous research (for example, Colgan and Ledwith, 2000; Kirton 2005), it has most frequently been considered in view of women's role in low paid, lower skilled work. For these women, it was their position in what is commonly considered a more powerful role – as managers and professionals in the Civil Service – that prompted them to seek more influence over their working environment. With the nature of management so contested in the Civil Service, and the hierarchy so extensive, women sought ways to exercise more control over their working environment, be that through access to more information or through exerting pressure on the government (as an employer) through trade union activity.

The participants in this study were ambitious and highly skilled women. As such, beyond altruism, they saw their trade union activity as an opportunity to use and develop skills. Learning and development courses delivered by the FDA were instrumental in prompting identification with the trade union as a professional body, and such identification moved individuals' motivation from individualistic to collective as they began to see themselves as part of their profession or the Civil Service more generally. The trade union's involvement in the development of professional identity within younger employees was also effective in developing collective identity and mobilising on this basis. Certainly, graduate trainees in this study had a strong sense of collective identity and sought union representation on that basis.

The use of collective identity could also be seen in the ways in which women positioned themselves as spokespeople for others with similar characteristics such as race or disability. Drawing on personal experiences in order to influence the workplace was both empowering personally and fulfilled altruistic needs.

Establishing the barriers to participation in this study was a more difficult proposition. The way that participants were accessed (through trade union literature) meant that all interviewees participated at least informally, in the sense that they read emails from the FDA and paid for their membership. However, clear themes emerged surrounding barriers to formal participation.

Both increasing seniority in general and, specific to this context, the introduction of New Public Management have been seen to lead to work intensification (Bach and Givan 2008; Hemmings, 2011). Women have been shown to take on the bulk of domestic duties (Sullivan, 2000; Warren, 2003), with the result that they inevitably have less availability for workplace activity. As such, it comes as no surprise that a barrier to active participation which was unanimously cited in this sample was time constraints.

The organisation of union work, which for FDA officials meant significant travel, a long-hours culture prizing presenteeism, increasingly less facility time and increasing work intensification all contributed to this sense of union work becoming increasingly impractical for the women in this study. Therefore, the Trade Union Bill combined with job cuts in the Civil Service can be seen to lessen trade union power in two ways. Job cuts inevitably lead to fewer available members but have also led to an increased workload for those who remain. This has limited women's ability to actively participate in their trade union as they struggle to fulfil their core job role. In this way, at a time where, arguably, union representation is most required, many of the more vulnerable workers (women disproportionately work in the areas most affected by cuts (Conley, 2012)) have had their access restricted and their voice quietened.

Within the union itself, barriers exist due to the ways in which union positions are filled. As was discussed in section 7.6.3, direct recruitment into positions was an extremely effective way of prompting formal participation. However, the lack of transparency in selection of



union representatives damaged members' perception of the union and its representativeness and therefore its instrumentality. Women voiced explicit concerns that it was "an old boys' club" and, whether as a result of such recruitment strategies or otherwise, it was widely observed that the majority of trade union officials in the FDA were white, middle aged, middle class men. In light of this, women questioned the FDA's relevance to them and the understanding such officials would have of their working lives.

The lack of transparency in filling union positions also had a negative impact on women's progression through the trade union hierarchies. It was reported that the majority of negotiating roles were given to male trade unionists and it was these roles that led to the most senior positions. Women who had been active in their trade union in the 1970s were explicitly told at that time that note taking and pastoral roles were more suited to them. Today, it seems that although this is unsaid, assumptions about the suitability of women for certain roles are still being made, to the detriment of women's participation.

Finally, the trade union agenda is set, in the most part, by men; and it clearly privileges male concerns based on male experiences of the workplace. As discussed above, both external and internal factors have led a situation in which the FDA's most vulnerable workers are under-represented by the trade union. However, internalisation of a male norm within the workplace and within the trade union, alongside fears of diluting collectivism, has meant that women are disinclined to raise gendered concerns. Many women in this study appeared conflicted when it came to the extent to which issues of motherhood and paid work should be a concern of the trade union.

For these reasons, including issues relevant to female workers more firmly on the trade union agenda appears complex. If women themselves are unable to press for inclusion of these issues, perhaps due to having internalised them as "women's" rather than mainstream issues, then it is difficult for trade unions to respond appropriately.

## 8.5 Implications

This section sets out some implications arising from this research, considering both the practical recommendations which are suggested for trade unions and perhaps particularly for the FDA trade union, before turning to the implications for Industrial Relations as a field, as well as for intersectional and gender scholarship.

### 8.5.1 Recommendations for Trade Unions

This research sought to provide data which could be used by trade unions seeking to increase active participation within their current membership as well as increase their membership levels. In line with this aim, this section sets out a number of recommendations derived from the findings in this study.

A trade union's remit is to protect workers' interests which includes all workers. In this thesis I have highlighted the fact that coercive gendering in the form of conflating issues of parenting with "women's issues" is detrimental to both women's economic activity as well as their trade union activity. The FDA could seek to change the culture which allows issues of care and of parenting to be seen as uniquely "women's issues". Legislation on shared parental leave has been introduced and the Civil Service does offer the option to parents. According to research undertaken by My Family Care and The Women's Business Council in 2016, take up of such leave has been very low, with only 1% of fathers taking leave. Campaigning for fathers to take up parental leave could begin the breakdown of stereotyping around gendered roles in both the domestic and public sphere, preventing the exclusion of women from positions of influence while equally allowing fathers opportunity to bond with and provide care for their children. The FDA could have a particularly critical role in culture change within the organisation as their "father-members" are in senior positions and may act as role models to less senior staff, removing stigma attached to men taking time off work to engage in domestic duties.

The homogeneity of union officials has been raised in this research as a barrier to participation. Women question the union's instrumentality in the sense that the question how the issues relevant to them will be represented by people with whom they have so little in common. This suggests a need for a more diversity amongst trade union officials. In

order to allow the development of diversity amongst officials, some changes to the ways in which union representatives are selected would be appropriate.

Firstly, a more transparent system communicated more clearly to members may support atypical FDA members in engaging with and becoming active in the trade union. This research has suggested that many officials are “selected” by existing officials, which relies heavily on those officials’ networks, therefore excluding those who may be interested do not have pre-existing union connections, thereby risking a “cloning” effect.

When women are active, trade unions must ensure they are given fair access to “officer” and equivalent roles and are able to develop negotiating experience. Evidence from this research suggests that there continues to be some level of vertical and horizontal segregation of union roles with many women becoming active based on disadvantaged identities. While this activity is seen as positive amongst members, there is a risk of equality issues becoming considered niche, thereby preventing the mainstreaming of equality issues onto the trade union agenda.

A key success of the FDA trade union appeared to be their ability to unionise and mobilise younger workers. A significant factor in this would seem to be their influence in the establishment of a collective identity amongst trainees. This was particularly clear amongst trainee members of ARC, who appear to feel both a part of the tax profession as well as having a clear identity as “trainee”. Both identities are considered relevant to trade union activity by members and therefore encourage engagement. The fostering of collectivism along occupational or professional lines is something that could be further developed; for example, managers in operational areas could be encouraged to develop a sense of collectivism across government departments. If this is done through the FDA a sense of identification with the union is likely to be developed which, in this study, has been shown to lead to higher levels of participation.

In addition, an expansion of learning and development offerings based on career stage may be useful for the FDA. Trainees have specific employment concerns based on their stage of career and this research suggests that post initial promotion from graduate schemes members continue to have “career stage” concerns. This requires considering members not

just in terms of their grade within the Civil Service but in light of other factors such as age, gender and length of service.

## 8.5.2 Implications for the field of Industrial Relations

A premise of this research was that despite interest in trade union membership in relation to discussions of trade union renewal, the actual demographic changes within trade unions' members has not been examined. The study of professional women in a trade union context has highlighted several factors which could influence understanding of both individual and group motivations for membership and participation of trade unions.

The findings from this research suggest that beyond the structural advantages existing for public sector trade unions, personal and ideological values held by employees within the Civil Service, even prior to becoming Civil servants, aligned with values of trade unionism, seemingly creating a workforce predisposed to union membership. This implies that the study of individual identity and agency could be significant to understanding the links between membership, participation and work environment. Early career choices may in themselves shed light on individual's union orientation and the development of professional identity is likely to reinforce or undermine such values, having implications for trade union's seeking organisation within certain sectors and professions.

A further implication of this research is that the "worker v manager" dichotomy of traditional Industrial Relations is no longer relevant to many workers (or indeed managers). As part of changes impacting not only union members but the workforce at large, the concept of "manager" is more complicated, fluid and problematic than has been previously considered. For women in this research the idea of "manager" was contested, encompassing both the privilege of seniority within a workforce, vulnerability of "worker" status and an additional vulnerability based on the role of management itself. While some of these findings may be context specific, due to the multiplicity of identity, it is clear that simple, one-dimensional understandings of workers' and managers' identities is no longer relevant to a modern workforce.

The complexity of managerial status and its interplay with trade unionist identity also raised questions around the utility of class identity as a mobilising factor. Class, it appears, remains

relevant to women in this research but is complicated by changing class status as well as generational differences. Despite professional status being situated within the middle classes, many women drew upon ideas of class struggle as a motivation for trade union membership. Younger women had a more complex relationship with ideas of both individualism and collectivism – the desire for “authenticity” in their working lives and values associated with trade unionism, including social justice and collectivism, remained important to them but they considered trade unions as more of an individual protection than a vehicle for social justice. Understanding class identity and its influence on trade union membership must therefore be revisited in light of the new generations of workers.

As was seen in sections 3.6 and further discussed in section 7.7.2, academic understanding of white collar workers’ identification with trade unions is dated, with much of the literature dating from the 1950s and 1960s. This research suggested that there is some intragroup variations in the levels of “unionateness”, meaning militancy and political activity (Bowburn, 1967) desired by professional workers. In the same way that the avoidance of homogenising women as a group would improve the analytical outputs of Industrial Relations scholarship (Forrest, 1993), viewing white-collar and professional workers as a heterogeneous group, influenced by competing identities, would allow for a richer, more textured analysis of their experiences.

A further driver behind this research was that women’s experience of trade unionism has been under researched. The experiences of the women in this research suggested that trade unions, just like work organisations, are a site of gender identity work as well as a source of identity regulation. Trade unions’ influence in the workplace has an impact on how women view their workplace and on how they consider their own needs within it. In this way, just as, particularly in the case of professional or managerial trade unions, trade unions may provide an identity resource in the development of professional identity, they also influence understanding of gender norms both within a working context and within the domestic sphere. Industrial relations as an academic field has thus far failed to fully explore the interactions between gender, experiences of working life and trade unionism. The interconnections between these elements of individuals’ identities have been shown to be significant in this research and, without a concerted effort to ensure women’s experiences

are brought to the mainstream, there is a risk that, certainly for women in the Civil Service, the struggle to maintain both privilege in work status terms and a voice in the trade union will become more problematic.

### 8.5.3 Implications for Intersectional and Gender Scholarship

This thesis has used an intersectional approach to draw out the simultaneity of oppression and privilege as experienced by senior female civil servants. The findings from this research demonstrate the dynamic nature of oppression and privilege, and the ways in which both are experienced differently dependant on context and time. Significantly, this research suggests that not only is privilege and oppression experienced simultaneously, the experience of each is qualitatively changed through its interaction with the other. Intersectionality, as a conceptual framework, must therefore avoid homogenising experiences of privilege as the preserve of the white middle classes (Levine-Rasky, 2007) and include analyses of privilege as part of a framework to explore the full complexities of identity-based power relations.

This research focussed on women in positions of relative privilege in their working lives. However, gendered disadvantage was shown as a key factor in understanding women's positions in their working, trade union and domestic lives.

In this research, an intersectional understanding of women as a heterogeneous group was shown to be both relevant and significant in understanding motivations and decision making both in terms of career decision making and trade union participation. This was particularly true in relation to generational differences. While, in many ways, the participants in this group had similar characteristics, particularly in relation to class positionality and ethnicity, experiences of the workplace and their trade union varied according to age and life stage. The impact of wider societal discourse around individualism and feminism was pertinent in this research, influencing younger women's perception of ideas of gender collectivism. The way that women frame their identity is based on wider societal discourses as well as their lived experiences and therefore generational differences amongst women should be considered in more depth from the point of view of both gender and industrial relations research.

The connection between motherhood and gender identity has been widely discussed in gender research. Such research has found parenting to be a highly gendered experience and has emphasised the high levels of domestic labour experienced by women with caring responsibilities. Although the impact of parenthood has been extensively discussed in literature in women's careers, this research has suggested that identity work around motherhood takes place before the presence of a child and has consequences for women's career ambitions; and is a consideration irrespective of whether or not women go on to have children. This again reinforces the need for consideration of identity work and individual agency and its links to wider societal discourses when considering career and life outcomes for women (and indeed other groups).

This research has demonstrated that class identity remains relevant to women, including those in privileged positions. However, it has also highlighted the contested nature of class privilege and its intersection with other identities both in various contexts. Class identity, for these women, can be mostly (although not entirely) considered a privileged identity. Privileged identities have been considered invisible for those who hold them (McIntosh, 1988; Maier, 1997). However, as demonstrated in this thesis, privileged identities remain contested and a more in-depth discussion of the intersections of privilege and oppression would enable a greater understanding of various and competing identities.

## 8.6 Future Research

This research has sought to provide an understanding of professional women's experiences of trade union by considering their experiences of working life and the interaction of multiple identities within that. In doing so, further questions have been raised.

Women in this research reported managerial status as a motivation for trade union membership. Vulnerability within management positions was raised as a significant concern to women and a significant trade union membership motivation. This raises a number of question which can be considered from the perspectives of gender, work environment professional status and trade union orientation.

Firstly, to what extent is the nature of vulnerability in management roles a gendered experience? Previous research (for example, Davies and Thomas, 2002) has highlighted that

the introduction of New Public Management has a gendered impact but this research cannot answer whether such vulnerability is experienced throughout the managerial grades of the Civil Service. In this way, whether female managers are particularly inclined to seek union representation also remains unanswered.

The seniority of this group of managers also means extrapolating their experiences to managers in the Civil Service more generally is problematic. The hierarchy of the UK Civil Service is extensive and it is not clear whether junior or middle managers experiences the same sense of vulnerability or seek union representation in the same ways. Research into the experiences of managers in 'non-managerial' unions would be insightful in relation to the debate around trade union renewal. Specifically, in the absence of a union specifically founded on its representation of managers, do managers want union representation and if so, are they able to find it?

The overlap between public service ethos and trade union values has also raised questions about certain occupational groups' propensity to unionise. Understanding motivations for career choice and union orientation is likely to be insightful in furthering understanding of union's success and failures in organising different workers and could raise the discussion beyond structural factors.

Class identity and trade unionism remain an intriguing area given trade unions' alignment with the working classes and the extent of trade union members' position as professional and managerial workers. The complexity of younger workers' identification with ideas of social class further complicated this. However, there is clearly scope to more widely research unionised professionals and explore their class identity and its interaction with their trade unionism. As was identified in section 7.7.2, although there was a suggestion that class provided an explanation of divergent views on the relationship between the militancy of the FDA and its effectiveness, further work could explore this area in more detail.

## 8.7 Reflections on the Research Project

The impact of the researcher on participants, and power dynamics throughout the data collection and analysis processes of a research project, have been given significant attention



by feminist researchers. Positioning the researcher within the research has been acknowledged as an important part of understanding how understanding and knowledge is created (Oakley, 2000; Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002; Letherby, 2003; Haynes, 2010). As Vickers (2002) and Haynes (2011) suggest, if we are prepared to acknowledge that another person's life experiences are important, we should also be willing to agree that the researcher's life experiences are important.

Haynes (2012) suggests that the researcher's life experiences are significant throughout the research project, with motivations for conducting research based not solely on academic enquiry but also personal questions. It is clear that in order to research a single topic for many years personal motivation must play a role and that these motivations may influence the way the research project is conducted. Haynes (2012) further explains that in answering personal questions, knowledge is constructed and therefore the impact of the research itself on the researcher is an epistemological and ontological process which merits discussion.

As was highlighted in section 1.7, before embarking on a PhD, I myself could have been a participant in this study – I was a female member of the FDA trade union. I had joined the Civil Service as a graduate trainee specialising in Human Resource Management and as such had spent several years becoming familiar with the workings of the Civil Service, the language spoken and the culture within which “we” operated.

The years between my arrival into the Civil Service and my departure were a time of significant change. The coalition government of 2010 came to power; and changes to terms and conditions prompted a deterioration in employment relations, which I experienced from the perspective of both Human Resources worker and employee in general. As with the majority of my participants, I had become a union member because it felt aligned with my own personal beliefs but I questioned the union's instrumentality and my own position within it. This uncertainty around my union membership and whether I could become active was intensified by my role within the Human Resource Management department, which had a clear drive to develop and cement a culture based strongly on a belief in the unitary nature of employment.

The motivations behind the research were therefore, in part, due to my own unanswered questions about how I identified with the union, how and why it took me several years to

begin to engage 'openly' with the union and to what extent my experiences of work were mine alone or were more broadly shared.

The time period through which this research project was conducted was also a period of personal change for me. As I left the Civil Service my husband also left the graduate scheme on promotion, changing, to some extent, both of our perspectives on life in the Civil Service. In addition, I was entering my late twenties: the media was warning me about my "biological clock"; and my friends were talking about theirs. By the time of conducting the last interviews for this PhD I was eight months pregnant. This change in my life, my own "lived experiences", will have impacted the interviews themselves. As time went on and my own life changed, my own life experiences were more extensive and I was able to reciprocate more, which I believe led to greater rapport in the interview but also to a more emotional connection between myself and the women being interviewed. The interview was clearly a social interaction (Holstein and Gubrium, 2003) and a personal exchange of this nature, looking back, would inevitably lead to friendship-like-feelings towards to the women. After all, outside a research project, with whom else do you discuss such matters?

My own beliefs had also changed. I began the PhD with attitudes very much reflective of the youngest participants in my research – while I was aware of gender inequality, I didn't really feel or experience it; instead, it was an academic phenomenon somehow not applicable to me. Although I would not have articulated it as such, I believed that true oppression took place exclusively at the intersections of disadvantage and women in positions of privilege has somehow transcended gendered oppression. The combination of more study and more life experience merged into a strong sense of injustice. The emotional accounts women gave in interviews had at first shocked me. I had not initially viewed the topic of the research as emotive. However, as the interviews progressed, the emotional accounts of unequal treatment became less a tale of something that happened "back then" and more a reflection that the longer you experience being a woman the more likely you are to have gendered experiences which are emotionally distressing. The level of emotion was not easy to demonstrate in the findings chapters, where transferring the interviews to words on page and then isolated quotations removed some of the meaning that was portrayed through tone of voice, expressions and body language. It is not clear the extent to which a complete solution to this problem exists, however, just as the interview itself is not an objective

process, the presentation of findings was also influenced by emotion. Throughout the time I was conducting interviews, I came to feel a closeness to the participants and a loyalty to them, which resulted in a desire to give them as much space on the page as possible – longer quotations were used at times in the findings in order to do this.

From the accounts of women in this research it became clear that navigating gendered expectations in both the personal and private spheres is not an easy task. Women's narratives of such struggles, even employed within an environment which allegedly offered "equal opportunities", made me more aware of my own working environment. It has been noted that women who are successful in academia disproportionately do not have children (see, for example, Mason et al., 2013), when compared with the general population, and this was also true amongst my participants. This points to a lack of available support networks for women in both environments, as well as indicating some of the pressures and norms of the workplaces in question.

The ambiguous status of PhD student within a university department also contributed to a need for identity work. Prior to becoming a PhD student, my understanding of early motherhood and work was defined by the procedures in place for "standard workers" – maternity pay, keeping in touch meetings and staggered returns to work were all things that I considered the "normal" arrangements for new mothers. My atypical employment as a casual teaching assistant and student meant that, unlike my friends, discussion of the best way to manage such arrangements and to get the best from maternity provisions were unconnected to my own experiences – I had no maternity pay, no maternity arrangements and was consequently reliant on my husband, in a way that was unusual amongst my social group. These differences between myself, my social group and my participants challenged my identity as "an insider". While I identified in some ways as a professional worker with career ambition, I had none of the benefits of a professional career, and I wasn't really a professional. I was a feminist, researching employment relations, who relied entirely on her husband's wage and had no employment rights. Public and private identities clashed, and I was aware that I was both privileged (educated, lucky to have a husband that could support me) and in a disadvantaged position (precarious work, no employment rights, dependent, a new mother).

As I discussed in section 4.3.3 and 4.4, some of the women I interviewed were – or became – friends; and in a time of enormous personal change also became a support network and informed my own identity work. My position as PhD researcher examining gender and trade unions clearly made certain statements about my own identity and beliefs to participants. As Haynes (2012) states, personal identity and personal questions are highly relevant to motivations in research.; and my own identity as reflected back to me by “participant friends” was an important driver in completing the thesis. When exposed to the difficulties faced by women in the workplace, through academic literature or emotional interviews, I found the proposition of opting out to be remarkably tempting. Could I redefine myself as a stay at home mum and avoid the identity conflict? Any articulation of these thoughts to my “participant friends” was met with expressions of disbelief – “how could you, of all people, opt out?”, or “that just isn’t you”. It seemed far clearer to these friends who “I” was than it was to me. In addition to the personal impact of these exchanges on my motivation, as a researcher, I also realised that I still “held” the data collected through interviews. It did not seem appropriate for the time women had given to go to waste and the personal accounts they had provided to be assigned to storage for ever. In completing this document, I will be able to share it with the FDA trade union, and in doing so, in some ways, I will be able to give the data back. I hope that, for any participants reading this thesis, it provides an accurate reflection of their collective experiences.

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## Appendix 1: Participant Information

Name	Participation Level	Grade	Department/Role	Approximate Age #	Ethnicity	Children	Disability*	Educational Level
Gemma	Formal, National	G7	Operational	Early 30s	White	No	No	Degree
Joanne	Formal, Regional	G7	Operational	40s	White	No	Yes	Degree
Claire	Informal	G7	Operational	50s	White	No	No	Degree
Emma	Informal	G7	Operational	late 50s	White	Yes	No	Degree
Daisy	Informal	G7	Operational	late 20s	White	No	Yes	Degree
Virginia	Informal	G7	Policy	40s	White	Yes	No	Postgraduate Degree
Chloe	Informal	FS	Policy	Late 20s	White	No	No	Postgraduate Degree
Delia	Informal	FS	Operational	30s	White	No	No	Degree
Georgina	Informal	FS	Operational	Early 20s	White	No	No	Degree
Eileen	Formal Branch Position	G6	Legal Services	60s	White	No	No	Degree
Anna	Informal	G7	IT, Operations	50s	White	Yes	No	Degree
Jennifer	Formal, National Executive	G6	Operations	40s	BAME	Yes	No	Degree
Beryl	Formal, National Executive	G6	Operations	40s	White	Yes	No	Degree
Flora	Informal	G7	Operations	20s	White	No	No	Degree
Bev	Formal, national	G6	Operations	50s	White	Yes	No	Degree
Pauline	Informal	G6	Operations	60s	White	Yes	No	Degree

Name	Participation Level	Grade	Department/Role	Approximate Age #	Ethnicity	Children	Disability*	Educational Level
Eleanor	Formal, Regional	G6	Operations	30s	White	Yes	Yes	Degree
Nicola	Informal	G7	Policy	20s	White	No	No	Postgraduate Degree
Audrey	Informal	G7	Operations	50s	BAME	Yes	No	Postgraduate Degree
Danielle	Formal, Local Committee	G7	Policy	20s	White	No	No	Degree
Holly	Formal, Branch Level	G7	Policy	20s	White	No	No	Degree
Alice	Former national activist (different union), current informal	G7	Operations	40s	BAME	Yes	No	Postgraduate Degree
Brenda	Formal, National	G6	Operations	60s	White	Yes	No	Degree
Lilian	Former national (not FDA), currently informal	G7	Policy	40s	White	No	No	Postgraduate Degree
Adele	Informal	G7	Operations	40s	White	Yes	No	Degree
Brittany	Formal, Branch Level	G7	Policy	20s	White	No	No	Degree
Kate	Formal, Local Level	FS	Operations	30s	White	No	No	Degree

Name	Participation Level	Grade	Department/Role	Approximate Age #	Ethnicity	Children	Disability*	Educational Level
Zoe	Formal, Branch Level	FS	Policy	20s	White	No	No	Postgraduate Degree
Joan	Formal, National Level	G7	Operations	50s	White	Yes	No	Degree
Valerie	Formal, ex-president	G6	Operations	50s	White	-	No	Postgraduate Degree
Debra	Formal, branch level	FS	Policy	20s	White	No	Yes	Degree
Michele	Formal, national level	SCS	Operations	60s	White	No	No	A-levels
Andrea	Formal, National	G6	Operations	60s	White	No	No	Postgraduate Degree
Becky	Formal, National	G6	Legal	30s	White	NO	No	Postgraduate Degree
Helen	Informal	G6	Operations	50s	White	Yes	No	Degree
Maureen	Informal	G6	Operations	60s	White	Yes	No	Postgraduate Degree
Christine	Informal	FS	Operations	30s	White	No	No	Degree
Sophie	Informal	FS	Operations	20s	White	No	No	Degree

\*Disability is recorded as “no” if undisclosed during the interview.

# Age is based on an estimate derived from dates given in during the interview



## Appendix 2: Information Sheet

### **Understanding Women's Participation in Public Sector Trade Unions:**

#### **A Qualitative Exploration of its Motivations and Implications**

##### ***Participant Information***

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research project. Please take some time to read the information presented to you in this information sheet. You will be an opportunity to ask questions and raise any concerns you may have prior to your participation.

##### **Project Aims and Research Procedures**

This research project aims to examine women's participation in trade unions and the ways in which this impacts upon and is influenced by trade unions' representation of its membership. I seek to explore women's experiences of trade unions in the context of both their working and personal lives.

The research is being conducted through a series of semi-structured interviews with female FDA members. The interview may last for up to two hours and will cover topics around your working life and motivations for and experiences of being a trade union member. The interview will be digitally recorded (if you consent) and later transcribed. You will receive a copy of the transcript, which you may amend should you feel you have not been accurately represented. Copies of reports, articles and other documents relating to the research will be made available to you.

##### **Use of Interview Data – Confidentiality and Ethics**

This research is for PhD Candidature and has been approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Newcastle University. All data and results of this research will be treated confidentially and anonymously. If you feel that ethical guidelines have been breached in anyway, please contact me or my supervisors (Dr. Jenny Rodriguez ([jenny.rodriquez@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:jenny.rodriquez@ncl.ac.uk)) or Professor Stephen Procter, ([Stephen.procter@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:Stephen.procter@ncl.ac.uk)), address as below).

The project's findings may appear in reports, articles and presentations. Individual participants will not be identifiable in any way – participants will be given a pseudonym and identifiers such as specific job titles and organisations will be removed. Your words may be visible in published work but they will not be attributed to you.

## **Confidentiality and Your Right to Withdraw**

You have the right to withdraw your consent and retract any statements you have made, written or verbal, during the research process. You will not be asked to provide reasons for your withdrawal. If you no longer wish to participate in the study, all information you have provided will be destroyed and removed from the research findings. In order to withdraw from this study, please contact me directly.

## **Contact Details**

Eve Ewington, PhD Candidate and Teaching Assistant

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NE1 4SE

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Tel: 07870 152043

## Appendix 3: Participant consent form

### Informed Consent Form – Women’s Participation In Trade Unions



I, the undersigned, confirm that (please tick box as appropriate):

1.	I have read and understood the information about the project, as provided in the Information Sheet.	<input type="checkbox"/>
2.	I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project and my participation.	<input type="checkbox"/>
3.	I voluntarily agree to participate in the project.	<input type="checkbox"/>
4.	I understand I can withdraw at any time without giving reasons and that I will not be penalised for withdrawing nor will I be questioned on why I have withdrawn.	<input type="checkbox"/>
5.	The procedures regarding confidentiality have been clearly explained (e.g. use of names, pseudonyms, anonymisation of data, etc.) to me.	<input type="checkbox"/>
6.	If applicable, separate terms of consent for interviews, audio, video or other forms of data collection have been explained and provided to me.	<input type="checkbox"/>
7.	The use of the data in research, publications, sharing and archiving has been explained to me.	<input type="checkbox"/>
8.	I understand that other researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the data and if they agree to the terms I have specified in this form.	<input type="checkbox"/>
9	I am willing to be contacted by the principle researcher should follow up questions be required:- <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes, I am happy to be contacted using contact details already provided to the researcher.</li> <li>• Yes, I am happy to be contacted on (please provide contact details).....</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/>
		<input type="checkbox"/>
10.	I, along with the Researcher, agree to sign and date this informed consent form.	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Participant:**

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Name of Participant                      Signature    Date

**Researcher:**

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Name of Researcher                      Signature    Date

Researcher: Eve Ewington [e.ewington@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:e.ewington@ncl.ac.uk)  
 Supervisor: Jenny Rodriguez [jenny.rodriguez@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:jenny.rodriguez@ncl.ac.uk)

## Appendix 4: Debrief document

### Understanding Women's Participation in Public Sector Trade Unions:

#### A Qualitative Exploration of its Motivations and Implications

Thank you for participating in this research. Your input is greatly appreciated.

The research aims to examine women's participation in trade unions by exploring how different elements of individuals' lives may impact upon their experiences and attitudes around their trade union membership. If you would like to know more about the research, read articles and reports that come from this research, or hear about any further research being conducted, please let me know.

This research is for PhD Candidature and has been approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Newcastle University. All data and results of this research will be treated confidentially and anonymously. If you feel that ethical guidelines have been breached in anyway, please contact me or my supervisors (Dr. Jenny Rodriguez ([jenny.rodriguez@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:jenny.rodriguez@ncl.ac.uk)) or Professor Stephen Procter, ([Stephen.procter@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:Stephen.procter@ncl.ac.uk)) address as below).

The project's findings may appear in reports, articles and presentations. Individual participants will not be identifiable in any way – participants will be given a pseudonym and identifiers such as specific job titles and organisations will be removed. Your words may be visible in published work but they will not be attributed to you

#### **Right to Withdraw**

The transcript of your interview has been sent to you today. You are invited to view the transcript and request any amendments should you feel you have not been accurately represented.

You have the right to withdraw your consent and retract any statements you have made, written or verbal, during the research process. You will not be asked to provide reasons for your withdrawal. If you no longer wish to participate in the study, all information you have provided will be destroyed and removed from the research findings. In order to withdraw from this study, please contact me directly.

## Contact Details

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