

**Senior Women Academics in Hong Kong:
A Life History Approach**

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by

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Abstract

This study generates a substantive theory of how factors in the life histories of a cohort of eleven senior female academics in Hong Kong contributed to their success in academe. The primary source of data is a series of face-to-face interviews with the respondents. The critical relationships, educational experiences, and life events that contributed to the career development of these women are identified, and these data are supplemented by information about the respondents collected from university websites and the media. Using the constant comparative method, categories are gradually developed to constitute the basis of the proposed substantive theory.

The major outcome of the study is a grounded theory of how the respondents made sense of their attributes and used their dominant attributes to achieve success in their academic careers. A fundamental concept of this ‘theory of selective attribution in career trajectory’ is the existence of reciprocal relationships among: (i) individual attributes (personal, social and academic); (ii) socialisation processes; and (iii) career trajectories. At various stages of the respondents’ career trajectories, the interplay between their dominant attributes and their socialisation experiences affected their construction (and subsequent redefinition) of their personal orientations—thus producing variations among individuals in their career orientations, strategies and pathways.

The study finds that the senior female academics in this cohort shared many desirable ‘success attributes’, which were largely formed and nurtured through various socialisation experiences, particularly in the early stages of their lives. In addition to these common features, certain distinguishing factors among individuals within the cohort are identified – forming divergent patterns of dominant attributes in terms of personal identities, values, career orientations, and career strategies. These divergent patterns are utilised to present a threefold typology of senior female academics: (i) ‘career academics’; (ii) ‘career educators’ and (iii) ‘career opportunists’. In accordance with the dominant attributes they exhibited, women of a given type are found to hold similar personal identities, values and career orientations, and to have employed similar career strategies.

The substantive theory of ‘selective attribution in career trajectory’ provides a new perspective on how female academics make sense of their attributes, and how they use them to achieve success in their academic lives. The theory thus contributes to the literature on the career development of female academics, especially with respect to how such women perceive, respond to, manage and balance the multiple demands placed upon them in their academic and family lives. Although the theory is generalisable only to female academics in situations similar to the present cohort, it has implications for the development of theory, practice and future research.

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Let us celebrate the successes of those who have made the grade in academia, be inspired and look forward to many more to come.

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Chapter 1

The Issue in Context

1.1 Prologue

A colleague at university once tried to explain why she had delayed having a child despite her fondness for children and constant pressure from her parents and in-laws. Having explained why having a child was not economically and socially viable, she then added: “Having a child is an act of academic suicide!”

Most people in Hong Kong probably believe that there is no gender discrimination in Hong Kong, and that women in Hong Kong enjoy a higher status than women in other parts of Asia. Indeed, the presence of senior women executives in government and the commercial sector suggests that women have significant influence on the political and economic life of Hong Kong.

Research on women in higher education in the United Kingdom (UK), United States of America (USA), Australia, and Canada has produced a substantial volume of scholarship on women’s academic career advancement in Western countries in the past two decades (Hennig & Jardim 1977; Aisenberg & Harrington 1988; Shakeshaft 1989; Evetts 1990; Spurling 1990; Astin & Leland 1991; Davidson & Cooper 1992; White, Cox & Cooper 1992; Bagilhole 1993; Acker 1994; Coleman 1996; Hall 1996; Heward 1996; Carli 1998; Blackmore 1999; Luke 2001) and studies are also being conducted in Singapore, Japan, and China on the barriers to women’s career success (Cheung, Wan & Wan 1994; Chow 1995; Luke 2001; Lo, Stone & Ng 2003). These studies have addressed the questions of why there are apparently so few women in senior academic positions, and whether there are barriers (visible and invisible) that prevent women from reaching senior positions in higher education.

As the present study demonstrates (see Section 1.2 below), there is a relative under-representation of female academics in senior positions in academia in Hong Kong. So-called “pipeline theories” have been invoked to account for this under-representation of women. These theories hold that insufficient women enter, and remain in, higher education to produce a sufficient pool of candidates for promotion through the system. Alternatively, the phenomenon might be explained by a range of cultural, social, ideological and institutional factors that combine to form a so-called “glass ceiling” for female academics.

The present study does not set out to explore the veracity of the so-called “pipeline theories”; nor does it set out to establish the existence of a supposed “glass ceiling” for female academics in higher education in Hong Kong. Rather, the study offers a different perspective by addressing the issue of female representation in the higher echelons of Hong Kong academia from the perspective of successful female academics themselves. The study thus focuses on a cohort of female academics who currently occupy senior positions in higher education in Hong Kong. By recording and analysing the personal data supplied by these outstanding female academics as they speak about their early life experiences, their career paths, their successes and their disappointments, the study aims to gain a clearer understanding of what is required of women who aspire to tread the path of an academic career.

1.2 Women's Presence in Higher Education in Hong Kong

According to Wu (2002), former chairperson of the Hong Kong Equal Opportunities Commission,

Education is in fact a great equalizer. One of the most significant measures in the empowerment of women in Hong Kong has been the requirement for nine-year compulsory education since the 1970s.

Since the introduction, in 1978, of nine years of universal basic free education for all children up to the age of 15, the educational attainment of the Hong Kong population has markedly improved. Girls have especially benefited by having equal access to primary and lower secondary education. Before 1978, many families of limited means provided education only for boys; in contrast, since 1978, the education reforms and the government's loan and grant schemes have provided girls from poorer families with an opportunity to study, and thus progress to higher education.

Higher education in Hong Kong underwent a period of rapid expansion in the early 1990s. The number of universities in Hong Kong increased from two to eight, all of which were funded by the University Grants Committee (UGC). Between 1986 and 2003, there was an average growth rate of 3.1% in the total number of students enrolled in higher education, and the proportion of female students increased from 32.9% in 1986 to 55.1% in 2003 (Census & Statistics Department 2004).

In addition to this increase in the proportion of women enrolled in undergraduate programmes, the proportion of women enrolled at the postgraduate level has also risen. In the past, master's and doctoral research used to be dominated by males, who represented 80% of the postgraduate student population in 1986 and 70.5% in 1996 (Census & Statistics Department 2004). By 2003, women in master's and doctoral research programmes represented 43% of Hong Kong's postgraduate enrolment (*ibid*).

Although there has been a significant increase in the proportion of female students, both undergraduate and postgraduate, in recent decades, the proportion of women employed in academic positions in institutions funded by the UGC has remained almost unchanged during the past decade. In 1996, there were 1,837 female teaching academics, who represented 27.4% of the academic staff funded by the UGC. By 2003, this figure had increased to 1,841, representing 30.5% of teaching staff (Census & Statistics Department 2004).

This phenomenon of under-representation of women in senior academic positions is not unique to Hong Kong. More than a decade ago, a UNESCO report on "Women in Higher Education Management" made the following comment (Dines 1993, p.11):

With hardly an exception the global picture is one of men outnumbering women at about five to one at middle management level and at about twenty or more to one at senior management level.

Research on women in higher education over the past decade or so has demonstrated that enhanced education and professional opportunities have not significantly increased the proportion of women managers; indeed, women now represent only a small fraction of those in senior positions (Adler & Izraeli 1994; Luke 2001).

To assess the contemporary situation in Hong Kong, the present author examined the “faculty profiles” presented on Hong Kong university websites during September and October 2003. Table 1.1 shows the under-representation of women in senior academic positions in Hong Kong.

Table 1.1: Academic staff numbers in Hong Kong by institution, staff grade and sex (September–October 2003).

University	Head/Dean			Professor			Associate professor			Assistant professor		
	M	F	Female%	M	F	Female%	M	F	Female%	M	F	Female%
CityU*	24	1	4.00%	70	2	2.78%	215	28	11.52%	119	35	22.73%
CUHK*	63	5	7.35%	250	36	12.59%	215	57	20.96%	107	43	28.67%
HKBU*	26	5	16.13%	20	2	9.09%	83	25	23.15%	75	45	37.50%
HKIEd*	10	6	37.50%	40	46	53.49%	N/A			N/A		
HKU*	59	7	10.61%	102	13	11.30%	282	63	18.26%	181	70	27.89%
HKUST*	22	1	4.35%	71	4	5.33%	186	11	5.58%	100	22	18.03%
Lingnan*	11	0	0.00%	12	0	0.00%	45	7	13.46%	24	17	41.46%
PolyU*	28	5	15.15%	60	7	10.45%	224	46	17.04%	279	140	33.41%
Total	243	30	10.99%	625	110	14.97%	1250	237	15.94%	885	372	29.59%

* CityU: City University of Hong Kong
 HKBU: Hong Kong Baptist University
 HKU: The University of Hong Kong
 Lingnan: Lingnan University

CUHK: The Chinese University of Hong Kong
 HKIEd: The Hong Kong Institute of Education
 HKUST: The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology
 PolyU: The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

Sources: University websites, October 2003

These figures raise certain pertinent questions about the role of women in senior positions in higher education in Hong Kong. In particular, given the fact that there is now about the same number of female as male graduates, why are there so few women occupying senior academic positions? Are women not interested in, or capable of, pursuing an academic career? Why is the equivalence of “the handbag brigade”¹ not found in the higher education arena?

The present enquiry approaches these questions in a unique way as it explores the career paths of a cohort of senior female academics from a “life-history” perspective. Rather than exploring the factors that might inhibit success for aspiring female academics, it focuses on how these female academics have made sense of their life experiences and achieved success in their careers. By examining and analysing the life events, experiences, and career pathways of a cohort of outstanding female academics in Hong Kong, the study makes a significant contribution to the existing body of knowledge of what is required of women who aspire to succeed in academia. It fills a gap in the literature, in that the only other research in this area is Luke’s (1997, 1998, 2001) investigation of female academics in South-East Asia, in which Hong Kong was included.

This study also has practical implications. Because role modelling is an effective way of empowering those who aspire to any managerial position, the senior female academics here can serve as occupational role models for future generations of female academics in Hong Kong. The experiences of these successful women offer valuable insights for those who aspire to similar senior positions.

¹ ‘The handbag brigade’ - made up of Hong Kong’s five most prominent and senior public women officers in the Public Civil Service in the period after the 1997 Handover; often quoted as powerful evidence of the existence of gender equality in Hong Kong.

1.3 Aim and Purposes of the Study

The overall aim of this exploratory study is to develop a theory of how life events and experiences shape the careers of successful female academics, by examining and analysing the experiences and career pathways of a cohort of senior female academics in the universities of Hong Kong. More specifically, the purposes of this study are:

- to identify the circumstances and factors which, according to the perceptions of the respondents, have contributed to the development of their careers;
- to identify the relationships, educational experiences, and life events that have affected the development of their careers;
- to highlight the attitudes and skills that they deem to have been critical to their success;
- to focus on the strategies and career paths that they used to reach the senior levels in higher education, and the factors that influenced these paths; and
- to profile the female academics with a view to providing role models for women aspiring to success in academia.

1.4 Research Questions

The main research question of this study is: What, in the life histories of particular senior female academics in Hong Kong, has contributed to their success?

In addressing the above question, several subsidiary questions are also addressed. They are:

- How did their childhood and education affect their careers?
- What life events and relationships have helped to lay the foundation for the development of their careers?
- What experiences, attitudes, and skills were deemed to have been critical?
- What strategies, if any, did they use to attain senior positions?
- What factors were perceived to have affected the advancement of their careers?
- How did they manage multiple roles?
- What kinds of support did they deem necessary?
- What advice would they give to women who aspire to senior academic positions?

1.5 Significance of the Study

Research on women in higher education has mainly been conducted in the UK, the USA, Australia and Canada. In the past two decades, this research has produced a substantial volume of scholarship on the career advancement of female academics. However, the conceptual frameworks of this research do not necessarily apply to the experiences of female academics in non-Western countries. In particular, Western conceptual metaphors (such as “pipeline theory” and “glass ceiling”) do not always apply in Asian contexts of higher education. As Luke (1998) has observed, the particularities of so-called “glass-ceiling politics” are specific to certain informal workplace cultures and professional milieux within organisations - which, in turn, are a function of the cultural values and attitudes of the wider society in which they occur.

Although Western researchers have always admitted that any analysis of social phenomena must be sensitive to particular experiences, contexts, and identities (Mead 1934), little research has been conducted on women's experiences and career pathways in higher education in non-Western countries. Apart from Luke's (1997) four case studies of women in higher-education management in Thailand, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Malaysia, little has been said about women in the higher-education sector in Hong Kong. The extant literature on gender issues mostly concerns employment, work/family conflict, domestic violence, and the success stories of particular female professionals and entrepreneurs.

The Women's Commission, which was established in 2001 by the Hong Kong government to promote the well-being and interests of women in Hong Kong, conducted a survey on the extent and level of positions taken up by women in Hong Kong (Women's Commission 2002b). The report acknowledged that a shortcoming of this survey was that it mainly consisted of statistical data, and that the Commission was:

... interested to know more precisely the underlying reasons and factors which have contributed to the phenomenon of gender job segregation and the relatively small proportion of women occupying senior or management positions ... [and academia should therefore] conduct more research in this area and contribute ideas on how to enable and facilitate women to participate in the private and non-governmental sectors more fully in all fields and at all levels (Women's Commission 2002a, p.4).

In response to this call, the present research contributes to knowledge about one specific group of women in Hong Kong - female academics in higher education.

As noted above, Luke (1997) conducted case studies of eleven women academics in senior positions in four universities in Hong Kong, as part of a larger study on women in higher-education management in South-East Asia. In commenting on the situation in Hong Kong, Luke (1998, p.32) made the following observation:

With the kind of affordable domestic help available in Hong Kong - [a] support system women in the west would envy - why has that not translated into enabling conditions to enhance women's career aspirations and mobility? Why have women's high educational achievement levels not produced greater female representations in senior management levels in the university sector?

These questions continue to be pertinent, and they point to a gap in current scholarly knowledge, that requires further research. The present study aims to bridge that gap.

From a practical perspective, the senior female academics in the present study can also serve as occupational role models for future generations of female academics in Hong Kong. Research has indicated that women are more likely to look to their own gender for occupational role models (Stephenson & Burge 1997), and that women leaders often grow up with images of strong women (Astin & Leland 1991). However, young women have few occupational role models from whom they can learn how to balance the demands of homemaker, mother, and wife with the demands of a career (Stephenson & Burge 1997). It is therefore important that the stories of the limited number of successful female academics in Hong Kong be heard.

Wu (2002), a former chairperson of the Hong Kong Equal Opportunities Commission, highlighted the positive effects of women's advancement on the family by stressing that:

Women in the family play a unique role. They are able to transfer the benefits of their own advancement to the family and thus multiply the effect of the benefits. In the process, the women become an agent for change for themselves and their families.

The present study can thus provide role models for those who wish to become "an agent for change for themselves and their families" (Wu 2002).

The present study is also distinctive in that it is a gendered study with a focus on Chinese women academics in Hong Kong. Unlike most studies on women which largely examine the barriers to career advancement for women, the aim here is to identify those factors that have facilitated the success of a cohort of senior female academics.

Blumer's (1969) theoretical framework of "symbolic interactionism" – that people act towards things on the basis of the meanings that those things have for them – has influenced the research design. The objectives of the study, as outlined above, are in accordance with Blumer's framework, in that it is assumed that a female academic decides what is important to her, and arranges her priorities in life accordingly, with a view to achieving what she considers to be "success" in her professional life.

Consistent with Blumer's "symbolic interactionism", the present study therefore adopts a topical "life history" approach. As Dimmock and O'Donoghue (1997, p.65) argued:

... the present values, beliefs, behaviours and practices of school leaders can only be fully understood by taking cognizance of their past life experiences ... as well as critical incidents, turning points and chapters which have moulded, shaped and had an impact on their lives.

In adopting a "life history" approach the study aims to form an understanding of the actions of the female academics in Hong Kong by examining their life experiences and their interpretations of those experiences. Such an approach will enable us to look beyond the "objective dimension" of the women's careers (consisting of formal structure of posts, statuses and positions of the career ladder) and venture into the "subjective dimension" that takes into consideration "individuals' own changing perspectives towards their careers: how an individual actually experienced having a career" (Evetts 1990, p.9).

Thus, by examining the career experiences of a cohort of senior female academics, and by understanding the factors that enhance and/or impede their career progress, the present study will supplement the extant literature on gender studies, which has, for the most part, undertaken research from a feminist perspective. The study is not set against other approaches. Rather, in combination with others that have adopted different perspectives, it is significant in contributing to a wider understanding of academic women's experiences and situations and how these contribute to success in higher education, especially in Hong Kong.

1.6 Limitations of the Study

This study does not presume to represent the experiences of all senior female academics in all universities in Hong Kong. The format is exploratory, rather than definitive. It is not our purpose to propose hypotheses or to offer an exhaustive explanation of all factors that determine success as a female academic leader. Rather, this is a qualitative study of the life histories of a cohort of senior female academics in which the informants were encouraged to recall, discuss, and reflect on their career experiences in the context of their own life circumstances. The “grounded-theory” method was used to develop deeper understandings of their life experiences and the meanings they attached to these experiences. The researcher conducted one-to-one interviews with them, as well as communicating via email. This methodology entailed a number of constraints.

First, given the limited population for study, sampling was a problem. In seeking to obtain a representative sample of female academics, it was difficult to obtain factual comparative data on the total population of interest – that is, the numbers of male and female academic staff members (and their rank). Neither the UGC nor the university personnel offices could provide comparative data on male and female staff members. However, even in the absence of reliable data on the overall population for the study, it became apparent that women are still in a significant minority among senior academics in Hong Kong, and that there was thus a limited population from whom to select a representative sample. It was therefore difficult to ensure a spread of senior female academics across all disciplines. Indeed, some academic departments had very few (if any) female academics at senior level. The issue of sampling is explored in further detail in Chapter 3, where the methodology of the study is presented.

Secondly, as with all qualitative research, a lack of time was an issue. As Measor (1985, p.76) has observed, “time can act as a real constraint in building research relationships”. Although most of the informants were willing to talk about their life histories at some length in their initial interviews, they all guarded their time carefully. As a result, a lack of time unfortunately restricted the number of subsequent interviews after the initial in-depth conversations.

Thirdly, as with all studies that use interview methodology, data collection was dependent on the informants' ability and readiness to recall significant events and persons that had made an impact on their life experiences. Measor (1985, p.67) has described an interview as:

... an unnatural social situation [in which] a stranger arrives, sets up a tape recorder, asks questions ... is prepared to sit and listen to you talking about yourself for an hour and a half; then they disappear.

According to Denzin (1989, p.117), this somewhat contrived situation can lead to "... a deliberate monitoring of the self so that only certain selves are presented".

Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that, in any retrospective data collection, there is always a risk of a disparity (whether intentional or unintentional) between an informant's later interpretation of an experience and what actually happened. The findings of this study, in recording the recollections of the respondents' life experiences, thus incorporate the potential limitations of any self-reported data.

Finally, this study can be said to suffer from the inherent limitations of any research that has a qualitative dimension, which can always be challenged with respect to its generalisability and the transferability of the findings. However, as we have noted, the study is exploratory rather than definitive, and it does not pretend that generalisability is its purpose. The purpose of the study is to develop a framework or typology that explains and captures the different career trajectories of a particular cohort of successful female academics in Hong Kong through examining their experiences and life events. Despite the acknowledged difficulties in generalising from such qualitative research, it is likely that some of the findings may be transferable to other contexts of a similar nature. For instance, other female academics with career orientations similar to the respondents' might be able to identify with the attributes and strategies employed by this cohort of senior academic women.

1.7 Overview of the Thesis

The thesis is comprised of eight chapters. The content of each can be summarised as follows:

The *present chapter* has introduced the background of the research by providing an overview of the current situation with respect to the role of women in higher education in Hong Kong. The chapter has outlined the aims and purposes of the study, the main research questions, the significance of the research, and certain limitations inherent in this type of qualitative research.

Chapter 2 presents a literature review of research related to the role of senior female academics, with a particular focus on such women in Hong Kong. The literature on women's career aspirations and planning is reviewed with a view to identifying life experiences and situations that have contributed to success in the careers of these women. In particular, the literature review explores: (i) the representation of women in academia; (ii) familial and parental influences; (iii) role models; (iv) mentors; (v) significant others; (vi) conflicts between work and family; (vii) workplace culture; (viii) networking; (ix) organisational socialisation and (x) political astuteness.

Chapter 3 discusses the methodology of the study in detail. In particular, the chapter examines the assumptions that underpin the paradigm of "symbolic interactionism", explains its relevance to the present research, defends the choice of an edited topical "life history" approach, and discusses the use of "grounded-theory" methodology. There are eight parts to the chapter:

- "symbolic interactionism" and the central research question;
- topical edited "life history" as a method of inquiry;
- the "grounded-theory" method;
- theoretical sampling;
- data collection;
- data analysis and recording;
- trustworthiness of the research and ethical considerations; and
- limitations of the study.

Chapter 4 presents an overview of the substantive theory of “selective attribution in career trajectory”, which emerged as a result of the present investigations. The chapter briefly describes the three stages of data analysis undertaken in the present study, introduces the “storyline” that emerged from the data, and explains the propositions that relate to the overall theory and a typology of the senior female academics.

Chapter 5 and *Chapter 6* present a summary of the raw data collected from conversations with the cohort of eleven senior female academics. The themes that emerged from the interview data are taken as the main section headings of the chapters. Under each major heading, the sub-headings are derived from the related core categories and sub-categories used in the coding process.

Chapter 5 covers the first three of the eight research questions of this study. The chapter is divided into three main sections, each of which addresses one of the three research questions – (i) impact of upbringing and education on career development; (ii) critical life events and relationships; and (iii) crucial attitudes, skills, and experiences.

Chapter 6 covers the remaining five of the eight research questions of this study. It is divided into five main sections, each of which addresses one of the five research questions – (i) career strategies; (ii) factors hindering career advancement; (iii) management of multiple roles; (iv) support networks; and (v) advice to aspiring female academics.

Chapter 7 provides a detailed exposition of the categories and concepts that constitute the theory of “selective attribution in career trajectory”. Attributes, as the core category of the theory, are explored, and the various clusters of dominant attributes that determine the typology of the senior women academics are carefully examined to explain how the interplay of attributes and socialisation experiences account for variations in the women’s career orientations and career strategies. This chapter also outlines the salient features of the propositions underpinning the theory of selective attribution in career trajectory.

Chapter 8 provides an overview of the aims and purposes of the study, the methodology employed, and the theory that emerged as a result of the investigation. It examines the implications of the research findings for theory, practice, and future research, as well as presents a concluding epilogue to this thesis.

Chapter 2

Review of Related Literature

2.1 Introduction

As discussed in Chapter 1, the overall aim of this study is to examine and analyse the experiences and careers of a cohort of senior female academics in Hong Kong, and thus to develop a theory of how life events and experiences shape the careers of successful female academics. A substantial body of scholarship on the career advancement of female academics has been produced in Western countries such as Australia, Canada, the UK, and the USA. However, the conceptual frameworks of such research do not necessarily apply to the experiences of female academics in non-Western countries, and an initial review of the literature indicates that relatively little has been written about female academics in Asian countries, and specifically in Hong Kong.

The most significant study involving female academics in Hong Kong was undertaken by Luke (1997), who conducted case studies of eleven women in senior academic positions in four universities in Hong Kong, as part of a larger study of women in higher-education management in South-East Asia. Luke's study investigated women's perceptions and experiences of "glass ceiling" factors that might have hindered career advancement to senior management in higher education, and identified obstacles that impeded gender equity. The present study, guided by symbolic interactionist principles, goes beyond the constraints of structural and cultural impediments. Rather, the position adopted here is one where senior female academics are "perceived as actively building their lives and careers out of the conditions created and maintained by larger societal and cultural forces" (Evetts 2000, p. 63).

As previously stated, the research design of this study is based on similar premises to those of Blumer's (1969) framework of symbolic interactionism. This study assumes that the meanings and importance that the female academics assigned to their upbringings, environments, education, work experiences, and relationships with other people affected their career aspirations and career development. Rather than examining the presumed barriers to career advancement for women, we attempt to identify the factors that have facilitated the success of a cohort of senior female academics in Hong Kong. It thus aims to bridge a significant gap in the extant literature, and to lay the foundations for the development of a theory of how life events and experiences shape the careers of academically successful women in Hong Kong.

This literature review examines relevant research in this area in four broad categories. First, it reviews the available literature on the "gender gap" in higher education. Secondly, it examines the limited research on the career aspirations and pathways of female academics. Thirdly, it reviews the literature on the life experiences and situations that have contributed to career success for such women – including familial and parental influences, role models, mentors, significant others, conflict between work and family, workplace culture, networking, organisational socialisation and political astuteness. Finally, the literature review summarises the essential attitudes and skills required of successful female academics.

Because the literature on women in higher education in Hong Kong is extremely limited, the literature review also includes references to studies of female leaders in business and professions other than academia.

2.2 The "Gender Gap" in Higher Education

2.2.1 Women in academia

According to the United Nations Department of Public Information [UNDPI] (1997), women had not achieved equality with men in any country in the world in 1997. Previously, in a UNESCO report on women in higher education, Dines (1993, p.11) had noted that:

With hardly an exception, the global picture is one of men outnumbering women at about five to one at middle management level and at about twenty or more to one at senior management level.

In the same report, Dines contended that the academic careers of women are impeded by cultural attitudes and practices, such that women are essentially disadvantaged by the fact that they are not men.

Luke (2001, p.6) expressed frustration that, despite years of affirmative action and the passing of statutes outlawing sexual discrimination (USA and UK in 1972; Australia in 1984), “the rate at which women have ascended academic career ladders in these countries is maddeningly slow”. She (2001, p.10) referred to universities as:

... fertile ground of horizontal sex segregation ... a hotbed of both vertical and horizontal sex segregation. Women are vertically clustered in low-level, low-pay, low-status positions as academic and general staff, and are concentrated horizontally in traditionally female areas of study that generally lead to low-prestige, low-pay professions.

These views appear to be supported by personnel statistics from universities across the world, which consistently reveal that women are under-represented in tenured academic positions (Banet-Weiser 2000-2001; Morrison 2000-2001; Marasco 2005; “Developing a diverse faculty” 2006; “Women in the academic work force” 2006). Although the numbers of women in higher education are rising in many countries, most occupy part-time, low-status or temporary positions, and the proportion of women in the most senior academic positions remains small (Mason & Goulden 2002; Williams 2004; “Women in the academic work force” 2006).

Spurling (1990) presented a report that is of historical significance in recognising the reasons for the existence of a “gender gap” at King’s College, Cambridge (UK), as early as the 1970s. The author identified three barriers that impeded the career motivation of women at that time – (i) personal attitudinal blocks; (ii) institutional inertia; and (iii) the difficulties of recognising structural barriers. Of particular interest to the present study, Spurling (1990, p.9) identified conflicts between family responsibilities and work responsibilities as being of significance:

... the division between professional and domestic spheres is so deep that anybody who tries to develop an academic career simultaneously with taking the major family responsibility experiences professional frustration and high levels of stress.

2.2.2 The Hong Kong scenario

Higher education in Hong Kong had a period of rapid expansion in the early 1990s. The number of universities increased from two to eight, all of which were funded by the University Grants Committee (UGC). Women's participation in higher education also increased. According to the Census and Statistics Department (2004), the proportion of female students enrolled in undergraduate programmes increased from 32.9% in 1986 to 55.1% in 2003, and the proportion of female students enrolled in postgraduate masters' and doctoral programmes increased from about 20% in 1996 to 43% in 2003. However, these increases have not been matched by a similar increase in the proportion of female academic staff. In 1996, there were 1,837 female teaching academics, representing 27.4% of academic teaching positions funded by the UGC; by 2003, this figure had increased to 1,841, representing 30.5% of academic teaching positions (Census & Statistics Department 2004).

Nevertheless, female academics in Hong Kong have not received much research interest. One important exception was a study conducted by Carmen Luke (1997, 1998, 2001), who undertook an extensive study of women in higher education in Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia as well as Hong Kong. She examined the experiences of female academics (including eleven women from four Hong Kong universities) with regard to "glass-ceiling" factors. It concluded that the "gender gap" in higher education was due to a combination of factors – including domestic and family responsibilities, cultural factors (including isolation in a male-dominated field), a lack of management training, the pressures of a dual career, and a lack of support from other women. The study thus concluded that explanations that relied on a single concept – such as a "glass ceiling" or a "pipeline factor" – were inadequate in explaining the complexities of the impediments to women's careers. According to Luke (1998, p.56), women's careers are:

... shaped by the intersections of historically situated cultural values and structures, and place-specific socio-political and economic factors [and] they can only be made intelligible by reference to local sites, socio-political and cultural contexts and histories.

Luke's study was the first of its kind in Hong Kong, but the basic approach of the research differed from that of the present enquiry. Whereas Luke assumed that women were disadvantaged, and set out to discover the factors that impeded their career advancement, the present research explores the career paths of a cohort of successful female academics from a life-history perspective and attempts to explain their success in terms of their life experiences.

2.2.3 “Brick wall”, “glass ceiling”, “stone floor” and “pipeline”

In seeking to identify the factors that prevent women from reaching the highest rungs of the academic ladder, images of “glass ceiling” (Hansard Society 1990; Davidson & Cooper 1992; Hede 1994), “brick wall” (Bacchi 1993), “stone floor” (Heward 1994, 1996), and recently, “blocked pipeline” (Keohane 2003), “maternal wall” (Williams 2004) have been cited in analyses of women's career opportunities.

The concept of a “glass ceiling” has also been widely cited in much of the workplace and management literature to explain women's inability to rise above a certain hierarchical level (Davidson & Cooper 1992; Hede 1994; Heward 1994, 1996; Luke 1998; Quina, Cotter, & Romenesko 1998). The Report of the Hansard Society's Commission (1990, p.2) on the under-representation of women in the UK provided a description of this concept:

For many women, there is a glass ceiling blocking their aspirations, allowing them to see where they might go, but stopping them from arriving there. In any given occupation, and in any given public offer, the higher the rank, prestige or influence, the smaller the proportion of women.

According to Luke (1998, p.36), glass ceiling barriers are:

... the transparent cultural, organizational, and attitudinal barriers that maintain horizontal sex segregation in organizations... [which] share certain structural features across cultural and institutional contexts such as the concentration of power and authority among male elites, concepts of merit, career, and success based on male experience and life trajectories, and social and institutional practices that reproduce culturally dominant forms of patriarchy ... women [therefore] look up the occupational ladder and get a clear vision of the top rungs but they can't always clearly see where they will encounter invisible obstacles.

Heward (1996), however, argued that the notion of the "glass ceiling" is inadequate because the concept is relevant only to entry to the senior levels of academia and other professions. She suggested (ibid., p.12) that the structural and procedural barriers faced by women are so fundamental that:

the problem of women and careers in higher education may be more accurately conceptualized as a "stone floor" keeping them at the bottom rather than a "glass ceiling" preventing them getting to the top.

The field work for Luke's study of senior academic women in Hong Kong was conducted in September 1997, two months after the historic return of Hong Kong to China. At this time, the international media were presenting profiles of the so-called "handbag brigade" - a term then used by the media to describe senior female government officials in Hong Kong. Luke reported that the senior female academics whom she interviewed for her study were unanimous in referring to these women as exemplars of the lack of "glass ceilings" in Hong Kong. However, she disagreed with her respondents:

... half-a-dozen high-profile women in a population of 6.3 million does not constitute overwhelming evidence to support arguments about the lack of glass ceiling politics. (Luke 1998, p.32)

... on closer probing [of Luke's respondents], many narratives emerged that revealed different institutional and collegial treatment, and cultural expectations, on the basis of gender. (ibid., p.54)

Although the “glass ceiling”, “brick wall” and “pipeline” theories provide convenient explanations of the impediments that exist to the career advancement of women, Luke warned that explanations that rely on a single concept cannot be presumed to be universally applicable to all women. Other mediating factors, such as workplace culture, domestic and childcare responsibilities, dual-career pressures, and mentoring/sponsorship opportunities, might also play a part in the careers of particular women. In advocating a more positive approach, Luke (1997, p.103) proposed seeking out those “who [are] promoting enabling processes and structures to improve women’s career opportunities”. The present study adopts such a positive approach.

2.3 Career Aspirations and Pathways

In a progress report on female managers in education throughout the world, Ruijs (1993, p.537) observed:

An important determining factor of female participation in the labour market is the social background against which women hold their jobs. For instance, do they work outside the home and also bear the brunt of childcare and domestic responsibilities? Or is the combination of “caring” and being economically active facilitated by a proper social infrastructure and the partner’s active involvement? This question becomes even more urgent when a woman is not just looking for a job, but planning a career.

Ruijs (*ibid.*, p.548) found that a woman’s choice of career is significantly influenced by the prospect of her dual role, and that a career in education was often chosen:

... because of the attractive possibilities for combining it with family responsibilities, including part-time work, attractive hours and long holidays.

Acker (1994, p.111), who collected data over a period of two years on the attitudes and aspirations of female teachers in primary schools, concluded that:

Careers are influenced by family stage and the work needs of teachers’ spouses, as well as by unexpected life events.

The same holds true in Hong Kong. According to Ngo (1992, p.485-86), domestic roles:

... restrict and condition married women's choice of employment statuses in Hong Kong ... a wife would consider both her obligations in the household as well as the degree of flexibility offered by the job.

Luke (1997) reported similar findings. All of the female academics in her study rated domestic and family responsibilities as the most important impediment to their career aspirations and advancement. According to Luke (*ibid.*, p.122-23), having children was:

... the biggest impediment to the freedoms and autonomy required to respond to professional demands and pursue career aspirations [and] some women postponed having children until their postgraduate studies were well underway or completed.

Acker (1994, p.129) also reported that men and women have differing perceptions of the term "career", and the women in her study spoke of a "career" as:

... a focus for the demonstration of competence and dedication, [whereas] men visualized it as a series of planned steps to a goal.

In a similar vein, Hall (1996, p.45-46) studied three female heads of secondary schools and noted that their career decisions were primarily motivated by:

... commitment to teaching their subject ... commitment to the educational goals of the work in which they were involved was a driving force in the women heads' career success.

Some of Luke's informants also perceived that commitment to the task, rather than climbing the academic ladder, was their primary motivation. As she (1997, p.117) observed:

... their career aspirations and concepts of successful achievement were fundamentally linked to a dedication to effecting change, having influence, making a difference ... they saw the importance of having a powerful and high-profile position as the best way to generate and disseminate knowledge, to develop large-scale research projects and attract major funding to support those projects.

Unlike men, few women begin their careers with a plan (Davidson & Cooper 1992; White, Cox & Cooper 1992). In their study of 100 managerial women, Hennig and Jardim (1977) found that “career” was initially perceived in terms of self-fulfilment in the far-distant future. The same authors identified three patterns among the concepts of “career” espoused by female managers. First, it was common for women to make “[a] late career decision, with career decision defined as a conscious commitment to advancement over the long term” (ibid., p.11). Secondly, women displayed “[a] sense of passivity”, and often held the view that career advancement “just happened” or that “somebody did it for me”. Finally, the women in Hennig and Jardim’s study emphasised “individual self-improvement as the critical factor determining career advancement” (ibid., p.12) – believing that, if they are better, they will be chosen. As a consequence, they tended not to plan and they talked of waiting to see what developed.

White, Cox and Cooper (1992) interviewed 48 successful female executives and entrepreneurs in business and industrial settings, and made similar findings to those described above. More than half of the respondents lamented that a lack of early career planning had resulted in a slow start and missed opportunities.

Following her study of primary teachers, Acker (1994, p.120) noted that the plans of female teachers were usually provisional, and that their ambitions could be modified according to unpredictable life events:

They remake definitions of careers and commitments to suit their preferences and their possibilities, strategizing for security and maximum flexibility ... In the process of perceiving and interpreting, the teachers are guided by their immediate experiences in the workplace culture of the school.

Coleman's (1996) study of female secondary heads produced similar findings. None of the five women heads who were interviewed had envisaged a career plan for herself when she began her career in education.

The situation is not dissimilar in higher education. Research has suggested that most women have no consistent career path (Heward, Taylor & Vickers 1995). In Luke's study, none of the senior female academics admitted having any career aspirations when she started out as a lecturer in the 1970s; as Luke (1997, p.113) observed:

When they started their first teaching posts, none had given much thought about career planning, and none had ambitions to attain senior administrative or executive management positions. For most women, career advancement "just happened".

In summary, research on women in higher education reveals that women's career patterns differ from men's, and that most women's careers have been characterised by diversity and flexibility, including periods of full-time child care and part-time work (Evetts 1990; Heward, Taylor & Vicker 1995). The majority lacked aspiration to become educational leaders, and they had often entered higher education at the suggestion of another person or by coincidence.

2.4 Socialisation Experiences Shaping Women's Career Development

The significance of socialisation experiences on career development has been promoted by career developmental theorists (Super 1953; Super, Savickas & Super 1996). According to this view, a person's self-concepts result from social learning in childhood, then evolve over time as the person goes through various life situations, and finally become increasingly stable over the course of the person's life (Super 1953). In terms of career development, Super, Savickas and Super (1996) suggested that the development of vocational choices occurs within the context of other roles that an individual plays in life – such as child, student, homemaker, worker, citizen, leisurite and so on. Because an individual plays multiple roles concurrently, these roles interact and impact on the person's self-concept, thus producing a particular personal and career orientation. According to this view, career development is a *process*, and a person's career outcome is the product of interactions among personal, family, and occupational factors throughout a person's lifetime

Similar assumptions underlie the proposals of Blumer (1969), according to whom, the meanings that individuals attach to the things in their world, and thus their identities and values, are shaped and reinforced by significant others and critical events at various times in their lives. In other words, socialisation experiences shape (and continue to reshape) the attributes of individuals, and hence their career orientations. This is the broad framework of the methodology employed in the present study.

2.4.1 Family and parental influences

Although there is a body of literature on how relationships with parents affect the subsequent career development of children, little research has been undertaken on the formative years of female academics in particular. This review is therefore expanded to include female leaders in business and professions other than academia. It is thus presumed that relationships with parents have similar influences on the careers of these women as they do on those of female academics (although further research is required to confirm this presumption empirically).

Astin and Leland (1991) studied three generations of female leaders in the education sector and concluded that family influences on female leaders were significant; in particular, they concluded that the qualities of leadership, self-esteem and independence were fostered in the early years of childhood. The parents and families of all the respondents had:

... modelled, encouraged or, at the very least, allowed them to develop as independent women infused with strong beliefs in social justice and the work ethic. (Astin & Leland 1991, p.42)

Similar findings were reported by White, Cox and Cooper (1992), who conducted interviews with 48 successful female executives and entrepreneurs in business and industrial settings. These authors found that a stable parent-child relationship “facilitated the development of an early sense of independence and self-sufficiency” (ibid., p.28). A majority of respondents in the study were able to identify childhood events that they believed had had an impact on their later development. Some recalled being motivated to overcome a weakness in themselves; others spoke of family origins that were limited in academic or financial terms; others talked about their families having had “an ethos of equity, independence, high standards and a belief that one could do anything that one chose to do” (White, Cox & Cooper 1992, p.35). Although the successful women in this study reported a variety of family experiences, a consistent theme was that the parent-child relationship “... facilitated the development of an early sense of independence and self-sufficiency” (ibid., p.28). The authors concluded that:

The various patterns of child-parent relations observed among the successful women all served to facilitate the development of a separate sense of identity, or a “positional” identity, which is based on the individual’s abilities and attributes... a positional identity is likely to engender a high need for achievement. Early experiences of coping independently with the environment generated a strong sense of competence and self-confidence in the women. (White, Cox & Cooper 1992, p.213)

It is also of interest that many of the respondents in their study named their fathers as being the more influential parent in their career development. They reported a father-daughter relationship in which they had been treated like sons – in that they were encouraged to use their creativity and to be financially independent. Many felt that they were similar to their fathers in temperament.

Hall (1996) studied three female heads of secondary schools and also found that families had played an important part in shaping the career perceptions of respondents. Parental influence, particularly that of fathers, exerted:

... significant influences on the women heads' early independence, self-sufficiency and desire to succeed ... [and] ... although family of origin is by no means an exclusive influence on future values and behaviour, it shapes perceptions of which resources achieve which results. In their [the respondents'] case, fathers provided the dominant role model (both positive and negative) for how formal authority might be used, and mothers were a source of other strategies for exercising influence. (Hall 1996, p.43-44)

With respect to maternal influence, Rosenfeld (1978) proposed that a mother's occupation represents an adult work-role model that influences the occupational choice of a child; in particular, when mothers work outside the home, Rosenfeld contended that the mother's occupation is a stronger predictor of a daughter's occupation than is the father's occupation. Similarly, Hall (1996) suggested that a mother with a full-time career can provide a stimulus for a daughter to follow in her mother's footsteps. Furthermore, Hall suggested that women who look to their mothers as role models often display similar feminine characteristics to those of their mothers. In a like vein, White, Cox and Cooper (1992, p.214) found that the successful women who identified with their mothers had mothers who were:

... strong characters with driving energy [and who] provided powerful feminine role models which may have helped the women to value positively and appreciate their own feminine traits.

The influence of siblings on a person's career choices, and a possible association between birth order and achievement orientation, have also received some attention in the literature. In the study conducted by White, Cox and Cooper (1992) to which reference has already been made, more than half of the successful women were first born, and most of the respondents said that they experienced no sibling competition. The authors (*ibid.*, p.41) concluded:

The number of siblings that a child has, his/her place among the children (that is, birth order), and relationships with brothers and sisters constitute important aspects of the child's learning situation in the home. The child may learn patterns of loyalty, helpfulness, protection, or of conflict, domination and competition, which may later be generalised to other social relationships.

In general, White, Cox and Cooper (1992) claimed that the family upbringing of the successful women in their study provided respondents with autonomy to choose the roles to which they were attracted, rather than being bound by culturally prescribed roles.

2.4.2 Role models

The relative absence of role models for girls has been cited as a cause of the lack of career aspirations among young women. For example, Spurling (1990, p.22) observed that:

Academics in the role of mentor can exert an especially powerful influence. This is an area in which the shortage of senior women represents a very real disadvantage in the development of women's academic careers, for students learn more than academic information from a supervisor acting as mentor.

Al-Khalifa (1989) contended that the relative lack of female role models caused female teachers to conceive images of headship on the basis of the examples provided by men. This opinion echoed that of Hennig and Jardim (1977), who suggested that successful women are forced to model themselves on men and, by implication, become like men.

In contrast, Hall (1996) did not support this view. Although she found in her study of women in higher education that her respondents' role models (during childhood and during their working lives) did provide some parameters for their future styles of management, none of the respondents mentioned that she had been forced to become "more like a man" in order to succeed. Indeed, the female heads in the study actually denied that they had had to emulate men's behaviour, and insisted that their role models had included both men and women. This finding was consistent with other aspects of Hall's conclusions regarding role models. Unlike the authors of other studies reviewed here, she felt that role models "did not appear to have played a significant part beyond strengthening self-confidence by confirming the rightness of their chosen path and evolving style". Indeed, her respondents were more likely to learn what *not* to do from "behaviours in both men and women which the heads chose later not to emulate" (1996, p.57).

2.4.3 Mentors

Mentoring can be formal or informal. Davidson and Cooper (1992, p.100) defined a mentor as a person who:

... provides information, advice and support for a junior person in a relationship lasting over an extended period of time, marked by substantial emotional commitment from both individuals involved.

White, Cox and Cooper (1992) found that the value of mentors was acknowledged by successful men and women alike. These authors supported the views that in career terms, the mentee in a mentoring relationship could benefit in terms of (i) sponsorship, (ii) exposure and visibility, (iii) coaching, (iv) protection, and (v) assignment of challenging work. More importantly, in psychosocial terms, the mentor might fulfil the functions of enhancing the mentee's self-concept, serving as a role model and providing encouragement.

Although none of the successful women in the study conducted by White, Cox and Cooper (1992) had been involved in a formal mentoring programme, most respondents stated that they had enjoyed the support of a respected person who had been influential in their careers or who had acted as a mentor on an informal basis. About a third of respondents reported that their confidence had been increased because their mentors had shown faith in their abilities. The study suggested that women express greater need than men for psychological affirmation from their mentors, and that mentors provide psychological support, as well as practical help, in advancing the careers of women.

In the academic field, Aisenberg and Harrington (1988) interviewed 37 highly credentialed yet displaced academic women who had ended up outside the academy. They reported that the women in their study had suffered from a lack of mentoring, which was identified as a factor in their subjects' having little knowledge of how to plan a professional life. According to Aisenberg and Harrington (1988, p.45), a lack of professional advice meant that:

... women tend not to plan intermediate five- and ten-year strategies. Rather they take smaller steps, almost literally feeling their way along ... Lacking instruction in general career strategy, women frequently remain unaware of specific steps important to their advancement.

Spurling (1990) reported similar findings from her study of academics at King's College, Cambridge. According to Spurling, academic mentors can exert a powerful influence on aspiring academics, and the relative lack of senior women as mentors represents a significant disadvantage for women in developing their academic careers.

Conversely, it has been reported that academic women who have been mentored achieve greater success in their careers in higher education - because a mentor can be critical in assisting aspiring academics to make correct career choices and in providing appropriate support (Kanter 1977; Hall 1996). Without such mentors, Kanter (1977) contended that women tend to remain dependent for promotion upon formal bureaucratic procedures, which often favour men. Hall (1996, p.55) found mentors important to women, and she argued that:

Mentors for women seeking promotion can serve two purposes ... First, mentors may act as a guide to an unfamiliar male-dominated organisation culture. Secondly, they provide sponsorship and legitimate access to power.

Mentors are also helpful in the professional socialisation of aspiring young professionals. Indeed, Denmark (1988) argued that an aspiring professional requires two mentors - a personal mentor to encourage individual development and a political mentor to assist in building a professional reputation.

McCabe and McCabe (2000) presented an in-depth exploration of the role of mentors in academia, and concluded that having one or more mentors is desirable. They observed:

...that at each stage of an academic career, an individual needs at least one, and often more than one, mentor. At all times, an individual needs training and guidance in the development of professional skills.... One also needs advice regarding the long-term development of one's career. Advice should be provided by a mentor who is able to transcend his or her own self-interest. Teaching and writing are also important skills for the academician and require mentoring. A trainee or junior faculty member may find one person to fill all of these roles or may need a number of individuals to provide mentoring. (McCabe & McCabe 2000, p.45)

Luke (2001) recommended that mentor and protégée should be of the same sex because female mentors can be role models as well as mentors to aspiring female academics. However, this is often not the case. Apart from the fact that a lack of senior women in institutions of higher education limits the availability of female mentors, the so-called "queen bee" phenomenon can inhibit the mentoring of women by women. The term "queen bee" was coined by Staines, Travis and Jayerante (1974) to describe dominant and successful senior women who are unwilling to help other women because they fear that their own positions in the organisational hierarchy will be threatened by the success of others. Although Luke (2001) acknowledged the existence of such "queen bees" in academia, she noted that many of the senior women in her study had recognised the importance of mentoring and had stated that they were willing to mentor junior women on the academic staff.

Regardless of gender, Astin and Leland (1991, p.47) felt that mentors and role models can have a positive effect on their protégées:

Role models and mentors give us permission to aspire and to act. We are given permission to be ourselves and to transcend prescribed gender roles. Role models and mentors also inspire us to try to realise our greatest potential.

2.4.4 Significant others

Most of the female leaders in the studies conducted by Astin and Leland (1991) and Hall (1996) mentioned the importance of “significant others” (other than mentors and role models) who had provided essential support to them at various critical times in their careers. In most cases, this person was the spouse/partner of the woman. In other cases, a senior person or colleague in the woman’s workplace had provided this assistance. Other “significant others” were friends and family members. In some cases, the nannies who provided childcare and household support served as “significant others” to the successful women.

These “significant others” provided essential support for these women in what was otherwise a potentially lonely existence. As Hall (1996, p.58) observed, the lives of successful women can be:

... mainly solo performances, other than the crucial support at different stages of one or two others with a strong interest in their success at work and at home ... [Successful women can be] concerned to protect others’ time, but ... unwilling to admit any need for help themselves.

2.4.5 Conflict between work and family

It is well documented that the extent of family commitments is markedly different for men and women (Davidson & Cooper 1992; Ruijs 1993; Coleman 1996; Cheung 1997). Research over time and across cultures has indicated that women carry the major responsibility for domestic arrangements and caring for the young and the elderly (Evetts 1990; Acker 1994; Cheung, Wan & Wan 1994; Coleman 1996; Blackmore 1999; Luke 2001; Lo, Stone & Ng 2003). This domestic and caring role applies not only to women who are working at home but also to women who have full-time positions in the workforce like those of their male counterparts. For example, Evetts (1990) studied women in primary teaching and observed that:

... family commitments such as childcare do not stop, although they might be eased, when children attend school. School hours do not correspond with working hours even for teachers; the taking and particularly the collecting of young children from school is a constant worry for working mothers; for school holidays, including occasional days, special arrangements have to be made; and for the sick child, complex coping strategies need to be devised. (Evetts 1990, p.118)

Despite the increased involvement of women in careers outside the home, the unequal allocation of household work within dual-career families continues. For example, in a report on female managers in education throughout the world, Ruijs (1993, p.546) emphasised this inequality:

The increase of women's activity rates in the labour market has not been paralleled by a substantial increase in the domestic work done by men. Over the [past] 10 years, men's daily contribution to domestic activities has increased by only four minutes. They now spend one and a half hours on household duties, as compared to an average of four and a half hours by women.

Although the twin demands of career and family affect both men and women, Coleman (1996) contended that women usually carry the major responsibility for household management. Lewis (1994, p.231) made a similar observation in noting that “the household management role is a gender boundary which remains contentious and difficult to dismantle”.

Both Blackmore (1999) and Acker (1994) reported that the majority of the women in their studies worked a “triple shift”. The women in Blackmore’s study worked a triple shift of paid work, unpaid domestic work and unpaid community work. Acker (*ibid.*, p.119) noted that:

... women teachers with young children had to be even more skillful at juggling, for they had a triple shift, namely, work, home and child-care responsibilities.

According to Blackmore, women in education are constantly torn between home and work. On one hand, they often harbour a feeling of guilt for the lack of time that they have for their children; on the other hand, female teachers can be perceived as not contributing to their workplace:

... [those] who did prioritize family responsibilities were often viewed by their fellow members of staff, male and female, as uncommitted, disinterested and apathetic, because they were not actively involved in school committees—“the nine to fourers”. (Blackmore 1999, p.78)

Cheung, Wan and Wan (1994) reported that Chinese women in Hong Kong were still expected to be largely, if not solely, responsible for managing the home and child rearing. According to these authors (1994, p.342), traditional gender roles placed a high priority on domestic obligations for women:

... for the majority of Hong Kong women, social status and worth continue to be derived from their husbands and not from themselves. The family remains their focal concern and major source of life satisfaction.

Work stress has been identified as a major problem for working mothers (Aryee, Luk & Stone, 1998). Cheung, Wan and Wan (1994, p.334) made the following observation regarding the situation in Hong Kong:

The extension of women's roles into the workplace has not relieved their responsibilities in the household. A number of studies have, on the contrary, pointed to the burden of having two careers: wage earner and homemaker. Many working mothers experience conflicts between work and family life. In spite of more fathers expressing the opinion that child care should be shared, few husbands take responsibility for child care or other family duties. The decision to have children is also directly related to women's choice of work.

In a similar vein, Cheung (1997, p.6) was adamant that:

... women's increased labour force participation may have a regressive effect if it imposes an additional burden on top of women's domestic load without a restructuring of the division of domestic labour.

According to Davidson and Cooper (1992), women all over the world face these difficulties. They observed that women:

... get the rawest deal in caring for relatives [and are] more likely to be faced with the pressures and strains linked with having to take care of elderly parents and dependents. (Davidson & Cooper 1992, p.139)

In Luke's study (2001), all the single female academics from Singapore and Hong Kong were living with their aged parents, and all had a substantial share of responsibility for care of their extended families. For respondents with child care and domestic responsibilities, the requirement for long working hours was often difficult; in addition, they were expected to find time to do research and write up academic papers.

Lo, Stone and Ng's (2003) study also reported on the particular nature of the conflict between work and family as experienced by married female professionals in Hong Kong. Their study emphasised some problems that differentiate Hong Kong women from their counterparts elsewhere. In particular, given the heavy emphasis on examinations in the Hong Kong education system, helping with children's homework appeared to be "a major concern among professional women in Hong Kong" (Lo, Stone & Ng 2003, p.189). This finding was similar to an earlier finding of Cheung (1997, p.185), who had noted that:

For most of the women we interviewed [who] had school-age children, supervision of children's school work was a regular task. This involved spending at least one to two hours a day sitting with the child while she did her homework, going through the lessons, preparing for tests and examinations, and so forth.

Although the availability in Hong Kong of domestic helpers and relatives in the household does assist women in balancing household responsibilities with paid employment outside the home (Ngo 1992), conflict between work and family can still have adverse consequences for the career development of women (Aryee, Luk & Stone 1998; Ngo & Lau 1998). The majority of the women professionals in the study conducted by Lo, Stone and Ng (2003, p.185) were found to "lead a lifestyle characterized by exhaustion and little or no family time".

According to Luke (2001), most of the female academics in her study stated that having children was the biggest impediment to their freedom and autonomy to respond to professional demands and to pursue career aspirations. This echoed Rujis' (1993, p.554) observation that:

... while men still have the privilege of planning career and personal life separately, the conflict between child-bearing and having a career is still very acute for women.

In both the UK and the USA, the literature reveals that senior women in education are less likely to be married and more likely to remain childless; if they do decide to have children, they are more likely to delay having those children (Davidson & Cooper 1992; Coleman 1996; Luke 2001). If they are married, having a supportive partner is a key to a successful career. For example, in Coleman's (1996) study, the successful female heads all had husbands who were working in education and were supportive of their spouses' careers; there were also some instances of joint career planning and of taking turns in giving priority to the career interests of each partner. Similarly, all of the female academics in Luke's (1998) study claimed to have husbands who were supportive of their career choices and willing to contribute to housework and child-care.

The situation in Hong Kong was summarised by Lo, Stone and Ng (2003, p.188) in the following terms:

... work-family conflict is a significant problem for many married professional women in Hong Kong. Many are exhausted and feel "guilt trips" from the demands of their multiple roles (mother, daughter and professional). They have to look after their children's homework and to take care of their parents in addition to their work roles. They appear to get little support from their husbands. Many tend to cope by downwardly adjusting their career and lifestyle expectations, and by enlisting the help of others (domestic helper, tutor, relatives and husband).

2.4.6 Workplace culture

Acker (1994, p.126) referred to the home and academe as being "greedy institutions" - because, in both cases, the "work is never really done". This concept of the "greedy institution" was echoed in a study conducted by Currie, Harris and Thiele (2000), who noted a range of personal and professional sacrifices that are required of those who wish to be part of university culture. In their study, a large majority of respondents, both male and female, reported having made significant sacrifices. According to Currie, Harris, and Thiele (2000, p.288), "the overwhelming picture is of staff working long hours, being away from family and abandoning community interests", and they then posed the following questions:

Are women and men equally able to devote extremely long hours to their paid work? Given the cultural and social expectations about women's domestic responsibilities, does the "work all hours" ethos have the same meaning for women and men?

In a study of successful female academics in English universities, Kettle (1996) concluded that the culture of the individual institution was crucial to the success or failure of initiatives to enhance women's careers. Although university practices and procedures did not actively discriminate against women, she contended that the existence of particular values and beliefs made it difficult for women to succeed:

There is a common theme whereby each respondent considers her university to be deeply hierarchical; where criteria for promotion are weighted in favour of men; where aggressive management promotes unfriendly working practices, where informal networking goes hand in hand with a devaluation of what are considered to be feminine attributes. (Kettle 1996, p.63):

This statement supports Gray's (1994) view that the patriarchal nature of higher education institutions is unfriendly to female academics, and that there is a need for support for women both within and outside the academe.

2.4.7 Networking

Aisenberg and Harrington (1988) described women at all levels of higher education as "outsiders in the sacred grove". Because higher education is still a male-dominated field, female academics often have peer groups that are composed mainly of men. According to these authors, women lack visibility, are not informed of available positions, and are not recommended by their male peers.

In this context, Hennig and Jardim (1977, p.39) spoke of a so-called "old boys network", which they described as "a subtle, active system of support which is dependent on friendships, persuasion, favors, promises and connections with people who already have influence", and this network often operates over drinks in bars or at sports events outside the work environment.

Although Shakeshaft (1989) claimed that it is in the nature of women to build relationships by spending time with people, communicating, and caring about individual differences, many women have reported that gaining acceptance in male-dominated networks can be difficult (Aisenberg & Harrington 1988; Shakeshaft 1989; Bagilhole 1993; Heward 1996; Chrisler 1998). Some felt that men deliberately excluded them, whereas others chose to distance themselves from male colleagues because they felt awkward or unwelcome. On this subject, Luke (2000, p.293) found that:

Such cultural gender politics, inscribed on married or single women's social and professional relations with men, are part of an informal cultural milieu that makes women invisible, limits opportunities and, in the words of many women, is "a very Asian thing".

White, Cox and Cooper (1992) suggested that the lifestyles of women can diminish their participation in informal networks - because women tend to keep contact with colleagues to official working hours in order to manage their domestic responsibilities. Their inability to be included in informal networks can have repercussions on their career prospects. Because much information and professional advice is imparted in daily informal discussions among peers, Carli (1998) was of the opinion that peer networking is as important to professional socialisation as formal mentoring. Moreover, as Spurling (1990) has observed, networking with colleagues, peers and other professionals in the field helps to enhance visibility and professional standing.

In the USA and the UK, networking among professional women is becoming increasingly popular; indeed, networking groups are deliberately established to provide support for female managers who would otherwise be denied social support, contacts, opportunities, and policy information by men (Davidson & Cooper 1992). According to Luke (2001, p.7), such networking among academic women can be:

... socially supportive as well as a source of building influential contacts and gaining access to important information circuits.

Heward, Taylor and Vicker (1995) interviewed sixteen male and female university professors, with a view to gaining an insight into the process whereby potential academics are identified by existing senior members of the academic profession. They found that senior academics have significant power to make influential judgements about others, and that they are in a position to influence the careers of their subordinates by facilitating the progress of chosen individuals and making their merits known to other influential members of the profession. They summarised their findings in these terms:

The evidence suggests that there are important networks of relationships through which senior members of the profession communicate their judgements of the academic merit of aspirants and make recommendations for the widest range of academic activities including honours, appointments and promotions. Many of the respondents had been invited to apply for posts by former tutors, supervisors, colleagues and friends. The extent to which such invitations involved participation in competition with other invited and uninvited candidates varied and included some which amounted to patronage. (Heward, Taylor & Vicker 1995, p.157)

According to the same authors, men apparently obtained greater benefits from their social and professional networks than did women. This view is in accordance with that of Aisenberg and Harrington (1988), who felt that exclusion from professional networks represented a significant disadvantage to women; moreover, such exclusion accentuated the perception that female members of the academic staff were treated as “outsiders” or “marginal professionals”.

2.4.8 Organisational socialisation and political astuteness

Organisational socialisation can be colloquially described as “learning the ropes” – that is, being indoctrinated and trained in what is important to a given organisation (White, Cox & Cooper 1992). In this regard, Kanter (1977) argued that gaining entry to the informal system of opportunity and power determines an individual’s ability to get things done and achieve goals - and thus to move toward the top of an organisational hierarchy. In a similar vein, Hennig and Jardim (1977) warned women against being too preoccupied with “self-development” at the expense of being seen to be competent.

Spurling's report (1990) on Cambridge scholars also emphasised the difficulties experienced by women in their attempts to be accepted into the university culture:

Unofficial, informal networks and channels of information, which help to educate men about ... areas of responsibility, are not easily available to women ... Some of the most highly motivated [women] have the least secure positions in the University - and also have family responsibilities in addition to full-time jobs. (Spurling 1990, p.53)

White, Cox and Cooper (1992, p.154) alluded to the fact that an understanding of the politics of these informal networks is essential when they stated that "within the informal system, signs of suitability develop to supplement official criteria of performance and trustworthiness". Rather than waiting to be chosen, the successful women in the study took the initiative; moreover, they recommended that other people should actively sell themselves, and "...show competence and simultaneously make others aware of their contribution, particularly those with the power to promote" (White, Cox & Cooper 1992, p.151).

Nevertheless, the same authors (1992, p.155) noted that organisational politics had negative connotations for the women in their study; indeed, political strategies were perceived as "secretiveness, controlling resources, stealing ideas, blackmail and backstabbing", that were used to "further personal goals at the expense of the organization". They (1992, p.157) went on to argue that women need a knowledge of how their organisation works, and that:

Women must be encouraged to question established norms and practices and to think about their organization in new ways. Awareness that they are constrained by the system is not sufficient. Women need to think about ways of achieving a more desirable state.

2.5 Key Experiences, Attitudes, and Skills

The female leaders in Astin and Leland's (1991) study had all had positive learning experiences in their early years which, according to the respondents, had a positive effect on their subsequent leadership skills and self-confidence. According to Astin and Leland (1991, p.55):

Their accomplishments reflect the integration of previous education, work and other activities, all of which contributed to their distinctive styles and commitments.

Astin and Leland (1991, p.126) suggested that this group of successful women exhibited certain qualities in common:

- high levels of activity and energy;
- an appetite for challenge, problem-solving, and risk-taking;
- an ability to accept and overcome obstacles and personal setbacks;
- intellectual competence and a strong academic background;
- personal awareness and confidence, continuously honed by wide exposure to life experiences (such as work, community service, cultural diversity); and
- support from family, friends, role-models, and/or mentors.

In their self-descriptions, the respondents who were engaged in academia spoke of their possessing such qualities as intelligence, perseverance, resourcefulness, leadership and curiosity. Many were active participants in organisations and institutions, and their leadership was manifested in teaching students and empowering junior members of the academic staff through mentoring.

2.5.1 Single-mindedness

When asked what advice they would give to other women who aspired to be successful, the successful women in White, Cox and Cooper's (1992) study emphasised the importance of being single-minded. They encouraged women to know what they want, to set their priorities, to aim high, and to "go for it". They recognised that success is harder for a woman to achieve, and many stressed the importance of persistence and the need to "keep battling". Some emphasised the importance of communicating their ambitions to those in power, rather than waiting to be noticed. The virtues of honesty and integrity were also mentioned, together with the importance of women being themselves, rather than attempting to adapt to a male model.

2.5.2 Self-confidence

With regard to the importance of self-confidence, Spurling (1990, p.49) reported that all of her respondents "felt that lack of it [self-confidence] seriously undermines academic performance". Heward (1996, p.17) had a similar view:

... self-confidence, a positive evaluation of their own academic ability from the outset of their career, is a crucial basis for a successful academic career.

All the respondents in Heward's study claimed that having confidence, especially seeing themselves as academically able, was of the greatest significance for their later success in academe. In addition, the respondents asserted that self-confidence continued to be important as these academic women competed with men for sponsorship or promotion. This was despite Heward's (1996, p.19) observation that:

Behaviour such as assertiveness, self-confidence and self-advertisement, which is praised in men, may be criticized as unfeminine and risk alienation from women colleagues.

In this context, Heward noted that a woman could be labelled as being "over ambitious" by her female colleagues at the same time as she was being encouraged by senior men. She concluded by calling for more research on:

How far women seek promotion or eliminate themselves from competition for the "glittering prizes" of the academic profession, and for what reasons?
(Heward 1996, p.19)

2.5.3 Risk-taking

Spurling (1990) noted that the female academics at Cambridge were not risk-takers; indeed, many of them put more effort into finding obstacles to improving their situation than into identifying and developing possible strategies. The explanation for this behaviour was as follows:

In hierarchical and patriarchal cultures there is an approved role for young men to play in challenging authority and proving themselves. It represents regeneration. If men generally seem to be more capable of mustering a challenge than women, they do so in a culture that encourages them—just as it also teaches them to withstand any uncomfortable consequences as a rite of passage. Women whose experience has been that society has passed judgement on their interests and ambitions and concluded that they are irrelevant, or secondary at best, might well regard judgements and conclusions warily. (Spurling 1990, p.46)

However, she argued that women are capable of overcoming their aversion to risk-taking:

The experience of even small success can quickly change this, but a risk has to be taken to achieve even small success. (ibid., p.48)

2.5.4 Making a reputation

The literature indicates that reputation is an important currency in the academic profession. Peer evaluation of one's work, theses and publications is the basis of academic success. Knowing and receiving positive judgements from senior members in the field of study are highly significant because these senior members act as "gatekeepers" and they admit or exclude aspirants to the academic profession. As observed by White, Cox and Cooper (1992, p. 155):

Individuals who cannot draw on a base of "knowing and being known" may be deprived of others' co-operation in achieving objectives. Informal channels are also an important means of transmitting information. Exclusion from informal networks can lead to failure to understand how organizational norms are translated into practice.

Hence, some of the women in Heward's (1996) study talked about "making and managing an academic reputation by publishing in prestigious journals and meeting the 'right people'" (ibid., p.19). Since making a reputation often involves taking a proactive role and to a certain extent, self-advertisement, some women may find it easier than others to establish themselves in the networks of their field.

2.5.5 Publish or perish

Research is essential for career success in universities and publishing is of paramount importance because one's academic career depends on it. McCabe and McCabe (2000, p.45) pointed out that "academic institutions reward individuals who have publications and bring income into the institution" and "too often, superb teachers do not receive appropriate recognition". This could pose a problem for some academic women, argued by Chrisler (1998, p.115), as:

the desire to appear unselfish, to give others whatever they seem to need, and to fit one's own work into the leftover spaces may be typical of women and a result of gender role socialisation.

2.5.6 Commitment

With regard to commitment, Gray (1994, p.78) made the following observations:

In order for women to develop their presence in higher education, a life of dedication is required ... [women academics] compete within the academic system on its terms, attempting to attain success via research ratings, publications, committee memberships, delivering conference papers and so on.

Similarly, Bagilhole (1994, p.22) found that female academics:

... strive to be incredibly conscientious and dedicated, putting excess pressure on themselves ... [because] they had to be better than their male colleagues to succeed.

2.5.7 An ambivalent academic

Gray (1994, p.78) referred to herself as “an ambivalent academic”. She saw academic work as “just a job”, and attempted to allocate more time to outside activities. This enabled her to accommodate different views, be open to ideas, and maintain some distance. This deliberate ambivalence enabled her to avoid:

... coming face-to-face with my own power and that of other women...
[and helped to] keep my investment in the academic at a safe level and remain a semi-outsider. (Gray 1994, p.78)

2.6 Women in Hong Kong

In a speech delivered in 2001 at the “Fortune Global Forum”, Wu, the former chairperson of the Hong Kong Equal Opportunities Commission, noted that “the social development of women is also a journal on the development of a civil society in Hong Kong” For her, the notable milestones in the improving status of women in Hong Kong have included:

- the admission of the first female student to Hong Kong University in 1921;
- six-year free compulsory education for boys and girls in 1971;
- equal pay for nurses and teachers in 1971;
- the extension of such education to nine years in 1978 – which led to a drop from 36% in 1971 to 12.6% in 1999 in the proportion of women with no schooling, and to about roughly equal numbers of women and men studying in universities today;
- amendments to employment law in 1981, which introduced ten weeks of paid maternity leave for women in full-time employment;
- the Sex Discrimination Ordinance, which came into force in 1996;
- the Equal Opportunities Commission established in 1996.

As a result of all these measures, Wu noted, more Hong Kong women are participating in the labour force today, and that they are making an important contribution to the development of Hong Kong.

However, despite these improvements, Ngo (1997, p .68) has noted that traditional gender norms and role differentiations continue to be widely practised:

Traditionally, women's activities were restricted to the domestic sphere and a patriarchal system evolved in those Confucian societies in which females held a dependent and subordinate position both within and outside the home. Another manifestation of Confucianism is familism, loosely defined as the ideology that emphasizes individual's loyalty to the family and the placement of family interests above individual and other interests. In these societies, the family exerts a strong influence on the opportunities of individual members.

According to Luke (1998), educated women in Hong Kong are caught between Eastern and Western cultures and ideologies. She described the dilemma and the constraints in the following terms:

It seems then that the choices educated women can make are structurally available – “women can do whatever they want today, there are no restrictions, it's up to women to work their way up” – but they are ideologically and subjectively heavily circumscribed ... Cultural expectations and gender differentiated socialisation still map out different expectations and opportunities for men and women. Subjectively, the professional and personal choices women make, such as whether and when to raise a family, come at what many called a “cost” or “price”. (Luke 1998, p.48)

Respondents to Luke's study (2001) also felt that the “mindset” and “culture” of women themselves were the biggest barriers to an academic career for women.

2.7 Summary and Conclusions

This chapter has reviewed the literature on areas of research that are related to the careers of successful women, with a particular focus on female academics in Hong Kong. Although some research has been conducted on how life experiences and critical events have influenced the careers of successful women in other countries, little significant research has been conducted on Chinese female academics in Hong Kong. The review has found that the only study of female academics in Hong Kong was conducted by Luke (1997) as part of a major study of women in higher-education management in South-East Asia. Luke's findings in relation to Thai, Hong Kong, Singaporean and Malaysian women in higher education highlight the fact that their experiences, as elsewhere, "are shaped by place-specific socio-political, economic and cultural factors" (Luke 2000, p.303), and pointed to the need for further research on female academics in Hong Kong.

In addition, this review of the literature suggests that a comprehensive understanding of women in the academic profession requires consideration of a multitude of factors – beginning with their early upbringings and including their accumulated life experiences. It is apparent from the literature that women's careers are constrained by many factors - including their domestic and childcare responsibilities, the workplace culture that surrounds them, and restricted opportunities for mentoring and sponsorship. It is also apparent from the literature that no single concept – such as a "glass ceiling" or a "pipeline effect" – is comprehensive enough to account for the complexities of women's career development. Moreover, the review suggests that the issues have to be examined within particular cultural contexts – especially with regard to how women choose to interpret their life experiences. The review has also revealed that Hong Kong's culture is unique in some respects – such as the ready availability of domestic help and the expectations on mothers for children's school work. The ways in which these factors differentiate female academics in Hong Kong from their Western counterparts have been brought to light in this literature review.

The findings of this review provide valuable background knowledge for the present study. The critical issues have been clearly identified and enumerated in this review, but the lack of research in the specific context of Hong Kong points to a need for a local study focused on the unique experience of female academics in this particular setting. Moreover, it is apparent that few if any researchers have approached this topic from a life-history perspective, and especially one that also employs the grounded theory methodology. The present research, rooted in Blumer's symbolic interactionism, thus fills a critical gap in the extant literature regarding Hong Kong. At the same time, it contributes to the growing number of studies on successful females, conducted both locally and abroad, which focus on their interpretations of the experiences that have contributed to their career development.

Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This study examined and analysed the life events, experiences and career pathways of a particular group of senior female academics, and the meanings they attached to these experiences. Using this approach, the study aimed to develop a theory of how life events and experiences have shaped the careers of academically successful women in Hong Kong.

The present chapter describes the methodology of the study in detail. The chapter examines the assumptions underpinning the paradigm of symbolic interactionism and its relevance to the present research, explains the choice of an edited topical life-history approach, and discusses the use of grounded-theory methodology. Following this introduction, the chapter is divided into 11 sections: (i) the debate between interpretivism and positivism; (ii) symbolic interactionism and the research questions; (iii) edited topical life history as a method of inquiry; (iv) grounded-theory methodology; (v) theoretical sampling; (vi) data collection; (vii) data analysis; (viii) trustworthiness of the research; (ix) ethical considerations; (x) limitations and (xi) summary.

According to Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe (1994, p.78), an interpretive approach assumes that “the world and ‘reality’ are not objective and exterior, but ... are socially constructed and given meaning by people”. Such an interpretive paradigm assumes that all human action is meaningful, but “has to be interpreted and understood within the context of social practices” (Usher 1996, p.18). In accordance with this approach, the present study adopted an interpretivist paradigm.

The study interpreted this paradigm from a symbolic interactionist perspective, which according to Blumer (1956, p. 686), can be understood in these terms:

We can, and I think must, look upon human life as chiefly a vast interpretative process in which people, singly and collectively, guide themselves by defining the objects, events, and situations which they encounter ... Any scheme designed to analyse human group life in its general character has to fit this process of interpretation.

The interpretive paradigm and the perspective of symbolic interaction adopted here assume that there is no objective truth; rather, individual perception bestows meaning. In Johnson's words:

All human life is experienced and indeed constructed from a subjective point of view, and ... social research should seek to elicit the meaning of events and phenomena from the point of view of participants. (Johnson 1994, p.7)

According to this approach, social research should aim to understand how individuals create, modify, and interpret the world in which they are placed (Cohen & Manion 1994). As Johnson (1994, p.7) observed with respect to social researchers:

Although we may not always know in full depth what a participant *means*, we have to go by what they *say*, and make the most sensitive interpretation we can of it, from the basis of our own world view.

The primary task of interpretive research is thus not merely to gather facts and measure how often certain patterns occur, but to appreciate the different constructions and meanings that people place upon their experience (Easterby-Smith, Thorp & Lowe 1994).

In adopting an interpretivist approach, the main research question of the present study is therefore:

What, in the life histories of particular senior female academics in Hong Kong, has contributed to their success?

In addressing this question, several subsidiary questions arose and were also addressed:

- How did their childhood and education affect their careers?
- What life events and relationships have helped to lay the foundation for the development of their careers?
- What experiences, attitudes, and skills were deemed to have been critical?
- What strategies, if any, did they use to attain senior positions?
- What factors were perceived to have affected the advancement of their careers?
- How did they manage multiple roles?
- What kinds of support did they deem necessary?
- What advice would they give to women who aspire to senior academic positions?

The methodology adopted in addressing these questions began with the development of a semi-structured interview guide to aid in the collection of data during interviews with respondents. The data were then organised and analysed using an inductive grounded-theory methodology based on the meta-theory of symbolic interactionism.

3.2 Interpretivism versus Positivism

Interpretivism and positivism have different philosophical assumptions regarding their conceptions of social reality and human behaviour. Interpretivism assumes that there is no objective truth; in the words of Johnson (1994, p.7): “all human life is experienced and indeed constructed from a subjective point of view”. In contrast, positivism rests on the assumption that a social reality exists; in the words of Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe (1994, p.77): “knowledge is only of significance if it is based on observations of this external reality”.

Qualitative research is often associated with the interpretive approach, which tends to be inductive and theory-generating, whereas quantitative research is often associated with the positivist approach, which tends to be deductive and theory-testing. Researchers who adopt an interpretive approach base their methodology on the subjective experience of the individual because individual perception is held to bestow meaning. According to this view, “the world and ‘reality’ are not objective and exterior, but ... are socially constructed and given meaning by people” (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Lowe 1994, p.78). The methodology adopted in accordance with this approach therefore aims to gain an understanding of the processes whereby the individuals create, modify and interpret the world. Researchers who favour the interpretive approach typically utilise a range of methodologies - such as accounts, participant observation, and personal constructs – which are usually of a qualitative nature.

In contrast, those who adopt a positivist view stress that the researcher is value-free and independent of what is observed. Rather than emphasising *processes*, the emphasis of the positivist approach is on the measurement and analysis of *causal relationships* between variables (Denzin & Lincoln 2000). As Creswell (1994, p. 6) observed:

When a quantitative researcher writes a study, the language should be not only impersonal and formal but also based on accepted words such as *relationship*, *comparison*, and *within group*. Concepts and variables are well defined from accepted definitions.

Researchers who adopt a positivist approach to the social world tend to employ traditional methodologies - such as survey research, experiments, and structured interviewing.

It is thus apparent that the interpretive approach tends to have an association with “qualitative” methodologies whereas the positivist approach tends to have an association with “quantitative” methodologies. The differences between these two broad groups of methodologies were explained by Denzin and Lincoln (2000, p. 8) in the following terms:

The word *qualitative* implies an emphasis on the qualities of entities and on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured (if measured at all) in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency. Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researchers and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. Such researchers emphasize the value-laden nature of inquiry. They seek answers to questions that stress *how* social experience is created and given meaning.

Against the background of the above discussion, a careful examination of the stated purposes of the present study suggests that the study naturally lends itself to an interpretive and qualitative research methodology. The stated purposes include the following:

- to identify the circumstances and factors which, according to the perceptions of the respondents, have contributed to the development of their careers;
- to identify the relationships, educational experiences, and life events that have affected the development of their careers;
- to highlight the attitudes and skills that they deem to have been critical to their success;
- to focus on the strategies and career paths that they used to reach the senior levels in higher education, and the factors that influenced these paths; and
- to profile the female academics with a view to providing role models for women aspiring to success in academia.

An interpretive and qualitative approach is appropriate because such concepts as “perceptions”, “relationships”, “attitudes” and “life-history accounts” cannot be quantified and the findings of the study cannot be replicated. Moreover, qualitative methods (such as interviews, participant observations and document analysis) are appropriate to the present examination of the life histories of the respondents because, in the words of Bogdan and Taylor (1975, p. 4), such methods “allow us to know people personally and to see them as they are developing their own definitions of the world”. The same authors have noted that these methods often yield rich descriptive data which helps a researcher to understand human experiences that are often complex and subjective. As Strauss and Corbin (1998, p. 11) observed, “qualitative methods can be used to obtain the intricate details about phenomena such as feelings, thought processes, and emotions that are difficult to extract or learn about through more conventional research methods”.

Another reason for choosing a qualitative approach is the exploratory nature of this study. As Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 10) have argued, qualitative research provides “the best strategy for discovery, exploring a new area, [and] developing hypotheses”. In view of the fact that one aim of the study is to develop a theory of how life events and experiences shaped the careers of successful female academics in the universities of Hong Kong, an interpretive and qualitative approach is appropriate.

3.3 Symbolic Interactionism and the Research Questions

The concept of “self” is of primary importance to the theoretical framework of “symbolic interactionism”. According to Mead (1934), the individual develops a sense of self through interaction with others. The process begins from childhood and continues throughout life through social interaction. Building on Mead’s (1934) ideas, Blumer (1969) formulated three principles:

- human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them;
- the meanings of such things is derived from the social interactions that people have with their fellows; and
- these meanings are manipulated and modified through an interpretive process.

The first of these principles is contrary to the view that human behaviour is determined by societal forces. According to symbolic interactionism, individuals attach their own meanings to a range of phenomena - such as people, material objects, and abstract concepts - and then act towards them on the basis of these meanings, which are personal to the individual.

The second principle implies that the meanings that a person has for the things in his or her world are created by the actions of other people. This view is supported by Bogdan and Biklen (1992, p.37) who argued that the self is:

... a social construction, the results of persons perceiving themselves and then developing a definition through the process of interaction. This loop enables people to change and grow as they learn more about themselves through this interactive process.

The third principle refers to an interpretive process, whereby a person deals with the things that he or she encounters. According to Blumer (1969), this process involves two stages. First, a person interacts (or engages) in a communication process with himself or herself with respect to the meanings of phenomena. Secondly, the person “selects, checks, suspends, regroupes, and transforms the meanings in the light of the situation in which he [or she] is placed” (Blumer 1969, p.5).

These three principles have significantly influenced the methodology of the present study. In accordance with the first, it is assumed that the female academics studied here decided what was important to them, and then arranged their priorities accordingly - with a view to achieving what they considered to be “success” in their professional lives.

In accordance with the second principle - that social interaction is the source from which meanings are derived - it is assumed that the meanings the female academics attached to phenomena were determined by the relationships and critical events in their personal, social, and academic lives. Significant others in the lives of these women (such as parents, family members, teachers, peers and colleagues) and critical events (such as opportunities for education, overseas study, job change, marriage and child-bearing) are thus assumed to have played an important role in contributing meanings to their lives - including their career orientations.

In accordance with the third principle, the present study assumes that interpretive processes influenced the careers of the female academics, and that an understanding of these processes - in particular, their interpretations of life events and people associated with career development - is crucial in addressing the main research question:

What, in the life histories of particular senior female academics in Hong Kong, has contributed to their success?

3.4 Topical Edited Life History as a Methodology

The topical life-history approach adopted in the present study is consistent with Blumer's (1969) symbolic interactionism, as described above. This view is supported by Minichiello *et al.* (1990, p. 152), who contended that there is "a fundamental affinity between the central tenets of symbolic interactionism and life history research". In support of this position, Minichiello *et al.* (1990) built upon Plummer's (1983) arguments to propose three theoretical assumptions common to both a life-history approach and symbolic interactionism.

First, according to Plummer (1983, p.54), "in every case of study, we must acknowledge that experiencing individuals can never be isolated from their functioning bodies and their constraining social worlds. Minichiello *et al.* (1990, p.152) argued that life-history research supports this view because "it is aimed at examining life as concrete experience".

Secondly, life is an emergent perspective and human beings experience the world through their definitions of it. Similarly, according to Minichiello *et al.* (1990, p.153), “the most central and fundamental source of knowledge is the personal document, the life history, which elicits “the sense of reality” that human beings hold about their own worlds”.

Thirdly, ambiguity and incongruity are always possible in comparing two individuals’ definitions of the same situation. Similarly, according to Minichiello *et al.* (1990, p. 153), a life-history researcher should “move away from studying abstractions and get at the particular, the detailed and the experiential [in order to] grasp the ambiguities and inevitability of different perspectives” .

The arguments of Minichiello *et al.* (1990) are applicable to the present study, which assumes that the meanings and importance that the female academics assigned to their upbringings, environments, education and attitudes (towards self, others, family and work) affected their career aspirations and developments. A life-history approach is therefore appropriate to addressing the research questions of the present study.

Another argument for the selection of the life-history methodology can be found in Dimmock and O’Donoghue (1997). In defence of their choice of such an approach in their study of school heads, they argued (*ibid*, p.65) that:

... the present values, beliefs, behaviours and practices of school leaders can only be fully understood by taking cognizance of their past life experiences - including particularly influential people with whom they have come into contact, such as relatives, friends, former teachers and professors - as well as critical incidents, turning points and chapters which have molded, shaped and had an impact on their lives ... Where individual school leaders are to be found today, what they happen to be doing, how they perform and with what success, are all matters which are connected to the routes they have travelled, the experiences gained and meanings created, through the passage of their lives.

Similarly, in the present study it would be impossible to make sense of the achievements of the female academics without examining the routes they travelled. A life-history approach, located within the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism, thus provides the most appropriate methodology for the present study.

However, in view of the limited scale and size of this study, it was clearly impossible to undertake a study of the full and comprehensive life history of each individual and to trace all aspects of an individual's life from birth. Rather, it was necessary to adopt a "topical" approach that focused on particular phases, aspects and issues of the respondents' lives. In particular, this focused on the interaction between the female academics' career aspirations and the phenomena that affected the development of their careers. As an "edited" life history, it does not aim to provide a full biography of the female academics, nor is it deemed necessary to do so. Rather, the aim is to examine "the interrelationships of incident, thought, people and place that underpin the current person" (Dimmock and O'Donoghue 1997, p.53).

In summary, the life-history approach adopted in this study was "edited" and "topical" in nature. Its aims were: (i) to provide an understanding of the female academics' meanings and actions by examining the early life experiences that shaped and influenced them; and (ii) to examine the interpretations of the female academics themselves with regard to the experiences that have contributed to the development of their careers.

3.5 Grounded-theory Methodology

The present study applied the grounded-theory method of sampling, data collection, and analysis as described by Strauss and Corbin (1990). In grounded-theory research, theory is derived from data. As Strauss and Corbin (1990, p. 23) observed:

...[theory] is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. That is, it is discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon.

According to the principles of the methodology, the researcher frequently returns to the field of study to gather additional data, which are then analysed, coded, categorised, and compared with previously collected data. This allows the research “to emerge rather than to construct it preordinately (*a priori*)” (Lincoln & Guba 1985, p.41). When conducted carefully, Strauss and Corbin (1990, p. 27) contended that the grounded-theory method “meets the criteria for doing “good” science: significance, theory observation compatibility, generalisability, reproducibility, precision, rigor and verification”.

The grounded-theory methodology is thus a form of inductive analysis that is suited to investigation of complex situations with multiple interacting factors and/or areas about which little is known or in which no pre-existing theory or research exists. As Strauss and Corbin (1990, p.23) observed, the methodology “does not begin with a theory, then prove it. Rather, [it] begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge”. This makes it eminently suitable for application in the present study, which began with an area of interest and whose central research question was developed after revisions. From the central research question, subsidiary questions were formulated to initiate the data-gathering process. As the interviews unfolded, further questions were introduced in the semi-structured interview guide.

Data collection in the present study involved initial documentary analysis of each identified informant, followed by one or two rounds of face-to-face semi-structured interviews, subject to each informant’s availability. After the interviews with first two informants, the transcripts were coded and memos written during the process. This process – of data collection, coding, and memoing – was often cyclical in practice, because data collection and data analysis were interwoven, and analysis often provided a guide for future data gathering and sampling.

Data analysis in grounded-theory methodology involves three steps of coding: open coding, axial and selective. The first of these, open coding, is “the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data” (Strauss & Corbin 1990, p.61). Axial coding seeks to “put back together data in new ways after open coding, by making connections between categories” (ibid., p.96). Selective coding is “the process of selecting the core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further refinement and development” (ibid., p.116). These three coding methods were employed flexibly for the purposes of data collection, analysis, and theory-building.

3.6 Theoretical Sampling

3.6.1 The nature of theoretical sampling

The key sampling mode of the grounded-theory methodology is “theoretical sampling”. According to Glaser and Strauss (1967, p.45):

Theoretical sampling is the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes and analyses ... data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop ... theory as it emerges.

The data-collection process is thus, in effect, a sampling process that aims to identify and develop concepts and categories that have “proven theoretical relevance to the evolving theory” (Strauss & Corbin 1990, p.176). In referring to “proven theoretical relevance”, the authors mean concepts that are repeatedly present or notably absent when comparing incidents.

Apart from the sampling decisions made at the initial stage of data collection, “theoretical sampling cannot be planned before embarking on a grounded-theory study. The specific sampling decisions evolve during the research process itself” (Strauss & Corbin 1990, p.192). Some degree of flexibility is thus required on the part of a researcher if he or she is “to respond to and make the most out of data relevant situations” (ibid., p. 178).

Theoretical sampling thus begins during the data-collection phase of the study and involves searching the transcripts for emerging categories of significance in the narratives. As constructs are derived from the data, repetitions of theoretical sampling can be used to increase the depth of focus and to ensure consistency - that is, to ensure that data are gathered in a systematic way for each category (Strauss & Corbin 1990).

Theoretical sampling serves different purposes in the three different coding stages: (i) in open coding, theoretical sampling aims to uncover as many categories as possible, and to identify their properties and dimensions; (ii) in axial coding, it aims to unfold relationships between categories and their sub-categories; and (iii) in selective coding, it aims to verify the emergent framework. The cyclical process of sampling and data comparison ensures that the procedure of sampling and analysis is well grounded in the data.

In the present study, purposive sampling (i.e. maximum variation sampling) was employed in the open-coding and axial-coding stages to ensure the inclusion of senior female academics from different disciplines and universities, and with different personal characteristics. At the selective-coding stage, theoretical sampling became more directed, and the researcher chose persons and documents with a view to verifying the story line.

3.6.2 Criteria for selecting respondents

In the choice of respondents for this study, certain broad criteria were first determined - such as seniority/rank, ethnicity, and tertiary background.

Seniority was interpreted as a senior academic or managerial position in an institution (such as head of a division, professor or senior lecturer). It was not possible to ensure a spread of respondents across all disciplines within the eight universities of Hong Kong because some academic departments had very few (or no) females at a senior level. An important consideration was the respondents' willingness to participate in at least two one-hour interviews, and to engage in active self-reflection about their early life experiences. At the open-sampling stage, several rounds of invitations were sent out, but only a small number of senior women responded to the invitation.

In terms of *ethnicity*, only senior female academics of Chinese background were included in the present study. This was done to produce a theory about Chinese women academics in Hong Kong.

In terms of *tertiary background*, “theoretical density” (Strauss & Corbin 1990) was maintained in terms of diversity of age, disciplines, teaching experience, background, positions, and institutions. Senior female academics from a range of academic backgrounds, disciplines, and life experiences were therefore included. The women in this study held positions as deans, associate deans, heads of departments and professors in a variety of departments within the arts, humanities, social sciences, law, science and engineering faculties of the eight universities of Hong Kong.

To preserve confidentiality, informants were assured that their names would not be disclosed, and each was designated a pseudonym to be used in data analysis and reporting findings. To ensure anonymity, all identifying information (such as names of institutions or people) was deleted or changed. A profile of the respondents is presented below in Table 3.1:

Table 3.1 Profile of the respondents.

Informant	Title	Age	Marital status
W1	Associate dean	50-59	single
W2	Professor, head of department	40-49	married with children
W3	Associate professor	40-49	married with one child
W4	Head of department	50-59	single
W5	Director	40-49	married with children
W6	Professor	50-59	single
W7	Professor, associate dean	40-49	married with children
W8	Professor, dean	50-59	single
W9	Professor	50-59	married with one child
W10	Professor, dean	40-49	married with children
W11	Dean	50-59	married with children

The senior female academics included in this study were from diverse backgrounds in terms of academic interests, teaching experience, roles within their institutions, and family backgrounds.

3.7 Data Collection

According to Strauss and Corbin (1990) data collection in grounded theory should facilitate the development of theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analysed. The data-collection methodology adopted in the present study therefore involved a continuous interplay between data collection and data analysis. The two major methods used to collect data were documentary study and semi-structured interviews.

3.7.1 Documentary study

Following Strauss and Corbin's (1990, p.56) recommendation that grounded-theory research should use "published materials during all phases of the research", professional profiles of the respondents were collected and analysed before the interviews. These included website résumés, media reports, and profile information available through the institutions and the media. Field notes and documents collected about the respondents were also used to supplement interviews. Documentary analysis was conducted on some of the media reports that pertained to issues relevant to this study.

Documentary research had an obvious advantage in being unobtrusive and non-reactive. In addition, the documents assisted in validating and expanding upon the data provided by the respondents in interviews. According to Minichiello *et al.* (1990, p.128), an interviewer can check for consistency by ascertaining whether "the informant's description, interpretation or analysis of an event, experience or issue is consistent with his [or her] account of it in another interview". Documentary analysis thus served as a means of "triangulation" because all such research is retrospective in that it provides information from the past, such documentary data provided a longitudinal dimension to the study.

3.7.2 Interviewing

According to Bogdan and Biklen (1992, p.96), interviews are used “to gather descriptive data in the subjects’ own words so that the researcher can develop insights on how subjects interpret some piece of the world”. To suit different purposes, qualitative interviews can be varied in depth and duration, and structure. Such qualitative interviews are particularly suited to research into intangible matters such as perceptions, values and experiences - because they provide interviewers with opportunities to probe into the feelings and meanings of interviewees.

The present study adopted *in-depth* interviewing as the primary means of data collection. Minichiello *et al.* (1990, p.87) defined such in-depth interviewing as:

... conversation with a specific purpose—a conversation between researcher and informant focussing on the informant’s perception of self, life and experience, and expressed in his or her own words. It is the means by which the researcher can gain access to, and subsequently understand, the private interpretations of social reality that individuals hold.

Furthermore, according to these authors (*ibid.*, p.96), in-depth interviews enable a researcher to “gain access to, and an understanding of, activities and events *which cannot be observed directly by the researcher*”.

In-depth interviewing was employed in the present study because it enabled the researcher to understand and interpret social reality through the meanings that the respondents attached to their life experiences. Such in-depth interviews can be conducted in an *unstructured* or a *semi-structured* format. In this study, semi-structured interviewing was used as the main data-collection method because some degree of structure ensures that common themes are addressed and that the researcher can be “confident of getting comparable data across subjects” (Bogdan & Biklen 1992, p.97), while simultaneously allowing sufficient freedom to explore particular issues of concern to individual interviewees.

An interview schedule, or “aide-memoire” (Burgess 1984), was developed on the basis of a list of topics and questions generated from the main research question. This aide-memoire consisted of a list of general issues to be covered in the interview; however, it did not necessarily determine the conduct of the conversations. As Minichiello *et al.* (1990, p.116) observed, an aide-memoire

... enables the researcher to start with some questions on a theme, and then he or she allows the conversation to meander according to the respondents’ responses and the subsequent verbal interaction between him or herself and the informant.

Burgess (1984, p.115) had a similar view of the use of an aide-memoire in noting that:

... the questions revolve around topics of conversations because the interview schedule merely suggests the kinds of themes, topics and questions that might be covered rather than any actual questions that might be used.

Examples of the interview guides used in this study are provided in later sections of this chapter to illustrate the interviewing process.

3.7.3 Pilot study

To test the validity, clarity, and effectiveness of the research questions, a pilot interview was conducted with one senior female academic at the university where the researcher works. The interview took place at the interviewee’s office and was tape-recorded. After this initial interview, a transcript of the recorded interview was sent via email to the informant to seek verification and to invite feedback. A week later, another email was sent to the informant to set up a time for a second interview.

On the basis of the feedback received on both interviews, the interview questions were revised to ensure optimal “theoretical relevance” (Strauss & Corbin 1990). For example, most of the closed (“yes/no”) questions were converted to open-ended questions to encourage respondents to provide more information than a mere “yes/no” answer. Moreover, some questions that appeared to be too “directed” and “negative” were removed.

In addition to testing the validity, clarity and effectiveness of the research questions, the pilot interview enabled the researcher to familiarise herself with the interview procedure, and to refine interview skills – such as paying attention, establishing rapport, providing timely feedback and taking notes.

3.7.4 The interviews

Data on the respondents' verbal disclosures, observable feelings, and body language were collected through face-to-face interviews. A minimum of two interviews was requested of each respondent because they served different purposes and focused on different aspects of the respondents' life histories. The duration of the interviews ranged from 1½ to 2 hours. These were supplemented with email conversations and some documentary analysis, as appropriate, before and after the interviews.

The process of data gathering began in August 2002 and continued through to mid-2005. Before the collection began, letters were sent to potential respondents explaining the purposes of the study and requesting their co-operation. Face-to-face interviews were subsequently conducted with eleven senior female academics from various universities in Hong Kong.

The aims of the first interview were: (i) to introduce the purpose of the research; (ii) to explain the level of commitment required; (iii) to establish rapport; and (iv) to obtain general information about the respondent. In pursuit of these general aims, the researcher had the following practical objectives in the first interview:

- to explain the general purposes and methodology of the study to the interviewee, and to answer any questions she might have;
- to induce the interviewee to talk about her current role (for example, position held, responsibilities, her perception of her current role, and so on);
- to induce the interviewee to reflect on how she came to be where she is today, and to identify the key strategies, attitudes, and skills that played a part in her success; and
- to provide an outline of the purposes and procedure for the second interview.

To assist in achieving these objectives in the first interview, an aide-memoire was developed. It was intended that this would serve as a reminder to the researcher of what to ask in keeping the interview focused on the objectives. However, in accordance with the researcher's desire to allow a free-flowing conversation, not all of the questions were asked and none was asked in any particular order. Figure 3.1 presents the aide-memoire that was developed for the first interview.

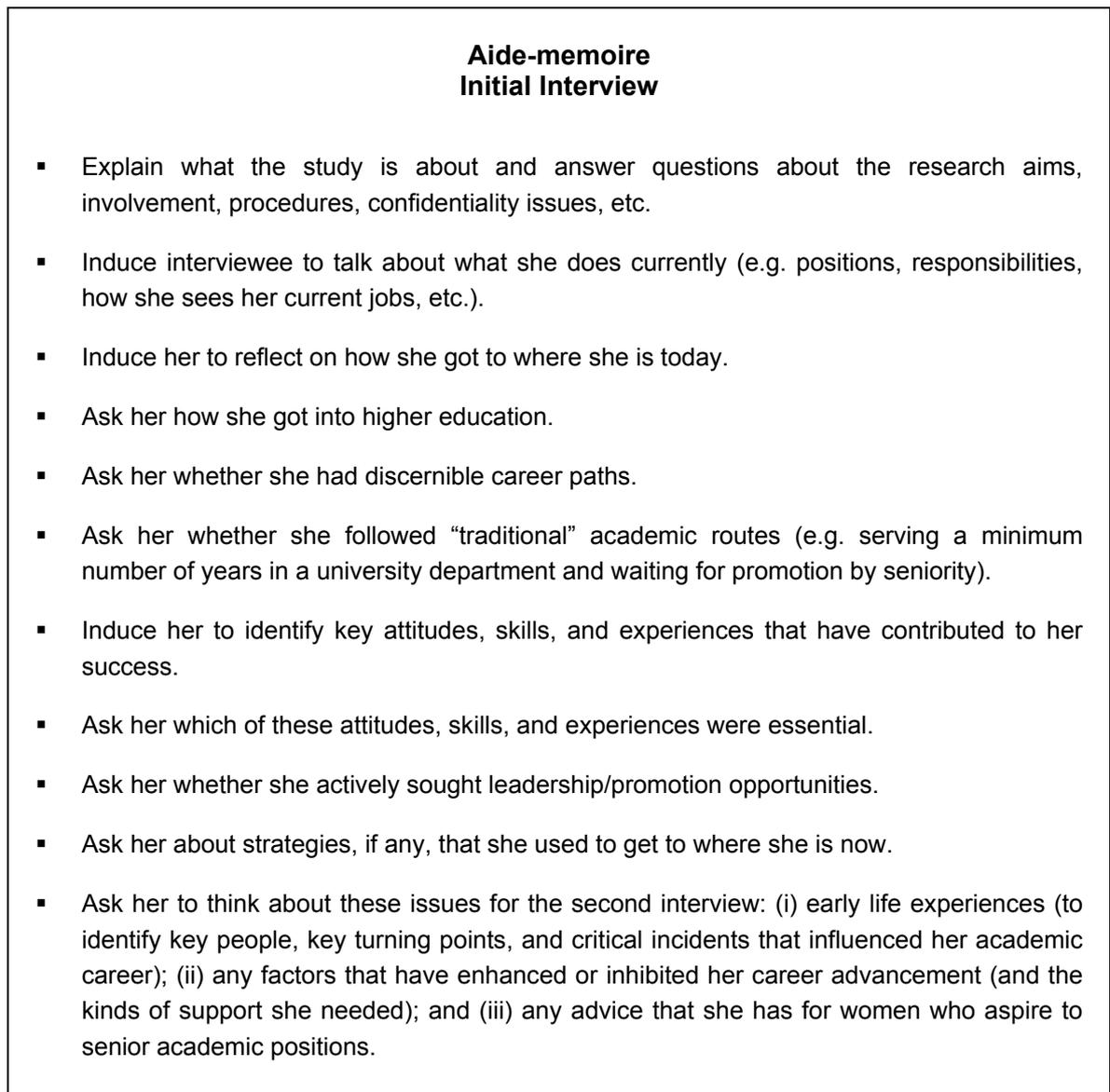


Figure 3.1 Aide-memoire for initial interview.

It was important to establish and maintain rapport with the respondents because most guarded their time carefully. An audio recording of the first interview was promptly transcribed verbatim and sent to each interviewee by email for verification. Soon after, another email was sent to each respondent requesting a second interview.

The researcher's practical objectives at the second interview were:

- to induce the interviewee to talk about her early life experiences and to identify key people, important turning points, and critical incidents that have influenced the interviewee's academic career;
- to discuss factors that have helped or hindered her career and the kinds of support that she needed; and
- to induce her to provide advice for women who aspire to senior academic positions.

An aide-memoire that allowed for open-ended responses was again developed to ensure that the researcher would be able to "gather comparable data across sites" (Bogdan & Biklen 1992, p.77). As noted previously, the questions in the aide-memoire served as reminders and were not asked in any particular order. Rather, the interview followed the flow of the conversation, and most of the respondents volunteered valuable anecdotes without having to be prompted. Figure 3.2 presents the aide-memoire that was developed for the second interview.

**Aide-memoire
Second Interview**

- Begin by asking interviewee to construct a “mental map” of her life and career. Ask her to identify different phases of her life and career.
- Consider each stage of her life and career (childhood, adolescence, adulthood, teaching, etc.) to identify significant people, critical incidents, and turning-points that have impacted on her academic career.
- Ask her to describe how her upbringing and education affected her growth as an academic.
- Induce her to talk about the family in which she grew up, the family situation, and the education she had.
- Ask her to identify life events and relationships that have helped to lay a foundation for her success
- Ask her to identify the experiences or situations that were especially important to her success. Ask her what happened and why the event or situation was especially important.
- Ask her to identify particular persons who influenced or assisted her on her career path? Ask her how this person affected her and what the person did to make him or her special?
- Ask her to identify factors that enhanced or inhibited her career.
- Ask her to identify the experiences or situations that were especially important to her success. Ask her what happened and why the event or situation was especially important.
- Ask her to identify particular persons who influenced or assisted her on her career path? Ask her how this person affected her and what the person did to make him or her special?
- Ask her to identify factors that enhanced or inhibited her career.
- Ask her to identify the kinds of support that she deemed necessary to success.
- Induce her to offer advice to women who aspire to senior academic positions, —in particular, any advice that she would give to a younger female colleague with regard to managing her career in higher education.
- Ask her whether she sees herself as a role model for other women.
- Ask her whether there are certain qualities or specific jobs that she perceives as being critically important in preparing female academics.

Figure 3.2 Aide-memoire for second interview.

Unfortunately, an outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) occurred in Hong Kong in early 2003. Because many people wore masks and were generally reluctant to receive strangers, some interviews had to be postponed until several months later.

All interviews were tape-recorded (after gaining the respondents' permission) and all recordings were transcribed verbatim for verification. These transcripts were then used for coding and analysis, which began shortly after the first few rounds of interviews, and then continued concurrently with subsequent interviews. This methodology was in accordance with the advice of Strauss and Corbin (1990, p.59), who suggested that "data collection and data analysis are tightly interwoven processes, and must occur alternately because the analysis directs the sampling of data".

3.7.5 The researcher's role

According to Burgess (1991, p.108):

... researchers need to have understanding and sympathy for the informant's point of view. They need to follow their informants' responses and to listen to them carefully in order that a decision can be made concerning the direction in which to take the interview. In short, researchers have to be able to share the culture of their informants.

Strauss and Corbin (1990, p.42) made a similar point in referring to the importance of "theoretical sensitivity" in a researcher. They described this attribute as:

... the attribute of having insight, the ability to give meaning to data, the capacity to understand, and capability to separate the pertinent from that which isn't.

These authors went on to explain that such "theoretical sensitivity" is derived from a researcher's personal and professional experience, together with his or her grounding in the technical literature. Moreover, it can be improved during the research process by continual interaction with the data.

The researcher in the present study was able to draw on her experience as a teacher and an administrator in the higher-education sector to establish credibility and build a rapport with the respondents in the study. This was augmented by the researcher's knowledge of the higher-education bureaucracy in Hong Kong, her teaching experience in Hong Kong schools and tertiary institutions, and her knowledge of the working conditions in tertiary institutions. Through active listening and appropriate attending skills, the researcher was able to foster an atmosphere of trust that encouraged respondents to talk about their personal experiences, reflect on past events, and share attitudes and feelings.

There were no language or cultural barriers, and the researcher was able to conduct the interviews in a language with which the respondents felt comfortable. Most of the interviews were conducted in a combination of English and Cantonese, or a mixture of English and Putonghua.

The researcher's confidence and theoretical sensitivity grew with time and through interactions with the data. As suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990, p.43), the analytical process itself provides an excellent source for theoretical sensitivity:

Insight and understanding about a phenomenon increase as you interact with your data. This comes from collecting and asking questions about the data, making comparisons, thinking about what you see, making hypotheses, developing small theoretical frameworks about concepts and their relationships.

In summary, the researcher in the present study adhered to the important methodological principles of: (i) continually asking questions about the data; (ii) maintaining an attitude of scepticism; (iii) seeking validation from the data; and (iv) following the accepted procedures of grounded theory in terms of data collection and analysis.

3.8 Data Analysis

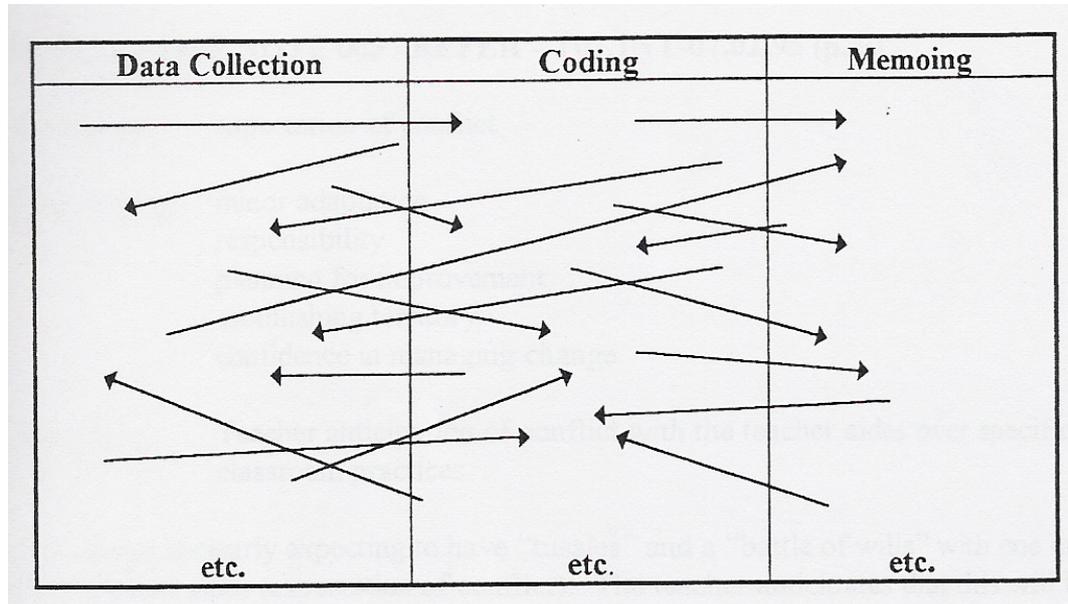
3.8.1 General principles of data analysis

This study followed the grounded-theory methods of data analysis, as proposed by Strauss and Corbin, and the basic analytical procedures involve:

... the asking of questions about data; and the making of comparisons for similarities and differences between each incident, event, and other instances of phenomena. (Strauss & Corbin 1990, p.74)

The study followed suggested procedures to ensure standardisation and rigour in the data-analysis process - which, in grounded theory, involves three types of coding (open, axial and selective). Code notes and theoretical memos were maintained throughout the data analysis to ensure accuracy in developing theoretical ideas.

The relationships among data, coding, and memoing, as proposed in the coding paradigm of Strauss (1987), are shown in Figure 3.3.



Source: Strauss (1987, p.19)

Figure 3.3 The coding paradigm.

As suggested in this paradigm, the present researcher kept moving back and forth among the collecting of data, coding and memoing.

3.8.2 Open coding

According to Strauss and Corbin (1990, p.61), open coding is the process of “breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data”. The purpose of this first analytical step is to identify categories of data and their related properties and dimensions.

In this study, open coding was applied to all the interview transcripts and some of the documents. To generate concepts, the early interviews were coded on a line-by-line basis and, if appropriate, word by word. As certain concepts and categories emerged repeatedly, relevant sections of the later interviews were coded paragraph by paragraph to identify the similar categories. Throughout the coding process, code notes and memos were maintained with regard to the questions asked of the data and the relationships among concepts and categories that emerged.

Figure 3.4 provides an example of an open-coded transcript from the first interview of the first round of semi-structured interviews.

A_INT01_240902

Interview transcript	Open coding
<p>A: 係呀。係呀。個 style 我再諗番下我點解會有咁嘅 upbringing, coming back to 點解我自己咁樣。好多女性都唔係咁, not be so direct and frank, without awareness of whom and the people around the table。咁我自己諗下就係屋企咁, 我媽媽成日都講話「有理打太公」。</p> <p>M: 有理乜嘢話?</p> <p>A: 打太公呀! 即係話 with good reasons, doesn't mind who, 都係咁話。然後, 我發覺我中學喇, 慢慢我發覺點解我會係 expected to be taken as equal 呢? 就係我中學係女校。我知道呢個係一個 factor 嚟。係一個 girl secondary school 裏面, 你唔會...點講呢? 好多時, 你如果讀 Co-ed school 嘅時候呢, 啲同學呢, 女同學咁樣, Co-ed school 裏面譬如做 experiment 呢, 全部係男仔嘅。女仔就做寫 notes 咁樣嘅。哈哈, 咁 another thing 就係咁樣嘅 upbringing 呢, the girls somehow they know, I don't know any better word to put this, they know how to behave in front of boys and guys。Whereas growing up in 一個 upbringing in all girls 嘅 school 呢, 好多時都唔識得分嘅。Treat them as equal。I don't care you are guys or boys or girls or whatever, 有嘢就講架。咁但係呢我亦都慢慢發覺, 愈嚟愈發覺啲男 males 嘅 ego 係好緊要, 好緊要。哈哈。</p>	<p><u>Self-reflection</u> Unlike other women, Direct & not rank-conscious</p> <p><u>Following Mom</u> Challenge authority</p> <p>Sense of right & wrong</p> <p>Equal status</p> <p><u>Girls' school vs co-ed school</u></p> <p>Peer influence Equal status Not gender-conscious</p> <p><u>Male colleagues</u> Strong male ego</p>
<p>Coding Memo:</p> <p>Girls' school vs co-ed school Are all girls from girl school like her? Do girls from single-sex schools turn out to be more independent and direct? Do they exhibit stronger sense of achieving equal status? Next interview: Check if informants are from girls' schools. If so, do they make similar comments?</p> <p>Male ego What about male ego? What prompted her to make such a remark? Any unpleasant incidents with male colleagues? Check intensity and situations.</p>	

Figure 3.4 Open coding of interview transcript.

Some of the documents - such as résumés, media reports, and profile information - were also coded. Figure 3.5 provides an example of open coding of an excerpt of a feature article about one of the respondents.

	Coding notes
<p>A Chinese first</p> <p>Dr ■■■'s breakthrough also represents a major accomplishment in genetics research on ethnic Chinese: Her haplotype was discovered in a test group solely made up of Chinese people, marking the first occasion that a gene associated with a complex disease has been identified in the Chinese population before it was discovered in any other ethnicity.</p> <p>This amazing achievement is all the more remarkable given that during the Cultural Revolution Dr ■■■ was made to quit high school after just two years to go and work in the countryside.</p> <p>Luckily for all of us, her education didn't end in the fields. Having completed a medical degree in ■■■ in 1983, her PhD at the University of ■■■ in 1992 and postdoctoral research at the Department of Genetics and ■■■ Institute of Biotechnology, University of ■■■, in 1995, Dr ■■■ has no intention of resting on her laurels.</p> <p>Her upcoming goals include the study of a drug that will apply her latest research findings for the treatment of schizophrenia. She will also continue her involvement in the international haplotype map (HapMap) project, building the next generation of the human genome map.</p> <p>In common with Dr ■■■'s other work, HapMap aims to identify even more of the detailed genetic differences that predispose us to diseases like cancer, diabetes and mental disorders - and to ultimately improve life for all of us by expanding the boundaries of science until cures can be found.</p>	<p>Ground-breaking</p> <p>Major breakthrough, Chinese subjects,</p> <p>Ground-breaking</p> <p>Early education disadvantaged by Cultural Revolution, Hard labour</p> <p>Medical training in China, Overseas education and research experience, Dedication</p> <p>Immediate goals, Research applications, Contribution to future medical discoveries</p> <p>Research areas, Finding cures to diseases,</p> <p>Dedicated to improving life</p>

Figure 3.5 Open coding of a feature article about an informant.

3.8.3 Axial coding

According to Strauss and Corbin (1998, p.124), the purpose of axial coding is to:

... begin the process of reassembling data that were fractured during open coding ... procedurally, axial coding is the act of relating categories to subcategories along the lines of their properties and dimensions.

They also stated that the focus of axial coding is on:

... specifying a category (*phenomenon*) in terms of the conditions that give rise to it; the *context* (its specific set of properties) in which it is embedded; the action/ interactional *strategies* by which it is handled, managed, carried out; and the *consequences* of those strategies. (Strauss & Corbin 1990, p.97)

In the present study, axial coding was used to make connections among the categories and their sub-categories, as identified in the open-coding stage. Hypotheses were proposed with respect to these relationships, and these hypotheses were then tested against existing and new data as they became available. Code notes and memos were maintained with respect to the relationships among categories and sub-categories in accordance with the model proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1990, p.99), as illustrated below:

(A) CAUSAL CONDITIONS → (B) PHENOMENON →
(C) CONTEXT → (D) INTERVENING CONDITIONS →
(E) ACTION/INTERACTION STRATEGIES →
(F) CONSEQUENCES

Figure 3.6 provides an example of an axial coding theoretical memo on a category (“mission search”).

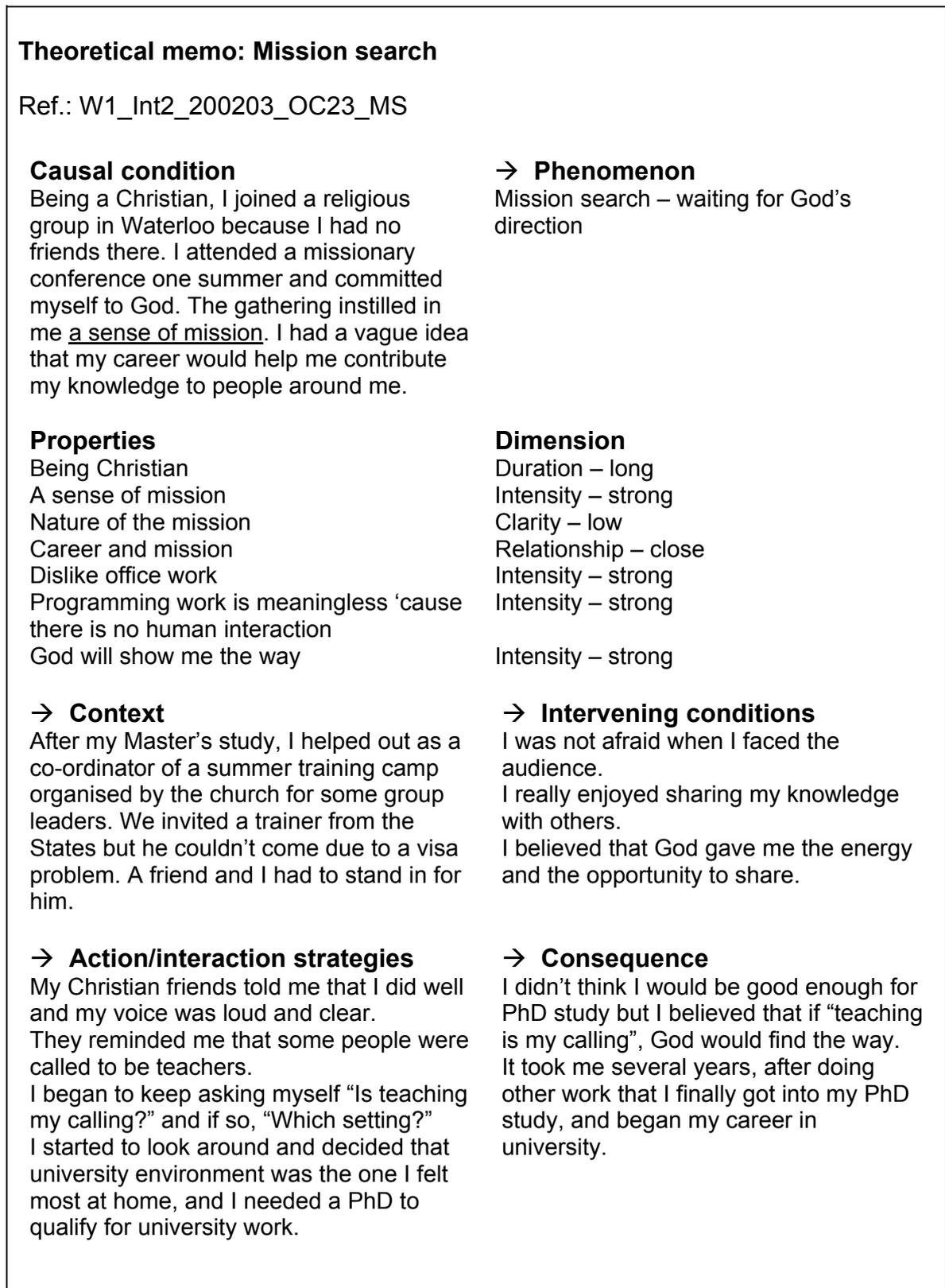


Figure 3.6 Example of an axial coding theoretical memo.

3.8.4 Selective coding

According to Strauss and Corbin (1990, p.116), selective coding is:

... the process of selecting the core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further refinement and development.

It is not necessary to undertake the steps described in the process in linear sequence, and most researchers move forth and back among them. This task of integrating the categories that have been developed through open and axial coding begins with “a general descriptive overview of the story” (Strauss & Corbin 1990, p.119). Using this “story” as a guide, the researcher “can [then] begin to arrange and rearrange the categories in terms of the paradigm until they seem to fit the story, and to provide an analytic version of the story” (ibid., p.127).

Figure 3.7 provides an example of a selective coding theoretical memo:

<p>Core category: dominant attributes</p> <p>Patterns of relationships between female academics' dominant attributes and their career orientations and strategies.</p>
<p>Relationships between female academics' dominant attributes and their career orientations and strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The respondents shared many "success attributes" in common – such as intelligence, a high energy level, perseverance, commitment, and a positive attitude. The attributes that influenced their career trajectories are distinctive. ▪ None of the respondents began their academic lives with a clear career plan but once they had identified their preferred roles, they were able to make best use of their dominant attributes to enhance their careers. ▪ The women's attributes were continuously modified by socialisation experiences, such as early upbringing, family demands, work situations, significant relationships, and critical life events. These interactions account for variations in their career orientations and strategies. ▪ On the basis of the distinctive influential attributes, three types of senior female academics could be identified: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Type 1:</i> particularly strong in their quest for knowledge; investigative and research-oriented; <i>Type 2:</i> a strong sense of mission to educate; humanitarian, and student-oriented; <i>Type 3:</i> a capacity to thrive on challenges; opportunistic and people-oriented.
<p><u>Career orientations</u></p> <p><i>Type 1:</i> researchers; regard research and publishing as core aspects of their academic lives; <i>Type 2:</i> teachers; primary goal in academic life is to improve the quality of education; <i>Type 3:</i> managers; main motivation is to bring about change; career goals are short-term and flexible.</p> <p><u>Career strategies</u></p> <p>Strategies in common that were identified: (i) focusing on essential tasks; (ii) building up academic reputation; (iii) being politically astute; (iv) taking up opportunities; (v) managing time; (vi) refining research and publication skills; (vii) thinking positive; and (viii) responding to the needs of students and departments.</p> <p><i>Type 1:</i> (i) focusing on essential tasks; (ii) building up academic reputation; (iii) managing time; (iv) refining research and publication skills;</p> <p><i>Type 2:</i> (i) focusing on essential tasks; (ii) managing time; (iii) thinking positive; (iv) responding to the needs of students and departments;</p> <p><i>Type 3:</i> (i) being politically astute; (ii) taking up opportunities; (iii) thinking positive; (iv) responding to the needs of students and departments.</p>

Figure 3.7 Example of a selective coding theoretical memo.

3.8.5 Data recording

A system for data coding and storage is needed to facilitate retrieval of data for coding, theory development, and verification. Lincoln and Guba (1985, p.319) recommended the development of an “audit trail” for this purpose. In accordance with this recommendation, face-to-face interviews with the respondents were recorded, transcribed, coded and filed. All data were stored in electronic form in computer files. The code notes, memos, field notes and other documents were referenced and filed to ensure that all data were easily accessible for coding and theory development.

3.9 Trustworthiness of the Research

In establishing trustworthiness, the present study adopted the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba 1985; Miles & Huberman 1994).

3.9.1 Credibility

The criterion of *credibility* refers to the truthfulness of the data. In the present study, multiple methods of data collection and prolonged engagements of the researcher with the respondents were used to enhance credibility. In addition, during the data-collection and analysis phases, the researcher engaged in sessions of “peer debriefing” (Lincoln & Guba 1985, p.308) with a colleague who had expressed interest in the study.

To ensure “referential adequacy” (Lincoln & Guba 1985, p.313), the interviews were recorded, transcribed and stored to provide a referential benchmark against which later data analyses and interpretations could be compared for adequacy. “Member checks” (ibid., p.316) were performed by asking the respondents to verify the content of the transcripts and summaries of interpretations of the interviews.

3.9.2 Transferability or generalisability

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985, p.316), the *transferability* (or *generalisability*) of the findings of a qualitative study is limited; the researcher “can only set out working hypotheses together with a description of the time and context in which they were found to hold”. The extent of transferability to other contexts depends upon the degree of similarity between the two contexts. In making an assessment of such transferability, Lincoln and Guba (1985, p.316) referred to the value of “thick description” – which assists others to make a judgement about the possibility of transfer to other contexts.

Strauss and Corbin (1990, p.251) expressed a similar view, contending that a researcher should:

... specify the conditions that give rise to specific sets of action/interaction pertaining to a phenomenon and the resulting consequences. [A study] is generalizable to those specific situations only. Naturally, the more systematic and widespread the theoretical sampling, the more conditions and variations that will be discovered and built into the theory, therefore the greater its generalisability.

In the present study, transferability was enhanced by the use of theoretical and purposive sampling to include respondents of different backgrounds and characteristics. The “thickness of descriptions” was also ensured by the use of recorded materials, detailed analysis of the interview scripts, and field notes.

Grounded theory method is not about using representative sampling in the sense of random sampling, and the purpose of this study was not to produce generalisations that can be applied to other contexts. Rather, the aim was to develop a theory that explains the phenomenon of how this cohort of successful female academics achieved senior positions. Nevertheless, in view of the rigour of the investigation, some degree of generalisation to similar contexts might be possible.

3.9.3 Dependability

To demonstrate the stability and “trackability” of data and theory development in qualitative research, Lincoln and Guba (1985, p.319) recommended the use of an “audit trail”, which should involve: (i) raw data; (ii) data reduction and analysis products; (iii) data reconstruction and synthesis products; (iv) process notes; (v) materials relating to intentions and dispositions; and (vi) instrument development information. This procedure was carefully observed in the present study. A record of interview schedules, recorded tapes, supplementary documents, field notes, and coding notes was kept. This enabled the researcher to present the process in a manner that demonstrates the trustworthiness of the findings and interpretations.

3.9.4 Confirmability

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985, p.324), *confirmability* refers to “the extent to which the data and interpretations of the study are grounded in events rather than the inquirer's personal constructions”. Confirmability can be addressed through a detailed auditing procedure, triangulation, and the keeping of a reflexive journal. In addition, the development of an audit trail allowed the present study to be evaluated and confirmed.

Finally, the present study adhered to the criteria provided by Strauss and Corbin (1998) for assessing the research process (see Figure 3.8) and the empirical grounding of a study (see Figure 3.9).

- Criterion 1:* How was the original sample selected? On what grounds?
- Criterion 2:* What major categories emerged?
- Criterion 3:* What were some of the events, incidents, or actions (indicators) that pointed to some of these major categories?
- Criterion 4:* On the basis of what categories did theoretical sampling proceed? That is, how did theoretical formulations guide some of the data collection? After the theoretical sampling was done, how representative of the data did the categories prove to be?
- Criterion 5:* What were some of the hypotheses pertaining to conceptual relations (i.e. among categories), and on what grounds were they formulated and validated?
- Criterion 6:* Were there instances in which hypotheses did not explain what was happening in the data? How were these discrepancies accounted for? Were hypotheses modified?
- Criterion 7:* How and why was the core category selected? Was this collection sudden or gradual, and was it difficult or easy? On what grounds were the final analytic decisions made?

Source: Strauss & Corbin (1998, p.269)

Figure 3.8 Evaluative criteria for assessing the research process.

- Criterion 1:* Are concepts generated?
- Criterion 2:* Are the concepts systematically related?
- Criterion 3:* Are there many conceptual linkages, and are the categories well developed? Do categories have conceptual density?
- Criterion 4:* Is much variation built into the theory?
- Criterion 5:* Are the conditions under which variation can be found built into the study and explained?
- Criterion 6:* Has process been taken into account?
- Criterion 7:* Do the theoretical findings seem significant and to what extent?
- Criterion 8:* Does the theory stand the test of time and become part of the discussions and ideas exchanged among relevant social and professional groups?

Source: Strauss & Corbin (1998, p.270-72)

Figure 3.9 Evaluative criteria for the empirical grounding of a study.

3.10 Ethical Considerations

The initial letter of invitation to respondents contained an assurance that they could withdraw from the study at any time, and, if they did, their records of interviews and personal information would be destroyed. This was to ensure that respondents participated on a voluntary basis, and that they were not placed under any pressure. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Each informant was sent a copy of her interview transcription and provided with an opportunity to make any corrections. To preserve confidentiality, respondents were assured that their identities would not be disclosed, and each was designated a pseudonym to be used in data analysis and reporting findings. To ensure anonymity, all identifying information (such as names of institutions or people) was deleted or changed.

3.11 Limitations of the Study

3.11.1 Access

Gaining access to suitable respondents was a significant problem for this study. Senior female academics are still in a minority in Hong Kong, and the population from which to select a suitable sample was therefore limited. In particular, it was difficult to ensure a spread of senior female academics across all disciplines within the eight universities of Hong Kong because some academic departments have very few (or no) females at senior level.

Despite several rounds of invitation, few female academics responded to the invitation. Of the 46 invitations, only a small number replied, and some of these refused to participate. A common reason for refusing to participate was a lack of time. One female academic cited a lack of interest in research associated with gender issues because she did not see the need for such a study in the Hong Kong context.

3.11.2 Sampling

The study was perforce confined to a small group of senior female academics in Hong Kong, and thus reflects the perceptions and attitudes of this relatively small number who agreed to participate in the study.

The study focused on these women's perceptions of success in senior academic positions, and no attempt was made to compare the perceptions of success of male and female academics, or to compare perceptions by race or academic subject area.

3.11.3 Data collection

It was difficult to obtain comparative statistical data on the number of male and female academic staff members (and their ranks) in Hong Kong universities. Neither UGC nor the university personnel offices could provide such comparative data. To obtain an approximation of the number of male and female academics by rank, the present researcher therefore visited the website of each university, accessed the staff list of each school or department, and counted the numbers and ranks of male and female staff members. This provided only an approximation because some websites might not have been updated, and because it was sometimes difficult to guess the sex of the person from the name.

A lack of time in interviews was also an issue. Although most of the respondents were willing to talk about their life histories, they also guarded their time carefully. Indeed, most were adamant that their interviews were to last no more than an hour. This lack of time might have restricted in-depth reflection and rapport between the interviewer and the interviewees. Lack of time also restricted the number of subsequent interviews.

The respondents' ability and readiness to share their personal experiences was obviously of importance. Unfortunately, one respondent refused to discuss her "private life" – thus restricting data collection in this case.

Finally, in any retrospective collection of data, there is always a risk of a disparity (whether intentional or unintentional) between an informant's interpretation of the experience and what actually happened. Moreover, the interview situation might produce distortions in data. As Denzin (1989, p.116–17) has observed:

... the knowledge that one is being observed, or interviewed, leads to a deliberate monitoring of the self so that only certain selves are presented. Because many interviews convey implicit demands to the respondent (social desirability, for example), there is often an attempt to present a self that meets these demands. This has the potential of creating a built-in self-fulfilling prophecy within the interview: Subjects may tell the interviewer what they think the interviewer wants to hear.

Every precaution was taken to avoid these difficulties and thus obtain research findings that accurately reflect the recollections and accounts of the respondents' life experiences. Nevertheless, the findings are subject to the various limitations that attend any self-reported data.

3.11.4 Generalisability

The small number of respondents necessarily limits the degree to which the research findings can be generalised to all female academics. However, as previously noted, the primary objective of the study was to interpret the experiences, perceptions, and descriptions of this cohort of respondents in this particular context. Any generalisation of the findings to other contexts should be undertaken with caution.

3.12 Summary

This chapter has presented an overview of the methodology adopted in this study. The purpose of this study was to develop a theory of how life events and experiences have shaped the careers of academically successful women in Hong Kong. The methodology therefore examined the life events, experiences, and pathways of a sample group of senior female academics, and the meanings they attached to these experiences. The chapter has provided justifications for adopting an interpretive approach and an inductive grounded-theory methodology based on the meta-theory of symbolic interactionism.

Because the present research assumed that the meanings and importance that the female academics assigned to their upbringings, environments, education and attitudes (towards self, others, family and work) influenced their career aspirations and development, a topical life history approach was an appropriate means of addressing the research question.

The grounded-theory methodology of theoretical sampling, data collection and analysis has been discussed, and explanations (and samples) of coding have been presented. The trustworthiness of the research (as reflected in the four criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability) has also been explained. Finally, the ethical issues and limitations of this study were also addressed.

Chapter 4

Towards a Substantive Theory of Selective Attribution in Career Trajectory

4.1 Introduction

The aim of this study is to generate a substantive theory with respect to factors in the life histories of certain senior female academics in Hong Kong that have contributed to their success in academe. In pursuit of this aim, the primary source of data was a series of face-to-face interviews with eleven senior female academics. The main objective of these conversations was to identify relationships, educational experiences and life events that had contributed to the career development of these women in higher education. These data were supplemented by information about these women collected from university websites and the media. Using Glaser and Strauss' (1967) constant comparative method, categories were gradually developed, and these constituted the basis of the proposed substantive theory.

This chapter presents an overview of the substantive theory that emerged as a result of these investigations. Following this introduction, this chapter is comprised of four sections. Section 4.2 briefly explains the essentials of the substantive theory. Section 4.3 explains the development of the theory through grounded-theory methods of data collection and analysis. Section 4.4 presents a “story line” of the substantive theory that has been developed. In the final section, the main propositions linking the concepts and categories within the theoretical framework are explained. The chapter concludes with a summary.

4.2 Essentials of the Theory

A fundamental concept of the theory of selective attribution in career trajectory that emerges from this study is the reciprocal influence of an individual's personal attributes on personal identity, relationships, decision-making processes, and career trajectory (Super 1953; Holland 1997). The reciprocal relationship between socialisation experiences and the development of attributes is also part of the theoretical framework. In short, attributes are powerful determinants of personal behaviour, and thus exert a significant influence on a person's career trajectory.

The present study focuses on how certain senior female academics have made selective use of their attributes to build successful careers in higher education. A study of the pertinent features in the life histories of the women in this cohort reveals that they share many desirable "success attributes", which were largely formed and nurtured through various socialisation experiences, particularly in the early stages of their lives. However, in addition to these common features, certain factors distinguish individuals within the cohort, and these divergent patterns of dominant attributes have eventually led them along their different career pathways.

Divergent patterns of dominant attributes can be discerned in the following respects: personal identities; values; career orientations; and career strategies. On the basis of these divergent patterns, three types of senior female academics have been identified:

- career academics;
- career educators; and
- career opportunists.

In accordance with the dominant attributes they exhibit, women of the same type have similar personal identities, hold similar values and career orientations, and employ similar career strategies.

4.3 Steps in Arriving at the Theory

The theory and typology described above was formulated using grounded-theory methodology, involving three stages of data-analysis:

- open coding;
- axial coding; and
- selective coding.

Each of these is discussed below.

4.3.1 Open coding

Open coding is a process of “breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualising, and categorising data” (Strauss & Corbin 1990, p.61). The primary purpose of this step of data analysis is to identify conceptual categories of data and their related properties and dimensions. In the present study, open coding was applied to all of the interview transcripts and some of the supplementary documentation regarding the informants. This process yielded preliminary topic categories. In particular, attribute types, attribute dimensions, and attribute properties were identified. These are described below.

4.3.1.1 Attribute types

Individual characteristics of the female academics were identified in the open-coding stage. For example, labels such as “mission-drive”, “commitment”, “diligence”, “perseverance”, and “risk-taking” were attached to the respondents’ descriptions of themselves and others in their accounts of their behaviours and experiences. Subsequently, the attributes were grouped under the categories of:

- personal;
- social; and
- academic.

4.3.1.2 Attribute dimensions

The following dimensions were identified for the three attribute types noted above:

- personal attributes: personal identity; personality; attitude; and competence;
- social attributes: age; socio-economic status; social and cultural identity; gender; and marital roles; and
- academic attributes: academic self-concept; and professional identity.

4.3.1.3 Attribute properties

Five concepts that described different facets of attribute properties were identified:

- *focus*: the area of concentration of effort;
- *commitment*: the degree of concentration of effort;
- *clarity*: the sense of clarity in attribute priority;
- *consistency*: congruity in application of attributes in similar circumstances; and
- *strategies*: how certain attributes were used in response to different life situations and in making career-related decisions.

4.3.2 Axial coding

The second step in data analysis, axial coding, has been described as “the process of reassembling data that were fractured during open coding ... [and] ... relating categories to subcategories along the lines of their properties and dimensions” (Strauss & Corbin 1998, p.124).

In the present study, connections were established among the categories (and their subcategories) identified in open coding by following a paradigm model proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1990, p.99):

(A) CAUSAL CONDITIONS → (B) PHENOMENON → (C) CONTEXT → (D)
INTERVENING CONDITIONS → (E) ACTION/INTERACTION STRATEGIES → (F)
CONSEQUENCES

The paradigm model facilitated the complex process of relating subcategories to a category by inductive and deductive methods. Each category was developed in terms of: (i) the causal conditions that gave rise to it; (ii) the specific dimensional location of this phenomenon (in terms of its properties); (iii) the context; (iv) the interactional strategies undertaken in response to this phenomenon (in light of the context); and (v) the consequences of any interaction undertaken.

Hypotheses were proposed with respect to these relationships, and these hypotheses were subsequently tested against existing and new data about the phenomena. The following example illustrates the process with one such phenomenon:

A dilemma (phenomenon) faced by one of the married academics who had two young children was whether to attend an overseas conference where she was to deliver a paper (causal conditions). In this case, a dimension of a social attribute (being a wife and a mother) had created a dilemma. The properties to be considered were: (i) the *area of focus* of the woman's effort at that time; (ii) her degree of *commitment* to her family (versus work); (iii) the *clarity* of her career goals; (iv) the *consistency* of her decision; and (v) the *strategies* she employed to resolve this dilemma. In this instance, an intervening condition was the assistance she received from her mother and a friend – who offered to look after the children for her while she was away from Hong Kong. Another significant intervening condition was the support and encouragement provided by her husband, who endorsed the value of the conference presentation to her career development. The strategies that she employed were: (i) gradual “weaning” of the children from dependence on her; (ii) pre-arranged household shopping; and (iii) tickets to various places of interest for the children and their friends. As a consequence of the implementation of these strategies, the woman was able to attend the overseas conference with fewer feelings of guilt for being away from her family.

In making connections among the categories and their subcategories (as identified in open coding) by use of the paradigm model described above, clusters of personal, social and academic attributes began to appear. Although the senior female academics shared many common success attributes, it became apparent that the most influential attributes were fairly distinctive. On the basis of these distinctive influential attributes, three types of senior female academics could be identified:

- *Type 1*: particularly strong in their quest for knowledge; investigative and research-oriented; designated as “career academics”;
- *Type 2*: a strong sense of mission to educate; humanitarian and student-oriented; designated as “career educators”;
- *Type 3*: a capacity to thrive on challenges; opportunistic and people-oriented; designated as “career opportunists”.

4.3.3 Selective coding

In the third step of data analysis, selective coding, the aims were: (i) to select the core category (or central phenomenon); (ii) to relate this systematically to other categories; (iii) to validate these relationships; and (iv) to fill in categories that required further refinement (Strauss & Corbin 1990). The overall objective was to develop a single story line around which everything else cohered.

In the present study, the core category of “selective attribution” was identified. This was chosen as the core category because it was considered to be a broad category that encompassed the main research question of how the women’s selective use of their distinctive dominant attributes has affected their career trajectories. The story line of the core category is outlined below.

4.4 “Story Line” of the Theory

The “story line” of the present study describes how certain senior female academics make selective use of their attributes to build successful careers in higher education. The pertinent features of the life histories of these women demonstrate that many of the desirable success attributes that they possess were formed and nurtured through various socialisation experiences, particularly in the early stages of their lives. Important attributes – including confidence, perseverance, and independence – were developed and reinforced at home and at school through formative childhood experiences.

The story line of the study goes on to identify three types of senior female academics (career academics, career educators, and career opportunists) in accordance with the divergent patterns of dominant attributes that they display. Although the types of senior female academics share several common attributes – including intelligence, a high energy level, perseverance, commitment, and a positive attitude – the most influential attributes in terms of their career trajectories are distinctive.

The dominant and distinctive attribute of the career academics is their *passion for knowledge*. The main motivation of their lives is to contribute to knowledge development in their own areas of expertise. They regard research and publishing as core aspects of their academic lives, and they derive pleasure from discovering new knowledge and achieving significant breakthroughs in research.

The dominant and distinctive attribute of the career educators is their *strong sense of mission to educate and to serve*. Their primary goal in academic life is to improve the quality of education. They are willing and able to respond to institutional and student needs, and they regard the education of their students as their major responsibility. They derive pleasure from recognition of their students’ achievements and from seeing improvements in students and courses.

The dominant and distinctive attributes of the career opportunists are *flexibility, versatility, confidence and political astuteness*. They thrive on emerging challenges and opportunities. Their main motivation is to bring about *change* – thereby improving the quality of their teaching and student education. They derive pleasure from developing departments, completing new projects, and leading effective teams of staff members.

In assessing the attributes included in this study, the researcher is well aware that the individuals' genetic endowment and inherited abilities are likely to have had a significant effect on their career development. However, while acknowledging the significance of natural endowment, the scale and nature of the present study precludes a detailed exploration of genetic factors and inherited characteristics, and therefore focuses on socialisation and nurturing factors.

The present study is rooted in Blumer's (1969) conception of symbolic interactionism, which presumes that:

- human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them;
- the meaning of such things is derived from the social interaction that people have with their fellows; and
- these meanings are manipulated and modified through an interpretive process.

According to this conception, the identities and perceived roles of the female academics studied here will be determined by the relationships and critical events in their personal, social, and academic lives – and the subsequent interpretations of these life experiences by the women concerned. Significant others in the lives of these women (such as parents, family members, teachers, peers and colleagues) and critical events in their lives (such as opportunities for education, overseas study, job change, marriage and child-bearing) are our focuses. The interpretations that the female academics have attached to these significant others and critical events have provided them with meaning and purpose in their lives – including their career orientations (Blumer 1969).

The influence of socialisation experiences on individuals' attributes, and their subsequent career trajectories, is well supported by theorists in career development. Super (1953) proposed that an individual's self-conception is a product of social learning, that this evolves over time as the person passes through various life situations, and that it becomes increasingly stable over the person's life span. The basic premise is that a career outcome is the product of interactions among personal, family and occupational factors during a person's lifetime. At different stages of the career trajectories of the senior female academics studied here, the interplay of their dominant attributes and their personal and professional socialisation experiences affected their construction (and subsequent redefinition) of their personal orientations – thus producing variations among individuals in their career orientations, strategies, and pathways. It is thus argued that the career trajectories of each of these women can be understood as an interplay of two important constructs – their individual attributes and their distinctive socialisation experiences.

The core category of this story line is thus how these female academics make sense of their attributes, and how they use them effectively to achieve success in their academic lives. The present study finds that there are three core categories of attributes:

- *personal attributes*: comprising four subcategories (personal identity, personality, attitude and competence);
- *social attributes*: comprising five subcategories (age, socio-economic status, social and cultural identity, gender and marital roles); and
- *academic attributes*: comprising two subcategories (academic self-concept and professional identity).

Attributes can be dominant or supporting. Knowing their own strengths, the female academics use their attributes selectively to achieve success in academe. According to the selective use of various attributes by individuals, different clusters of dominant attributes are formed. It is thus possible to construct a typology of these academics to describe and explain how particular respondents have used their attributes effectively to achieve career success. The typology consists of three types of female academics: (i) career academics; (ii) career educators; and (iii) career opportunists.

4.5 Main Propositions of the Theory

The theory of selective attribution in career trajectory can be presented as two related sets of propositions. The first relates to the overall theory, the second to the typology of the senior female academics (career academics, career educators and career opportunists).

4.5.1 Propositions relating to the overall theory

4.5.1.1 Career plans and dominant attributes

Few of the participating academics began their academic lives with a clear career plan. Most started to examine their career options and strategies seriously after they had been in their jobs for a few years. Once they had identified their preferred roles, they were able to make best use of their dominant attributes to enhance their career trajectories.

4.5.1.2 Modification of attributes by socialisation

The women's attributes were continuously modified by socialisation experiences – such as family requirements, work situations, significant relationships and critical life events.

4.5.1.3 Subsequent career trajectories

The interplay of attributes and socialisation experiences influenced the women's career trajectories; and their careers had a reciprocal influence on their attributes and socialisation experiences. These interactions account for variations in their career orientations, strategies and pathways.

Figure 4.1 illustrates the interrelationship of attributes, socialisation process, and career trajectory.

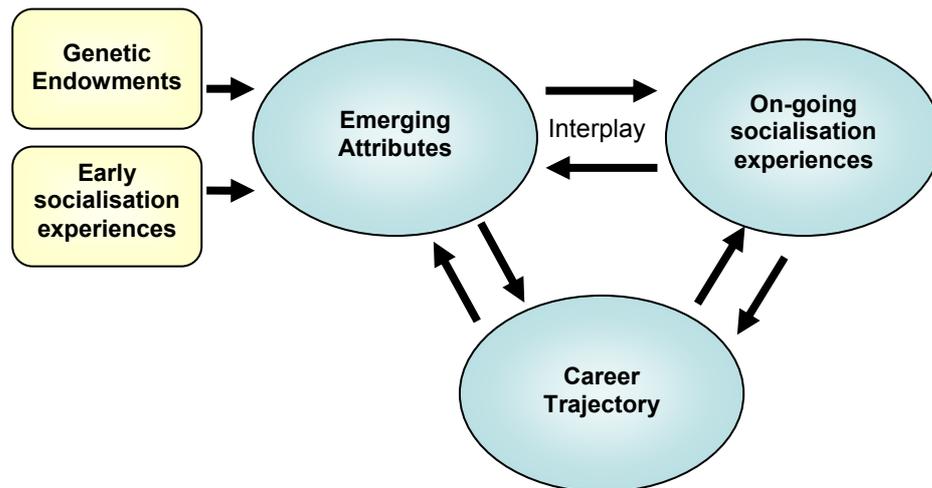


Figure 4.1: Impact of interplay of attributes and socialisation experiences on career trajectory.

4.5.2 Propositions relating to the typology of the female academics

As previously noted, the senior female academics studied here can be classified into three types according to the different clusters of attributes that have affected their individual career trajectories. Although the three groups share many common attributes (such as intelligence, high energy level, perseverance, commitment and a positive attitude), the dominant attributes that exert the most influence on them (and subsequently on their career trajectories) vary among the three types that were identified.

4.5.2.1 Career academics

The dominant attribute among the *career academics* is their passion for knowledge – the furthering of existing knowledge and the discovery of new knowledge. As students, they were bright, curious and eager to learn. They were academic high achievers in school, and even at a young age they were self-disciplined about learning and had resolved to excel in their studies.

Their main motivation in their academic careers is to make a contribution to knowledge development in their respective areas. They regard research and publishing as being core aspects of their academic lives, and they derive pleasure from being a leader in the field, from working on ground-breaking research and publications, and from the excitement of discovering new knowledge.

Their career trajectories have been marked by the presence of significant others (such as role models, mentors, and influential senior academics), and their intellectual competence has attracted attention from like-minded senior academics who were prepared to “open doors” of opportunity for them.

4.5.2.2 Career educators

The *career educators* display a dominant set of attributes characterised by a strong sense of mission to serve and improve student education. As academics, they see their primary goal as improving the quality of education. They focus on teaching, and consider that the education of their students is their major vocational responsibility. Although most of them enjoy research and publishing, and recognise the importance of maintaining a prolific publishing output, research is often regarded as a luxury and a privilege. Because the welfare of their students is their first priority, most of these women have to compromise their research output to allow time for student-related work and teaching.

These career educators are easy-going and versatile individuals who are caring and people-oriented. They are also academically able, but they were not necessarily outstanding achievers in school. They are natural team leaders who are active in managing projects and people. They appear to be more willing and ready to respond to institutional and student needs because they often have a strong sense of mission to serve – sometimes originating from their religious commitments.

4.5.2.3 Career opportunists

The *career opportunists* display a different set of dominant attributes – flexibility, versatility, confidence, and political astuteness. They take on challenges and new opportunities as they emerge. Their main motivation at work is to bring about *change* – thereby improving the quality of their teaching and student education. They derive pleasure from building up a department, completing new projects, and leading effective teams of staff members.

Unlike the career academics, the career opportunists do not have clear career orientations, and their career goals are often short-term and fluid. They do not usually regard research and publication as their core academic work; indeed, some of them even see research and publishing as “academic red tape” rather than a scholarly pursuit, and many of them undertake little research and publication.

They are intelligent individuals who make effective use of professional “openings” to enhance their careers in higher education. Although without clear career orientations, they have an ability to understand the organisational systems in which they work, and they are able to make effective use of opportunities to enhance the development of their careers.

The term “opportunist” is often taken to have a pejorative meaning, that is, it may convey a sense of ruthlessness in exploiting situations for self-promotion and advancement even when not justified on grounds of merit, ability or talent. The term as used here, however, is not used in this sense. The women academics who attract the label “career opportunist” are in fact, highly able, intelligent professionals; it so happens that a dominant characteristic they share in advancing their careers is an ability to seek, and respond to new opportunities in a way that fully utilises their professional talents.

This typology of the female academics studied here can be illustrated diagrammatically as shown in Figure 4.2.

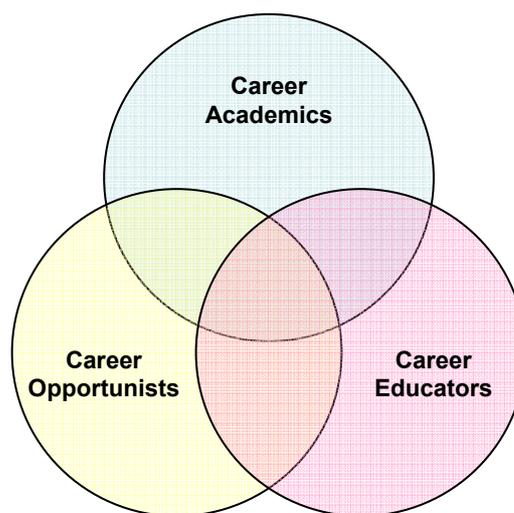


Figure 4.2: A typology of senior female academics.

It is important to recognise that the “types” depicted here are approximate representations of clusters of dominant attributes in a particular group of female academics. As shown in the diagram, the women share many attributes in common, which appear as either dominant or supporting attributes exercising some influence on their various career trajectories.

4.6 Summary

This chapter has presented an overview of the substantive theory of selective attribution in career trajectory – a theory that emerged as a result of the present investigations of the life histories of a selected group of senior female academics in Hong Kong. The chapter has described the three stages of data analysis undertaken in the present study – open, axial, and selective coding. A core category of “dominant attributes” has been identified, and a “storyline” that explained the relationships among dominant attributes, socialisation experiences and career trajectories has been presented. The main propositions linking the concepts and categories within the framework have been explained, and a typology of senior female academics has been drawn up on the basis of three clusters of dominant attributes.

Chapter 5

Voices of the Senior Female Academics (I)

5.1 Introduction

Chapters 5 and 6 of this thesis present a summary of the data collected from conversations with eleven senior female academics. The data reflect the decisions they took in assessing what was meaningful and valuable to them, how they arranged their priorities in life, and the career paths they took to achieve success in their academic lives. The data show how the personal orientations, career aspirations and career developments of these women were influenced by their personal, social and professional attributes, and how these developed through socialisation, particularly in their early life experiences. In particular, the data show how their attributes and career aspirations and strategies were constructed, and subsequently affected by the relationships they had with significant others and by critical events at various stages of their lives. Although their backgrounds and life histories varied, the women in this cohort shared many common attitudes, skills and experiences that contributed to success in their careers.

The grounded theory methods of sampling, data collection and analysis, as outlined in the work of Strauss and Corbin (1990), were employed in this research. The primary source of data was a series of face-to-face interviews with eleven senior female academics. These data were supplemented by information about these women collected from university websites and the media. In the analysis of data, three steps of coding, namely, open, axial and selective codings were used flexibly. Using Glaser and Strauss' (1967) constant comparative method, certain patterns of similarities and differences emerged, and the relevant incidents and examples were grouped to develop the primary themes.

The following eight themes, which were organised according to the initial framework of the interview questions (which in turn reflect the specific research questions) as presented to the respondents, emerged from the interview data:

- Impact of upbringing and education on career development
- Critical life events and relationships
- Critical attitudes, skills and experiences
- Career strategies
- Factors hindering career advancement
- Management of multiple roles
- Support networks
- Advice to aspiring female academics

The eight themes formed the main section headings of chapters 5 and 6, and under each heading, the related core categories and sub-categories used in the coding process were presented as sub-headings of the sections.

This chapter covers the first three of the eight research questions of this study:

- What impact did your upbringing and education have on your career?
- What life events and relationships have helped to lay the foundation for your career development?
- What experiences, attitudes, and skills do you deem to have been critical?

It is divided into three main sections, each of which addresses one of the three research questions listed above – (i) impact of upbringing and education on career development; (ii) critical life events and relationships; and (iii) crucial attitudes, skills and experiences.

5.2 Early Years: Impact of Upbringing and Education on Career Development

5.2.1 Upbringing and family influence

Apart from one, who grew up in China, all of the respondents were ethnic Chinese who had been born and brought up in Hong Kong. Their upbringing thus reflected the lives of Hong Kong females in the 1950s, when the economy of Hong Kong was flourishing and most parents worked hard to make a living. At this time, local university education was reserved for the élites, and admission to higher education was extremely competitive. Education was thus highly valued, and entering university was perceived as being the ultimate goal of education and a means of climbing the “social ladder” for the children of low- and middle-income families.

Analysis of the interviews with the eleven respondents revealed a variety of familial relationships; however, in all cases the upbringing facilitated the early development of self-concepts and independence. In most cases, respondents described their relationships with parents and siblings as being “stable” and “harmonious”. Although most felt that they had not received a great deal of personal attention from their parents, their recollections of childhood were generally pleasant, and they were all able to relate childhood events that, in their estimation, had had a positive influence on their personal development. In general, their family backgrounds had created an atmosphere of stability, harmony, and independence in which they were allowed freedom to choose their career paths, rather than being obliged to follow culturally prescribed roles.

5.2.1.1 Parents

Most of the parents of the successful female academics in the present study were from relatively humble backgrounds, and many of them did not have much education. The respondents’ descriptions of their family backgrounds, and their parents in particular, were mostly brief. They all said that their parents had provided them with no role models to follow in terms of academic and career aspirations. In addition, six of the respondents, who were all the eldest daughters in their respective families, reported that their parents expected them to take care of their younger siblings and to provide them a good role model in terms of being obedient, diligent and studious.

A majority of the respondents said that they had received little input or assistance from their parents with regard to education. This was largely because most of the respondents were from low- and middle-income families in which one or both of the parents were uneducated or illiterate. In addition, the parents were busy making a living or, in the case of mothers who did not hold an outside job, running a family. Nevertheless, although most of the respondents' parents did not play an active role in shaping their children's educational and career aspirations, the respondents did learn the importance of hard work from an early age, and they all assumed that working long hours was a normal way of life. Typical comments included the following:

When I was small, there were many things that I wanted to learn but we couldn't afford them, and my parents were not overly supportive ... My dad is barely literate, and my mum has never had an education. So, throughout my childhood, my mother knew nothing about whether or not I had done my homework, and when I had my exams and tests. She certainly wasn't interested. [W2]

My parents couldn't have given me any help or advice. They were both illiterate. They had to work long hours to make enough money to support six children. [W9]

Only one of the respondents reported an affluent family background. However, despite this, her parents had also been busy with their business, and she had not experienced any extra parental attention. W11 made the following observations on her family experiences:

There were seven of us. Everyone was well provided for. I was the first to study for a degree overseas; then, every one of us went to a university overseas. That means, in materialistic terms, we had been really well provided for. Because there were so many of us, and because my parents had to look after a business, they had no time to exert any influence on us ... Financial support was a substitute for much of their attention on us. When we were small, we had servants, a gardener, handy-men, a cook, and seven dogs ... We had an array of tutors – a tutor for school work, a dance tutor to teach me ballet ... a piano teacher ... a teacher who taught me calligraphy and Chinese painting ... a taichi master ... I loved sports and my parents built a tennis court in the garden. We also had a basketball ring in the garden, a huge garden where you could run around a thousand times ... my parents gave us everything they could lay their hands on, but they did not give us any attention in our studies, or in our daily lives ... we were taken care of by many people.

However, this respondent did report that despite a lack of overt parental guidance, her parents had given her a very good education which helped her develop into a versatile and independent person.

In general, therefore, the respondents reported a lack of parental guidance with respect to education. These parental attitudes were typical of the traditional views and limited expectations held by Hong Kong parents with respect to their daughters in the 1950s and 1960s. Higher education for girls was generally perceived to be unnecessary; it was a privilege, not a right. The ultimate goal in life for most females was to find a responsible husband with a stable income; indeed, in some cases, academic qualifications could become a negative dowry for women, as reflected in the following observation from one respondent:

Mum kept telling me not to study. Her favourite line was, “Who can afford to marry a PhD?” [W10]

The first responsibility, especially of the eldest girl in the family, was to take care of younger siblings and to be a good role model. W6 made the following observations:

Seven girls. I am the eldest, and I took care of each one of them ... I actually replaced my mum in looking after all my sisters ... The problem was when it came to nice things, I was never given any. They all went to my older brother ... They said it's because you're not a boy.

Despite disappointment, and even bitterness, as a result of not being their parents' favourites and not having received overt support from their parents, all of the respondents acknowledged the positive effects of their upbringing. For example, they mentioned the freedom and space they had to pursue their own interests, the opportunities they had to solve problems and make decisions, and the positive experience of taking care of their siblings, and exercising self-discipline at a young age. These positive recollections are reflected in the following observations:

My parents' expectations of me? There were no expectations. You could do what you liked. It was like that even when we were small. It was great. I got to decide things for myself. [W1]

There are positive as well as negative influences. From a positive angle, my parents gave me a lot of space and freedom. The fact that they didn't mind my business actually helped me become more independent. I learnt to resolve my own problems ... From a young age, I had to handle everything. I took care of myself ... Sometimes, I wondered how I had managed but I did. [W2]

The fact that they left me to my own devices also gave me a lot of room to do what I liked. [W10]

5.2.1.2 Mothers

Most of the respondents' mothers were illiterate, and about half of them were housewives; the other half worked hard outside the home to bring in additional income to support their large families. The approaches of the mothers to bringing up children varied. Most were "quietly supportive", as the following comments reveal:

Mum gave me a lot of freedom; that is, I could do what I liked. [W2]

She didn't know how to assess my school results because she was illiterate, but one thing about her ... she didn't treat me as her daughter. We were like sisters, and we confided in each other. My mum is great. [W6]

Perhaps conscious of their own lack of a proper education, some of the mothers had projected their hopes onto their daughters. They encouraged the respondents to study hard, and were very strict with them. W9 said this about her mother:

Mum was the boss in the family, and her words were orders. She had a very strong personality. She saw education as the only way to our good future. She decided that we had to have a good education so we wouldn't end up like Mum and Dad who were both illiterate.

A different perspective was demonstrated by W10's mother, who was apparently concerned that her daughter's desire to continue her education would prevent her finding a job, expanding her social circle, finding a husband, and becoming a mother. This mother was not at all pleased that W10 went from secondary school to university, and then on to postgraduate studies. This became a point of contention between W10 and her mother. Nevertheless, W10 continued to be aware of her mother's influence and love. At the time of the present research she was a dean, a professor, and a mother of two. W10 proudly recalled:

I was rebellious as an adolescent. I didn't like what my mother said. I chose to study, instead ... I decided not to listen to her and to do things my way. I didn't follow her preferred traditional path of being a good wife and a caring mother. On her deathbed, she said: "You didn't listen to me, but you've done well by not listening to me. I didn't think you could become an academic" ... Looking back, my mum was the best. We were very poor and she still allowed me to study for many years. She was wonderful. Despite having to work so hard herself, she let me follow my path.

Although the respondents did not always follow their mothers' advice, most reported that they appreciated their mothers' traditional virtues. Some also stated that their mothers' strong characters and personalities had provided influential female role models for them. The following comments reflect these views:

I'm just as stubborn as my mum. We're both quietly stubborn and principled. We don't shout and we don't like too much public attention, but we don't give up either. [W1]

She was a fairly traditional ... Chinese woman. Although she had given me a lot of freedom, on many accounts, she wouldn't encourage me to go for new things, or she worried too much ... Like her, I am not very creative, and I don't like taking risks. That could be because I was discouraged from trying new things, not doing anything out of the ordinary. Nothing too bold! My mum was a very cautious person and I guess that is in my blood too. [W2]

5.2.1.3 Fathers

Compared to the close relationships between mothers and daughters, the father-daughter relationships described by the respondents were more detached. Few of them nominated their fathers for special praise. This may have been a reflection of typical father-daughter relationships in Chinese families where fathers were traditionally aloof, non-communicative, and authoritarian. Most of the respondents stated that they did not have close relationships with their fathers. Their descriptions of their fathers were mostly brief, as the following examples illustrate:

My father was a Filipino Chinese, and most of the time he was in the Philippines. I didn't see much of him – altogether, not more than three years. I lived with mum in Hong Kong, and he visited us when he had time. His visits were not long, usually a few weeks to a month. Then, he was gone again. [W2]

I have a fond memory of my father. However, we never had a chance to be close to each other. I suppose mum was too strong, and dad was kind of “over-shadowed”. Mum's words were final. Dad didn't say much, but he was quietly supportive. I liked him. But sadly, I can't recall any particular instance when we spent any quality time together. Perhaps, in those days, fathers had to appear aloof. [W9]

Only one respondent went to some length to talk about her “love/hate” relationship with her father who, she admitted, had had an impact on her strong character and her being a stern perfectionist:

I loved and hated my father. Why? I loved him because he was my father. But after his business failed and he lost face ... he had a bad time outside. At home, he wanted absolute authority over us. Sometimes, it was his authority at the expense of our pride. He wouldn't allow us to have our pride ... I had to do well; I had to succeed. Why? I had always done well in my studies, even from a very young age, but my father was never satisfied. He kept comparing my present and previous results all the time. In his mind, there was always something not quite right with me. He was always so demanding. I had to keep proving myself to him. [W6]

5.2.1.4 Siblings

Most of the respondents reported happy and uneventful childhoods with their brothers and sisters, although some claimed to have had little communication with their brothers because of a large age difference. The following comment reflects this:

I have two brothers and I'm the youngest [in the family]. My second brother is older than me by eight years. When he completed high school, I was still in primary school. We had little to talk about, and my brothers had their ways at home. Being boys, they had their own world. So I have always been independent. It's as if I had no siblings. I did everything by myself. [W11]

Despite the scarce communication and the age difference, some maintained reasonably close relationships. For example, one respondent turned to the elder brother for help when she sensed a potential problem with her mother:

When I knew I had been admitted by university, I didn't know what to do. Mum would not be pleased, so I went to see my elder brother. He was already working ... He reassured me: “Don't worry. If mum says no, I will support you financially.” [W10]

These sorts of relationships are not uncommon in Chinese families – in which parents always stress the virtues of harmony and fraternity. From a young age, children are instilled with the notion that older siblings should take care of their younger brothers and sisters. The eldest child, especially a daughter, is strongly encouraged to take good care of the other children. This is reflected in the following comment from a respondent:

Mum kept telling me that I, being the eldest, had to set a good example for my brothers and sisters. I had to study hard, find a good job, and support my brother and sisters' education when my parents became too old to work. I think she's done a pretty good job in "brain-washing" me! [W9]

There was no mention of competition or rivalry among siblings. One explanation for this was that some respondents, being the eldest, took it upon themselves to look after their siblings. Several of these respondents were also the "brightest" and "most academic" in the family, and the other siblings therefore looked up to them. Indeed, some of the respondents bragged about their superior status:

There were five of us, all girls, all very intelligent. But my sisters all stopped [their studies] at the university level. I'm the only academic in the family. [W3]

No, no, no! There was no competition. I took care of them. They were no match for me! [W6]

My brothers and sisters looked up to me, and I even helped my older brother with his homework. [W9]

In contrast, W1 was the only "low achiever" in her family. Nonetheless, she did not feel any pressure from her siblings:

I'm the only low achiever in the family. I'm fourth in line. My older brother and sisters did very well in school; they all got scholarships. My eldest sister went to a teacher's college. My brother got into University of Hong Kong with a scholarship, and my other sister did too. Even my youngest sister got in, and I didn't. But there was no competition among us.

From the reports of the respondents, it is apparent that their siblings were generally supportive of each other. Only two respondents, W9 and W6, expressed mild resentment toward their brothers. These negative feelings were largely generated in the respondents by their parents, who were perceived as favouring their sons. It is recognised that traditional Chinese parents usually put their sons before their daughters. However, the following situation, as described by W1, is an exception:

There were five of us – four daughters and one son. The son wasn't given any special treatment, and we were all equal at home ... The concept that I have to listen to my older siblings because they are older than I am is foreign to me.

Nevertheless, this is unusual. Stories like this one are more common:

I know I'm smarter than my brother. Mum called me "Chit-chat chick" – because I asked about everything and my brother was quiet ... Being the eldest girl, I almost replaced mum in looking after my siblings. But when it came to distributing goodies, all the goodies went to my brother and I wasn't given anything. It was grossly unfair. All because he's a boy! [W6]

My mum said that she loved us all the same; but, actually, it was obvious that she cared for her sons more. She said to me on many occasions: "I wish I could transfer your brains to your older brother's head so I wouldn't have to worry about his school results." I was lucky that brain transplantation wasn't popular then! [W9]

They expressed feelings of injustice and bitterness about these matters, which might have driven them to prove their worth. W6 found comfort and consolation in her grandmother. She was the only one who mentioned the influence of a grandparent. W6 spoke in the following terms:

Fortunately, my grandmother was great ... she loved me ... You see, at least there was one person who loved me. She was OK. A tough lady she was, [and a] very strong character. I learnt something from her – her strength. She was very clever. She would do anything to keep me happy, but underneath, she had her principles. She's the kind that appears to be soft on the outside, but is really strong and tough inside.

5.2.1.5 Early education

Although most of the respondents stated that their early school years had not made a significant impact on their lives, most could recall some incidents that might have facilitated their growth, and some teachers who had helped and motivated them in their younger years. Most stated that the support and encouragement that they had received from teachers had been of assistance to them, although they believed that the experiences could not be considered as having been “critical” to their development. For example, W2, a professor in Chinese, said that her interest in the Chinese language had been inculcated when she was in primary school. Her class had compiled examples of good Chinese writings and had formed a literary club, which had met regularly at a teacher's home. This activity went on for several years, and had continued through her high-school years. She made the following observation:

Somehow we really enjoyed each other's company, and it would have been a real pity to let the club die. When we went to different secondary schools, we invited our classmates to join in ... at its peak, we had around a hundred people. It was good. We studied together; we shared our mock exam papers. We kept it up until we went into university. [W2]

When W2 was in high school, some Chinese-language teachers reinforced her interest in Chinese by asking the more able students, including her, to read out their work in class. The teachers then discussed the strengths of the piece of writing. The extra effort put in by these teachers apparently encouraged W2 to study Chinese, despite her being a science student in an English-medium school.

Another respondent, W10, mentioned several occasions on which she had been helped by various teachers. An English teacher had encouraged her interest in reading by lending her English novels, and a mathematics teacher had motivated her by being generous with his praise. W10 talked about these experiences in the following terms:

In Form 4, I had a maths teacher ... I was very weak in maths but ... in one algebra test, all my classmates got the answers wrong, and I got half of the calculation correct. To my surprise, the maths teacher told the class that I was the top student, and that they should all work hard like me. From then on, I passed maths every year.

W1 talked about growing up in a non-competitive school environment in which students helped each other, and teachers were encouraging and motivating. At the end of the conversation, she commented that, as a result of growing up in such a nurturing and stable environment, she had developed self-confidence, trust in people, and a sense that all people were equal. She also suggested that her attitude of “treating everybody as equals and expecting to be taken as an equal” had begun at home because her parents had ensured equal treatment among the children, and that this concept of equality had been reinforced in her school days. She had attended a girls’ school, and she believed that growing up in a girls-only environment had helped to foster her perception of equality.

Of the eleven respondents, W1, W2, W4, W5 and W9 had completed their secondary education in girls’ schools. Most believed that studying in a girls’ school had given them an advantage – in that they had been brought up to be more independent, direct, and willing to take up challenges. In contrast, W2 said that her single-sex school had had no special effect on her. She believed that her university education had trained her to be an independent and confident person.

Not all of our respondents had been high achievers in their early school days, and not all had had smooth experiences in the early stages of their school lives. In W3's case, her high school education had been disrupted for many years:

I was in the third year of junior high school when the Cultural Revolution began and schools were closed.... When I was sent to a country area to work, I kept up my learning. I was hoping that one day I would have the opportunity to go to university ... when the opportunity arose later, I worked triple hard to make up for lost time.

W3's experience of disruption had caused her to value her learning opportunities more highly, and she was keen to acquire new knowledge. An adverse experience of this kind was not confined to this respondent. Two others had also faced disruptions in their studies. W8 had barely completed secondary school when she had to start work to support her family. This disruption had strengthened her desire to learn, and a few years later, when the family's financial situation had improved, she began a new life as a mature student at an overseas university. Another respondent was, in her own words,

... born in the wrong time ... I was placed in a Chinese-medium school and there was no way of getting into a university of my choice. I was determined to get into the University of Hong Kong. It was a challenge I set myself. [W6]

Regardless of their achievements at school, the early years had influenced the respondents in various ways. Two respondents, W10 and W9, reported that they had been transferred to better primary schools by their parents, and both regarded the move as critical to their later academic success. W10 described the experience in this way:

My dad, who is usually fairly woolly about things, made one smart move ... Out of the blue, he moved me to the best primary school in the area at the time – "best" in the sense that they had the best public exam results... We weren't rich and we lived in government houses in a poor area, ... that school turned out to be a good choice for me. It was a good school academically and the teachers liked me... From there, I got into a secondary school – not a top one, a new school which was serious about teaching.

W9 described her experience in these terms:

Through my maths tutor's recommendation, mum moved me from a village school to the primary school where he was teaching. It wasn't a top school but it was certainly better than a village school. Every year, over a hundred of the Primary Six students from the village school went in the Secondary School Qualifying Exam, and for as many years as my brother and I were there, none of the students managed to get a place. Had I stayed there, my life would have been very different. You know, most of my classmates from that village school were married before they turned 18, and their husbands were fishmongers, butchers, farmers, and restaurant proprietors.

W1 conceded that, with hindsight, her not doing very well in a public examination had turned out to be a "blessing in disguise:

I am thankful that I didn't do well enough to get into a university in Hong Kong, so I had to leave for Canada. It was a complete blessing. At that time, I didn't do well academically. I wasn't good enough. However, looking back, the overseas experience really made a difference. It gave me the opportunity to learn many more things, and develop the perspective and values that I have now.

5.3 Turning Points: Critical Life Events and Relationships

5.3.1 Critical life events

5.3.1.1 Overseas education

Most of the senior female academics in the present research nominated *overseas study* as a significant life event that helped to lay the foundations for the development of their careers. All of the respondents in the present study had studied outside Hong Kong. One had left at the age of ten, and had obtained all of her academic qualifications overseas. Only two had completed their higher degrees in Hong Kong, but these had attended short courses overseas, and they agreed with the others in regarding this experience as having been critical to the development of their careers. The others had pursued undergraduate and/or postgraduate studies variously in Australia, Britain, Canada or the USA.

Although all respondents nominated overseas education as having been a critical event in their career development, the experience had different meanings for various individuals. For two of the respondents, overseas education offered a “second chance”. One of these observed:

I had very little confidence at that time, and I was a failure by Hong Kong standards. When I got to Canada, I was able to achieve what I am doing today. [W1]

The other respondent noted:

The financial situation at home improved and I could drop that burden. Once I made up my mind, I flew overseas with only a few thousand Hong Kong dollars with me, just barely enough for my ticket. I got in as a mature student and I started from scratch because I didn't even have my matriculation. [W8]

According to W1, the years in Canada completely changed her direction in life, and subsequently changed her career. She was comfortable during her first two years in Canada because she had her relatives and friends around her. However, her circumstances changed in subsequent years. As she noted:

The critical change came in the third year when I was transferred to another state. It was a real turning-point for me. Why? At that time, I really had to leave all my friends and went there alone.

These times of relative solitude provided her with time, space, and caused her to think about religion, the meaning of life, and what the future held for her. She explained this in the following terms:

It was a turning point in the sense that I had time to ask myself what kind of Christian I wanted to be. What's ahead of me? What am I doing now? Answers to these questions gave me a clear sense of mission ... Studying there was hard work. My only support was the God I believe in, my Jesus. Then, I realised that I was all by myself, yet I was not alone. The time there made me realise that what gave me support was not myself, nor my friends. It was a significant turning-point in my life.

For the respondents who spent considerable time overseas, the experiences not only prepared them for their academic careers, but also had a positive impact on the development of their personal attributes. They talked about gaining independence, confidence, perseverance and other important life skills. The benefits of overseas knowledge were thus not limited to the academic sphere. As W4 noted:

In terms of learning about life, my perspective was much wider ... The impact on me was very significant. I learnt a lot from the courses I studied. Not just about facts but things that are useful in life, too... Overseas education did offer me things which I didn't and wouldn't have got in the Hong Kong education. Things like how to deal with adverse situations and how to integrate skills and knowledge.

Other respondents made similar comments on the benefits of being exposed to a foreign environment. Most experienced a growth in character, a change in life direction because of a new-found interest, and a consolidation of knowledge – all of which took them along the path to a career in academia. The following comments reflect these benefits of overseas study:

In the MA course that I attended in England, the training was very different from that of the traditional one. The biggest difference was the way they looked at a problem, the way they argued, etc. Then you realised that a problem could be viewed and dealt with in many different ways. [W2]

Professor X took us to New York to follow some masters. There, my knowledge was perfected. I went there every year. I was exposed to the teachings of the great masters. My scope was expanded from Hong Kong to international scenes. It was my turning-point. [W10]

The effect of overseas study on the respondents has continued to influence their present educational philosophies and approaches. Some referred repeatedly to importing certain aspects of the North American and British models of education to higher education in Hong Kong. In this regard, they often referred to their past educational experiences in discussing course structures, student-staff relationships, residential life for students, students' rights, teaching and research.

5.3.1.2 Mission found

The experience of living overseas allowed the respondents time to reflect upon their goals in life. W1 discovered and affirmed her career orientation and mission in life. She recalled a missionary conference that she had attended, at which she had taken the place of a group leader who had failed to arrive. In doing so, she discovered that she possessed a gift for teaching. W1 reported this experience in the following terms:

Another turning point was when I attended a missionary conference after I graduated. It was like committing to God. It was a huge conference with over 30,000 students ... I was given the strength to face them, and I did a pretty good job. The experience was meaningful, and I discovered a way of applying what I had learnt. My sense of mission began there, and it prompted me to go into teaching.

Having found her mission in life, this respondent's career path became obvious. Once she had affirmed that teaching was her special calling, she deduced where she wanted to go in terms of her career. She explained this as follows:

I asked myself where I wanted to teach; I mean: which level? I knew that I was not a patient person and I couldn't handle children. Most of the time... I had been in universities, and university appeared to be the place where I felt most "at home". Most of my life perspective and values were formed while I was in university. I knew then that I had to study for a PhD.

W3, in the early stages of her medical school experience, witnessed patients dying of incurable hereditary diseases. Her feelings of helplessness prompted her to study abroad to seek solutions through research. Since then, her mission in life has been to seek solutions through innovative research to improve the lot of humanity.

The recognition of their missions in life also affected the respondents' other life choices. W7 stated that:

Mission drive is important ... there have been numerous opportunities for me to emigrate or to go into the business field. Hong Kong is a place of changes and a land of opportunities. There have been many critical historical moments. If one is not guided by one's sense of mission, one can go astray easily.

5.3.1.3 Adversity in life

Adversity in life has been important in shaping the respondents' development. For example, some of the women were initially driven to study abroad as a result of adversity. Subsequently, while studying abroad, separation from family and friends had helped the respondents to develop independence and perseverance. They reported that they had gained strength through adversity, and that difficulties in life had helped to pave the way for their careers in academe.

An extreme case of adversity was reported by W3, who stated that the Cultural Revolution (1966–1978) had deprived her of any chance of formal education for many years. She was required to quit junior high school and was sent to “serve the people” in remote villages in China. She toiled for ten years in the fields. Rather than destroying her ambitions, the drastic change in her life circumstances made her stronger and more determined to study. She maintained her self-education in the belief that eventually she would have an opportunity to return to school. She described the experience in the following terms:

The Cultural Revolution years had a great impact on me. I wasn't able to receive formal education, so I embarked on self-education for twelve years. I kept on learning, and I learnt English and Japanese from tapes and books. I was curious about everything. I had a passion for knowledge, and I wanted to study ... With the help of a tutor, I prepared for the university entrance examination myself. During those years, I also got married and had a child.

It was a good twelve years, which prepared me for my career today.

When the Cultural Revolution was over, she managed to enter a medical school, where her keen attitude toward the pursuit of knowledge impressed her teachers, and they gave her opportunities to research.

Further evidence that adversity in life can be a “blessing in disguise” was provided by the experience of W6 who returned to Hong Kong to serve the Church after finishing her PhD in London. On her return, she was disappointed that the Church was not prepared to use her intellectual skills. As she recalled:

They put me in a job that could easily be done by a fresh graduate.

Apparently, they had no plan to use my research skills.

Disillusioned with this experience, she decided to take up an academic post. In her view, she had changed from serving God in a church to serving God through her research publications.

5.3.2 Critical relationships

5.3.2.1 Mentors

Although none of the senior female academics in this study had had any experience of a formal mentoring relationship, they all acknowledged the value of informal mentoring experiences. Most of the respondents were able to recall particular people who had been influential in their careers. These included PhD supervisors, academic seniors, and employers who had acted as informal mentors. Five respondents, W3, W6, W7, W8 and W10 stated that they had had several ‘mentors’ who provided them with guidance, encouragement, and opportunity at various stages in their lives. Those who had not had a mentor lamented the lack of such an important person in their development. As W1 reflected:

How I wish, at the time of my graduation, that there had been a mentor there to help me be more focused.

Apart from helping the respondents to become more focused on their work at an early age, the mentors assumed other important roles. According to some respondents, their mentors also offered much practical assistance – including helping them to develop publishing careers, and providing them with opportunities to undertake research. For example, W3 and W6 reported that it was critical for them to have mentors who nurtured their interest in research, and showed faith in their work. They described the roles of their mentors in the following terms:

As a student at university, my department head helped me to develop an interest in, and the ability to conduct research. I started to publish while I was in university in China ... My PhD supervisor was sceptical at first about the offer; but very soon he realised that I was capable. He gave me many opportunities and funding to do research. He kept encouraging me, showed faith in the theory that I developed, and discussed research results with me. [W3]

I met an academic senior in London when I was doing my PhD. He read my articles and gave me comments. His feedback made a difference to the quality of my work ... My second mentor is an Oxford scholar in Hong Kong, and he is very knowledgeable about church matters. [W6]

Most of the mentors of our respondents had been their university teachers or supervisors. From the accounts of the respondents, their mentors had “opened doors” for them:

My honours supervisor persuaded me to continue my studies. He got me a scholarship and so I continued to study for a PhD full time ... In early 1984, my supervisor called me and said: “I found you a job. Come back and be an academic.” He kept telling me that I should pursue an academic career. [W8]

I didn’t have to look for work. My teacher rang me and said: “I heard that you were thinking about working part-time”. My son was small then, so I said: “Yes”. She said: “OK, come back and work for me”. In my whole life, I have never once attended a proper job interview. Then, she encouraged me to pursue further study ... How did I discover my area of interest? Well, it was my teacher again. At that time, I was busy writing my PhD thesis. I was right in the middle of it and my days were spent on those figures and tables. I told my colleagues that I didn’t have time to attend any seminars ... Then, my teacher called me again. She has been very nice to me, and I couldn’t say no to her. So I went to the seminar. Once I was there, I knew it was for me. Since then, I became a devout follower. [W10]

Not all mentors were able to provide as much practical assistance as these. Some assumed a more developmental role in acting as a role model and widening the respondents’ perspectives. Some of the respondents talked about admiring their mentors as models of excellence. These respondents were convinced that mentors were

...absolutely essential. At different stages, junior academics must have a master ... you need a model, you need to see what it means to be good.
[W10]

Not every mentor played an active practical role in advancing the respondents’ careers. Mentors appeared to have meant different things and to have assumed different roles – depending on the respondents’ individual needs. In some cases, the reassurance of knowing that there was someone who was ready to listen and help was just as important as any practical assistance that might have been offered. As W4 observed:

I just needed someone to talk about my problems, and then I was able to get on with life ... as long as I knew that someone was there looking after me, that was enough ... I would say four of them have had some influence on me in different aspects. They played different roles. My two supervisors were for knowledge. The boss at the University of Hong Kong was the one who gave me opportunities, and my *qi-gung* master taught me how to deal with people.

5.3.2.2 Role-models

Only one of the respondents acknowledged having role models in her life. W11's first role model was her Physical Education teacher in secondary school, who had nurtured her interest in sport, and inspired her to follow a career in Sports Education. Her second role model was her ex-boss, with whom she had worked for eight years. W11 said that this was a woman of integrity with excellent management skills, and she was a good role model and an excellent mentor.

All the other respondents maintained that they had no role models in their lives. The following comments were typical:

People in Hong Kong are not used to the idea of having a role model in life. We don't see any prominent role models in society, apart from a few movie stars! [W5]

I looked for role models in life but I must say I was disappointed. I couldn't find any. The people around me were pretty mediocre. [W6]

However, despite these generally negative responses regarding role models, some of the respondents did concede that they modelled certain professional behaviours on senior people around them. For example, W2 noted the management style of the vice-president of her institution, and applied it to her own communication style when dealing with junior members of staff; W10 learnt the importance of teamwork and professionalism from a male supervisor.

Some of the respondents talked about “negative” role models among their colleagues. They observed, ironically, that they had benefited from people whose work behaviours reminded them *not* to commit the same mistakes! For example, W1 made the following observation:

You can see it among your colleagues and people around you. There are things that you wouldn't do – like the ways they interacted with the students. They are negative role models. I found them in some of my colleagues.

5.3.2.3 Significant others

In the present study, people who had played a significant role in the respondents' careers included teachers, former employers and supervisors, priests, spiritual directors, *qi-gung* masters, friends, parents, and others who had faith in the respondents and were keen to provide them with encouragement and support. Secondary school teachers and university supervisors were most prominent in this regard. Several of these people had been inspirational and motivating at important stages of the respondents' lives. The following comment reflects this influence:

I'm thankful for all the teachers who have helped me. Actually, a teacher didn't have to do much ... One day, I met a teacher in the corridor, and he asked me to see him in the staff room. He pointed at his graduation photo on the desk, and asked: “Do you like this gown?” I nodded, and he said: “You know that you could wear it, too”. What he said excited me, and I studied hard from then on. [W10]

Some of the teachers influenced the respondents' choices of academic discipline or profession. As W11 observed:

Why sports education? First, it was my interest. Second, our physical education teacher. Due to his influence, quite a few of my schoolmates decided to study sports education overseas ... He helped me realise that I was interested in sport, and that it could become a career.

The second most prominent group of “significant others” was that of former employers and supervisors, who were often mentioned as having provided encouragement and opportunities for professional growth. W2 put it this way:

My ex-boss was the one who pushed me into doing a PhD and encouraged me to develop a career in higher education... I learnt a lot from him. He gave me a lot of work and lots of exposure, and I learnt how to manage projects.

W6 talked about the long-term relationship that she had enjoyed with her spiritual director:

At first, we communicated via mail correspondence. We have maintained this relationship for about 30 years. Every now and then, he came to Hong Kong to visit me. We had heart-to-heart discussions about my spiritual growth. I couldn't talk to other people like that, I just could not ... we had no conflict of interests. He's a friend whom I can trust. He also treats me like a friend, and he, too, pours his heart out.

W7 said that she was fortunate to have developed a friendship with a conference participant who helped her to appreciate her own worth and gave her a sense of direction. She described this friendship in the following terms:

In 1991, I met an excellent professor in Australia, an outstanding academic ... We were at a conference, and we started chatting. She told me that I had very good potential, and she asked me if I had considered when I might achieve a professorship. I said that I had never thought about it, and she retorted: “Why not? You can do it”. The next thing was, I found myself working towards it.

Other “significant others” who were mentioned were friends and family members who had given the respondents confidence to apply for promotion, or who had provided childcare and household support to give them time for career development. The following quotation provides a succinct summary:

The idea of a mentor didn't occur to me then, but throughout my life I've been blessed by individuals – friends in particular – from whom I have learnt a lot of lessons, and drawn strength and support. [W5]

5.3.2.4 Spouses

Eight of the respondents were married, and all of these stated that the support of their husbands had been crucial to their success. In terms of family and work burdens, all the respondents were of the opinion that male academics do not experience conflicts between work and family in the same way that female academics do. In this regard, the following comment from one respondent, who chose to remain single, is of interest:

It's not easy to be a career woman in Hong Kong because society expects you to do well at work and at home. The men in Hong Kong are mostly "very Chinese", very traditional. The idea of men being superior is still very much alive. Although Hong Kong society seems to be fairly liberal and although women enjoy a relatively high status compared to other Asian women, most men today still cannot live with the idea that their wives have more highly paid jobs than they do. I've seen this happen with my women colleagues. They have had fights, and their marriages ended in divorce ... If both of them are equally bright, and are in jobs that are demanding, there'll be a tense competition between them. One of them has to make sacrifices for the family. Who? The answer is obvious! [W6]

Although the dual demands of career and family affect both men and women, the respondents were adamant that women usually carry most of the responsibilities within the home. Against this background, W2 and W10 in the present study counted themselves fortunate to have married men who were willing to take over the management of the household when they were busy with work. They described their situations in the following terms:

He is happy to spend time at home. When I am busy writing papers, he takes care of the children. He even buys me lunchboxes and picks me up from my office when I work late. So, I don't have to worry too much about the family and, in that sense, having a family is not at all a barrier. [W2]

When I first started as a junior academic, I had a really hard time. I needed lots of help. I was doing my PhD, and I had to come back to university to study on Saturdays and Sundays. My husband looked after the children. That's why my daughter said, "You have to give half of your PhD to daddy. He deserves it." What she said was true ... I was very lucky ... to have a husband who was willing to look after the children. [W10]

Other respondents had not received as much domestic support, but they were content that their husbands did not meddle with their work, and that their spouses allowed them freedom to pursue their careers. The following comments reflect this point of view:

A lot of men cannot put up with the fact that their wives are busy. But my husband is very nice; he allows me to be busy. Every now and then, he whinges about my doing too many things but he does support me, in spirit and in practice. [W5]

In this respect, I think we work well together. Basically, he accepts what I am and that's how I organise my time. Even before we married, I made it very clear that I would not give up my commitments. [W7]

My husband is OK. Most of the time, he pays only lip service to being supportive, and he rarely takes over the childcare chores. The bottom line is that he lets me get on with my academic work at home, and I have a study at home where I can lock myself in and not be disturbed. [W9]

Some of the respondents' husbands also acted as sympathetic listeners when the respondents were tired and frustrated by work. In one case, in which the respondent's husband was also an academic in a similar field, his empathy and support were much appreciated. W7 described their relationship in this way:

My husband is among those who made an impact on my career. He is also an academic, and he is in an area similar to mine. He kept telling me not to spend so much time on other things, and that I should focus on things that give me the most satisfaction. His ideas are inspirational.

5.4 Success: Critical Attitudes, Skills and Experiences

In addition to examining significant life events and relationships that had shaped the respondents' careers, this study also investigated key attitudes, skills and experiences that were perceived by the respondents as having been crucial to their success.

5.4.1 Critical attitudes

5.4.1.1 Sense of mission

A commonly used word in the conversations conducted in the present study was “mission”, and a common mission shared by most of the respondents was a desire to provide quality education to their students. The following comments reflect this sense of mission:

I wanted to work in Hong Kong or Asia, teach Asian students, Hong Kong students, and see how much I really can contribute. I wanted to change their narrow mindsets. [W1]

Teaching is my interest and I give my students a lot of time because I believe it is important to hear their feedback. In terms of education, I'm not just teaching them knowledge ... I believe I have something to share with young people – things like my drives, my enthusiasm, my sense of mission, my being a caring teacher, my skills in presenting arguments. [W7]

No matter how busy they might be in other respects, most of the respondents wanted to continue to be involved in teaching. Although they recognised that academics have many other important roles, including research, publishing and converting research outcomes into entrepreneurial projects, teaching remained the priority for most respondents.

W8, who was a busy dean, described how she maintained her teaching commitments:

I like to see all staff members going into the classrooms. Every year, I go into the classroom too, although I wouldn't dare take one whole course all by myself. I might get called away to handle emergencies, that wouldn't be fair to the students. So I co-teach with a colleague every year.

For some respondents, their interest in teaching was nurtured when they were young. A “mission” to educate younger generations had then led them to pursue their academic careers. Others had discovered their sense of mission as they grew through life experiences. W7 made the following observation:

When I was in secondary school, I had a vision of reforming Chinese Law. I wanted to do something but then I couldn't envisage my role. At that time, going into law meant being a legal practitioner, and I was too young to realise that I could create so many projects ... If you had asked me about my mission when I first joined university, I wouldn't be able to tell you anything. There was none. I joined because I was interested in law. Now, it's different. I chose to be here; it's my career. I chose an academic career so I could nurture and educate the next generation of legal practitioners. I believe that legal education in this historical period is very important. It's my mission drive.

Some respondents were so engrossed in their discipline that the promotion of the discipline itself had become their mission. W11 described it this way:

It was a big decision for me to move from an administrative position where I'd worked for 14 years to an academic position. I did it out of a strong sense of mission. There was no pay increment and the status was lower, but it was the first academic programme in this field. I wanted to promote physical education in Hong Kong, and to instil in the students a sense of mission like mine.

Other respondents simply had a general desire to serve others and to perform good deeds that would benefit humanity. Three such respondents explained their “mission” in the following terms:

In my research work, and whatever I do, I always feel a sense of mission ... to serve ... to do the best I can in meaningful projects. [W3]

Being an educator, I want to help students, colleagues, departments, and society. I want to do things that are meaningful. That's my driving sense, my mission. [W4]

I've devoted a lot of time in developing the postgraduate programme. I believe that postgraduates are our future leaders, and that university is the training ground for leaders. The satisfaction is immense. [W10]

5.4.1.2 Dedication

The respondents in the present study affirmed that a high level of commitment is required if women are to cope with the rigorous demands of academic work. All of the respondents were passionate about their work, and all devoted long hours in their dedication to the various tasks at hand. W10 put it this way:

I love my practice, and my clinical work gives me lots of stimulation – very rewarding. It challenges my thinking and gives me plenty of food for thoughtful research ... Even when I was extremely busy, I didn't give up my clinical work. Others said, "You don't have to work so hard, you're already a dean". I just laughed. I didn't want to explain because they couldn't feel my passion for my work ... I only have time to do my clinical on Saturdays and Sundays, from morning till night.

All respondents stated that they worked long hours. Most said that their positions required them to perform many roles, both in and out of the academic arena, to maintain their personal and professional profiles. In recent years, Hong Kong universities have been required to compete for funding and donations from the public, and enhancing the public profile of their institutions has become an added responsibility for senior staff members. Two comments from the respondents reflect these increasing burdens:

I do a lot of community service. In university, I do a lot of administrative work, seminars, etc. Outside, I write newspaper columns, and talk on radio and TV. They are part of my routine, and I set aside time for them. I have to say no to new invitations when my schedule is full. Usually, I drop an old commitment before I take on a new one. [W7]

On top of all the work of being a dean, I chair and sit on many university committees. Outside campus, I have my other professional involvements, partly required to upkeep my professional knowledge and partly because of my role as a dean – things like sitting on accreditation committees ... It hasn't been much of a life for me in the past four years. It's so full that I don't have time to think about other things apart from work... It sounds unreal, but it has been my reality for the past four years. [W10]

Many of the respondents felt the pressure of being a female leader in a male-dominated environment. Most of them believed that they had to be better than their male colleagues to succeed. Most of the present respondents contended that respect had to be earned by female leaders through demonstrated good work and diligence. As W2 observed:

When I pick up a piece of work, I always give it my best shot ... Usually, people don't like female bosses because they think we're petty and always picking on trivialities. So if you want to gain respect, you have to work really hard.

Many of the respondents were trying to maintain an equilibrium among the four essential aspects of academic life – administration, teaching, research, and publishing. The comments of three respondents reflect this:

Perseverance is most important. I don't count my jobs, I just do my best, and I don't give up. Research is flexible, in a way. Teaching is a must, and I have to go full speed to do it well ... Whenever I have time, I work on my research. It's endless. Basically, I have no holidays and no rest time. I combine my holiday leave with overseas meetings, duty research, etc. [W3]

Although the work of a senior manager is mostly administrative work ... senior management shouldn't lose touch with what's happening in the lecture rooms, and they also have to provide academic leadership to the school. Not only do we lead our colleagues in doing research, we also like to go into classrooms. [W8]

The workload is heavy and there are just not enough hours in a day. My so-called “work hours” are spent on administrative work; whereas my non-work hours are spent on academic work, such as research papers. Sometimes, I have to do administrative work in the evenings and on weekends. Any research work would mean giving up sleep and rest time, or locking myself at home during vacation time. Otherwise, there’s little time for my scholarly work. [W10]

It is apparent that perseverance and diligence are essential attributes for success in academe. Because of the multiple demands that are made upon them, and the need to balance home and work, the respondents have been required to devote long hours and much effort if they are to cope with their work. All the respondents in this study contended that success is harder for a woman to achieve, and all stressed the importance of perseverance.

5.4.1.3 Coping with adversity

It became apparent in the course of the study that being focused and persistent, particularly in the face of adversity, has helped the respondents to be successful. One respondent put it this way:

First and foremost, do not fear failure. I know that my achievement today is built on persistence. Second, if you fail, try again, change your method ... When you’re not afraid of failure, you have a lot more tolerance and you don’t give up in the face of problems. Honestly, everything that I have now is gained through effort. It’s not luck. It’s time and repeated efforts. [W8]

Although all respondents displayed a high degree of tolerance and persistence in handling adversity, some also mentioned the importance of knowing when to quit. Two respondents said:

If I feel that I’ve done enough here, and that there are no more roles for me to play, I will move on. I don’t care so much about future prospects; I ask myself if I’m of any assistance to people first ... I can contribute in different ways – to colleagues, students, department, school, and even to society at large ... The job has to be interesting, too. [W4]

My biggest drive is my sense of mission. Another driving force is: “Gosh, I’m stuck! I don’t want to be here anymore. Enough is enough. I want out!” ... If you’re really unhappy in a job, it’s still a kind of personal development and personal growth. It’s OK to remain in an adverse situation when there are still lessons to be learned. When you feel that you’re not learning anything, staying on will only do you harm. Then, it’s time to get out. [W5]

5.4.1.4 Being different

Many of the respondents had refused to follow the traditional career routes for women. For example, W2 undertook an unconventional route from when she was young. She refused to follow a traditional path for young women when she chose to study science subjects in an English-medium school, and on entering university she decided to switch to Chinese because of her interest in the Chinese language. As W2 observed, “My university mates were all arts students from famous Chinese-medium schools, and I was an alien in class.”

Being pioneers in their fields provided some of the respondents with an advantage because they were able to carve distinctive roles for themselves in academe. Several respondents spoke of their having “rare” qualities or experiences when they began to develop their academic careers. For example, W7 was able to boast of her foresight in pursuing further education in China in the 1980s:

My area of research is Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. This is a relatively new area [of research], which requires a lot of practical experience. Very few people *really know* Hong Kong, the Mainland, and Taiwan. I was lucky enough to have secured a relatively unique research focus. I started on it early, at a time when no one was interested in China. After I obtained my bachelor’s degree, I studied law in China; and on returning to Hong Kong, I studied for another degree in Hong Kong. I obtained my barrister’s qualifications. My background is rare and the experiences that I can share are unique.

W11 recalled that in the 1970s very few people were interested in her area of study and she was the first person in Hong Kong to have two degrees in her particular discipline; W3 pursued a PhD in biochemistry because at that time, she believed that this would become “the science of the century”; and W6 said she was the only female academic who combined religion and political science in her research. W6 also criticised some academics in Hong Kong for being too conventional, and for being reluctant to comment on sensitive issues – such as the relationship between religion and politics. She reflected on her own nature:

There are pros and cons to being daring. By being daring, I could express what I wanted to say ... Other colleagues were too afraid to speak up. I asked: “Why not?” It’s just not in my character to shut up. I have research data to support what I say. But of course, being daring is also my Achilles’ heel ... While I’m in an academic environment, I’m OK. It’s when I’m outside it that I feel the pressure. For example, I know I will not be asked to take up certain official advisory posts ... [W6]

5.4.1.5 Being positive

One notable characteristic of the present cohort of respondents was their positive attitude and general enthusiasm. They were not deterred by hard work, they welcomed new opportunities, and their enthusiasm was obvious. When they talked about new tasks, they often described these as “interesting” and “challenging”. They were invariably positive about potential new ventures. The following comments reflect these characteristics:

Interacting with this new group of alumni will be a big challenge. I can learn so much from them. [W1]

Teaching students, designing curriculum, not the traditional spoon-feeding approach, new ways of teaching ... I want change. If this doesn’t work, try a different way ... Eventually, it’ll work. [W5]

I’m a very positive person. Well, I do moan about being “snowed under” with work, but after my moaning I go back to making things happen ... I moaned about having to do meaningless tasks, and then I took a few deep breaths and started planning how to get things done. [W10]

Another distinctive characteristic of the respondents was their passion for learning. In some cases this reflected a desire for perfection, as illustrated by the following remarks from respondents:

Many people had commented that I worked like a slave under my boss. It was hard work ... I didn't have any immediate reward then, but I learnt so much from that experience. It was a great learning opportunity. [W2]

My work attitude is: "It doesn't matter whether I get promoted. I have been given an opportunity to accumulate knowledge. If you're good, you'll eventually meet someone who appreciates your talents." [W5]

I'm sort of a perfectionist and I always want to give it my best. I'm not a hundred per cent satisfied with my work, and I always feel I can do better. So I become anxious at times. [W8]

The university has given me plenty of opportunities. In the past few years, I have worked very hard, but I'm grateful for the learning opportunities. [W10]

Finally, one respondent's definition of what she called "a success package" provides a succinct summary of the data collected under the heading of "critical attitudes":

True academics have a certain air about them ... most laymen tend to believe that this is largely made up of professional knowledge and skills. In reality, what matters more to success are "soft skills", such as EQ [Emotion Quotient], devotion, leadership and a sense of mission ... A sense of mission is of paramount importance. Without it, one cannot withstand adversities or failures in life. [W7]

5.4.2 Useful skills

According to the respondents, certain specific skills have helped them advance their careers. These include: (i) language skills; (ii) interpersonal and networking skills; and (iii) time-management skills.

5.4.2.1 Language skills

Several of the respondents stressed the importance of their bilingual competence in English and Chinese. This was particularly important in Hong Kong, where important meetings are often conducted in English. As W8 observed:

Lots of things involve using English. You're at a disadvantage if you're weak in this aspect. The council meetings, co-ordination meetings, committee meetings, etc. are all conducted in English. Really, good English skills are essential for people in senior positions.

Even the head of a Chinese Department needed to be able to communicate fluently in English. She believed that her command of both languages had put her ahead of other candidates for her position:

English ability counts ... our working language is English, and most paperwork and working documents are in English ... if you're not used to communicating in English, you'd find it difficult to cope. [W2]

Being bilingual not only helped in internal communication, but also provided an advantage in research and publishing. W7 noted that her scope of research and publishing had been widened by her ability to do comparative research in China and in English-speaking countries:

... you're competing with "mother-tongue people" in a language which is not your strongest. I am lucky that I communicate reasonably well in both languages. I have publications in both languages. It's something that most of my colleagues cannot do, and it's a real personal strength.

Academics who were less comfortable in communicating in English did feel at a disadvantage, as the following comments reveal:

In our academic world, we have an international mix. When a person's English is good, they speak louder, and those people seem to have more power. [W6]

You know, we're Chinese. You do "feel the pinch" when you have to write in English. After all, it's our second language. [W11]

5.4.2.2 Interpersonal and networking skills

Most of our respondents felt comfortable in the higher education arena. Although they acknowledged that higher education is still a male-dominated field and that female academics are often in peer groups composed mainly of men, they did not feel excluded from the male-dominated networks. They all understood the importance of establishing networks of relationships, and many reported that they had been invited and recommended to apply for academic positions by male supervisors, employers and colleagues. In terms of social and professional relationships, they appeared to have been quite successful, as reflected in the following comments:

I didn't think I was a sociable person, but so far I'm OK in my interpersonal relations. I have been able to build networks both inside and outside university ... [W2]

People have been really nice to me, especially people in my field. Maintaining a good relationship is very important to me. What do I mean by good? Say, if there are things that I don't know, I ask others to guide me. Usually, people don't mind at all. [W10]

W8 who had worked overseas talked about the difficulties that she experienced in attempting to network with male colleagues:

Female academics usually network with females. It's much easier. When I was working overseas, my male colleagues often chatted in the pubs for hours and hours ... It's impossible for female colleagues to get into these networks, and I didn't try. They went every Friday to the pub for a drink, and although they did ask me at the beginning, I don't drink and so I didn't go. After a while, they just didn't ask me any more. I knew that it would affect my academic life because networking helps with a career. It's simple. If you're "in the loop", your mates will include you in their projects, such as editing a book, writing a chapter, etc. There is nothing wrong with this because, if they know you they have confidence in you, and they know your expertise. Otherwise, you'd have to initiate your own projects, and look for people to collaborate with you. There's more effort required. So, in that respect, networking posed a barrier for me then.

She observed that this kind of “pub culture” is not a way of life among Hong Kong academics, and that every Chinese intuitively understands the importance of *guan-si* (interpersonal relationship).

All the respondents said that they had no problem working with their male colleagues, and most considered themselves to have been quite successful in building relationships. However, this does not mean that all had found networking to be easy. Two of the four single women chose to distance themselves from their male colleagues because they felt awkward. One of them admitted that:

... breaking into male networks is not easy for me. It's my personality. I don't like socialising. So, I'm never one of them and I have no access to inside information. It's problematic. [W6]

5.4.2.3 Time-management skills

To maintain their varied roles as teachers, scholars and administrators, most of the respondents had to work long hours. Time management thus became an increasingly important issue for them as they tried to balance the demands of work and family. Being able to “compartmentalise” their work and family commitments was often cited by the respondents as being an important skill to maintain focus and minimise stress. W7 explained what she meant by “compartmentalisation”:

That is, when I am at work, I don't think about the troubles brewing at home, and I just keep them totally out of my mind ... I stay in my office till late to do as much as I can with no distraction, and once I am home, I give my family 100% of myself.

The respondents also tried to gain more free time by delegating their duties, encouraging teamwork, and reviewing their schedules. However, some found difficulty in delegating work, and these respondents admitted that they had to learn to “let go”. W7 talked about time allocation in the following terms:

I allocate time for my work every day, and I keep a close tab on all my extras, such as committee work, article writing, media work, etc. When I see that I have taken on too much of one kind of work, I stop saying yes, and will only take on a new task when an old one is dropped.

Nevertheless, working long hours remained the norm, despite their time-management strategies. One of the respondents, who was a dean and whose children were all studying abroad, stated that she started work at 7 a.m. every day:

Time allocation is not a problem for me. I can tell you that my time is organised very efficiently every day. You can do more if you organise your time better. Usually, people can find me here around 7:15 a.m. ... From seven to nine in the morning is my private writing time, and research is done at this time. [W11]

5.4.3 Professional experience

In reflecting on why they had been selected for certain positions or roles, the respondents talked about the particular professional experience that had given them an advantage over other candidates.

5.4.3.1 Research and publishing experience

The most important professional experience that underpinned success for all the respondents was their background in research and academic publishing. All respondents agreed that research and publication were essential for a successful career in academe. The number of internationally refereed articles published by individual academics is often used by universities to determine promotion, and academic reputations; and career prospects depend on research profiles, research grants, and published articles.

W7 recounted how her published articles had enhanced her career profile:

When I first entered the academic field, I picked a new area of research. Nobody studied Chinese law at that time ... I was invited to write articles. They were not outstanding, but there were some new ideas ... Once I helped to render Chinese laws into English, I assumed international standing. Publishers began to show interest in my work. It was a big leap and I was famous overnight.

W1 provided a different perspective:

My publication record was not strong. It took me a long time to become an associate ... After I got my tenured position, I found some good students; I then did some serious research, and was published, and got myself promoted. The first six years is important in forming a good research habit.

However, ironically, once they occupied positions of responsibility, the respondents often found themselves too busy to do any research. As W8 noted:

Particularly in the first two years, everything was new to me, and everything needed my attention. My own scholarly activities suffered. Research and publication stopped for more than a year.

Nevertheless, the more committed researchers among the respondents organised their lives around their research and writing. As one explained:

Summer is important to me. I have to go away in summer – not necessarily leaving Hong Kong but I must leave my office. I hide at home for a month to give myself time to work on my research data. [W10]

Maintaining a good professional history in research and publishing did pose a problem for some respondents. As two respondents explained:

There's no time for sleep. I work every waking minute. How can I keep up my research? [W4]

Juggling the demands of family and professional life is extremely difficult. I managed but often I have to be brutal in guarding my time. Some of the women who started with me left because they couldn't withstand the pressure. [W7]

Several of the respondents chose to forgo academic work and to move into leadership positions in curriculum development. One of them explained her choice in these terms:

My value in life is not just for a few papers. To me, life is more meaningful when I am able to contribute to students and to society. Those are my perspectives, and they are more important to me than publishing a few more papers. [W2]

Other respondents who had moved into administrative work were happy with their new roles. One described her attitude in these terms:

Personal satisfaction is the biggest driving force. When I was involved in my scholarly work, research, paper-writing, data analysis, etc., I could be totally immersed in them for many days, forgetting meals, everything ...

However, when you see administrative results – such as setting up new departments, colleagues being promoted, staff size expanding – then even administrative work becomes satisfying. For a long period of time, I looked into how to improve the profile of the school, how to lead the staff, how to negotiate with the government, Education and Manpower Bureau, University Grants Committee, etc. I found the work interesting and rewarding ... and I didn't mind putting a lot of time on them, putting aside all my scholarly work. [W8]

5.4.3.2 Industrial and local experience

For the respondents in certain disciplines, industrial experience and a network of contacts in industry have been helpful in securing a position or promotion. As one observed:

... without that experience, I probably wouldn't have been chosen for this position. The industrial experience was very important. [W1]

Two other respondents, W5 and W10, had similar views on the value of what they called their “solid industrial experience” in their respective disciplines.

Familiarisation with local systems, particularly local teaching experience, was also highly valued. One respondent said:

Most of my colleagues are involved in research. I'm one of the few who has taught in local secondary schools, and I was therefore often asked to sit on committees. With more and more commitments, I became an expert on local scenes in regard to the subject. Being familiar with the local language policy helped me in the design and planning of the curricula. [W2]

For those who advanced through internal promotion, institutional experience was important. As one respondent observed:

I have been a department co-ordinator for all these years, so it was natural to ask me to take up the position. Besides my teaching experience in this field, I suspect that they did give me credit for knowing the department and its people inside out. [W4]

Administrative and management experience was also mentioned by some respondents, but all respondents felt that this was undervalued when it came to promotion within the academic hierarchy. Most respondents said that they had learned these skills "on the job". One respondent reflected the general view that administrative experience was undervalued when she made the following comment:

Do you really think that the heads have a lot of management experience? Most of the heads in the tertiary sector have very little management experience, except for a few who came with a management background. The conscientious ones learn on the job or read a couple of books ... When I first took up the post [deanship], I was busy "putting out fires" and had no time to even learn. [W8]

5.5 Summary

This chapter has presented data that were collected in relation to the first three of the eight research questions. The chapter has examined: (i) the impact of early upbringing and education on career orientations; (ii) critical life events and relationships that have helped to lay the foundations for career development; and (iii) attitudes, skills and experiences that were perceived by the respondents to have advanced their careers. The data have revealed how the respondents' personal orientations, career aspirations and career development were influenced by their personal, social and professional attributes – which, in turn, were constructed and nurtured through socialisation. The respondents' relationships with parents, siblings, teachers and colleagues, together with critical events at different stages of their lives, combined to set the scene for their later success.

The following section provides a summary of the data collected in relation to questions 1 to 3.

5.5.1 Question 1

The first question was presented to the respondents in the following terms: “What impact did your upbringing and education have on your career?” With respect to Question 1, the data can be summarised as follows.

- Most of the parents of this cohort of female academics had not been highly educated, and they were therefore unable to advise their daughters on educational and vocational matters. However, they had supported their daughters' achievements in various ways, and they had encouraged autonomy of decision-making. All of the respondents were able to identify significant family experiences in their childhoods – experiences which, in their estimation, had had a positive influence on their personalities and careers.
- The respondents' mothers, despite their illiteracy, had contributed to shaping the personalities, attitudes and self-confidence of their daughters to a greater extent than had the fathers.

- There was no competition or rivalry among siblings. In most cases the respondents were the “brightest” and the “most academic” in the family, and the respondents’ siblings therefore looked up to them. Some negative feelings towards their siblings were generated in the respondents as a result of their parents showing favouritism to their sons.
- Although most of the parents were not overtly influential in determining their daughters’ career orientations, their parents’ apparent lack of concern and assistance had provided the respondents with space and freedom to construct their own identities at an early age.
- All of the respondents had benefited from their early education. Most of the respondents had been inspired and motivated by their teachers. The lack of educational role models and assistance at home was apparently compensated by the care and interest shown by their school teachers.
- As a result of growing up in a nurturing and stable school environment, the respondents developed self-confidence, trust in others, and a sense that all people were equal. Some believed that growing up in the environment of an all girls’ school had nurtured important attributes, such as independence and confidence.
- Adverse experiences, such as failures in examinations and disruptions to schooling, had provided the impetus for some of the respondents to develop positive attributes that were useful in meeting later challenges in life.

5.5.2 Question 2

The second question was presented to the respondents in the following terms: “What life events and relationships have helped to lay the foundation for your career development?”

With respect to Question 2, the data can be summarised as follows:

- This cohort of senior female academics nominated three critical experiences that had helped to lay the foundations for the development of their careers. These were: (i) overseas education; (ii) the development of a sense of mission; and (iii) the experience of adversity in life.

- Relationships that had a significant influence on the respondents' career orientations, included those with: (i) mentors; (ii) role models; and (iii) significant others, such as teachers, former employers and supervisors, priests, spiritual directors, qi-gung masters, friends, parents and others who had shown faith in them. For the married respondents, especially those with children, support from their husbands was most important.

5.5.3 Question 3

The third question was presented to the respondents in the following terms: "What experiences, attitudes, and skills do you deem to have been critical?" With respect to Question 3, the data can be summarised as follows:

- Critical attitudes included a sense of mission, dedication, dealing with adversity, being different and being positive.
- Language skills, especially being bilingual in Chinese and English, time-management skills, and interpersonal and networking skills were considered important skills that supported career advancement.
- Key experience mentioned by the respondents included research and publication experience, and industrial and local experience.

Chapter 6

Voices of the Senior Female Academics (II)

6.1 Introduction

Chapter 5 covered the first three research questions of this study, and the present chapter addresses the remaining five research questions as presented to the respondents:

- What strategies, if any, do you use to attain top positions?
- What factors, do you think, have affected your career advancement?
- How do you manage your multiple roles?
- What kinds of support are deemed necessary?
- What advice would you give to women who are in pursuit of senior academic positions?

This chapter is divided into five main sections, each of which addresses one of the five themes – (i) career strategies; (ii) factors hindering career advancement; (iii) management of multiple roles; (iv) support networks; and (v) advice to aspiring female academics.

6.2 The Way Up: Career Strategies

6.2.1 Career planning

Three of the eleven respondents in this study joined their present tertiary institutions as senior lecturers after having worked overseas in universities for many years. Others began their academic life in junior positions in local universities, and worked their way up the ranks to become deans, department heads and professors. The majority said that they had not planned their careers at the beginning of their working lives. In discussing the influences that had prompted them to follow an academic career, three main factors emerged: (i) family needs at the time; (ii) mission drivers; and (iii) unsolicited opportunities.

6.2.1.1 Family needs

Several respondents stated that their work choices had been influenced by their perceptions of family needs at the time. W9 and W10, for example, said that they had chosen to take up positions in universities because they had been attracted by the possibilities for combining work with family responsibilities. W10 had been expecting her first child when she decided to apply for a part-time lecturing position. She explained it this way:

The new job helped to strike a balance between having a family and a career.

At that time, part-time work was the best option ... I wanted to work. I couldn't sit still, I know. I didn't specify that I had to go into academia.

W9 had accepted a position as a lecturer because her family was planning to return to Hong Kong at the time and she needed a secure position.

6.2.1.2 Mission drivers

As noted in Chapter 5, an interest in teaching had been nurtured in some of the respondents when they were young, and a "mission" to educate younger generations had then led them to pursue their academic careers. Others had discovered this sense of "mission" as they grew through life experiences. Some respondents simply had a general desire to serve others and to perform good deeds; others regarded the promotion of a discipline itself as their mission. W11 said:

I just wanted to teach and I didn't even know how to conduct proper research. I was passionate about teaching and promoting the discipline. Therefore, I did not make any plans to be in any particular positions at various times.

For the respondents who explicitly said that they were mission-driven in their career development (W1, W2, W3, W4, W7 and W11), a senior academic position was a means of achieving their educational and professional goals. W4 described it as follows:

You have to be in certain positions before you can make a difference. Trying to introduce changes when you're outside the system means you're making a "revolution". When you're in the system, you're making "reforms".

6.2.1.3 Unsolicited opportunities

W5, W6, and W8 talked about their moving into academic careers by good fortune, rather than by deliberate intention – often after experiencing difficulties in finding suitable jobs. Eventually, opportunities had arisen and they had made the best of them. W8 recalled:

After completing my bachelor's degree, I came back to Hong Kong hoping to go into teaching in schools. I wrote to the Department of Education and the schools, and was told that there was no vacancy in my discipline. A couple of schools told me that I was over-qualified. In 1979, one could be made a principal with a bachelor's degree ... My supervisor in Australia found me a scholarship. Once I started my PhD study, I knew I had to follow an academic career.

W9 noted that she entered higher education at the suggestion of others:

My ex-colleague gave me the job advertisement, and said, "No harm trying this one". [W9]

Regardless of the reasons given for embarking on an academic career, all of the respondents stated that they had not initially planned to become senior academics. Rather, various unsolicited opportunities had presented themselves, and they had been in the right place at the right time. The following comments were typical:

I just wanted to teach ... Often when I think about it, I know that I'm not an ambitious person. [W4]

I don't have a career plan. I am an impulsive person. I am a risk-taker. When a new opportunity appears, I will grab it and try. [W5]

When I first decided on an academic career path, I had no sense of vision, no career plan. To be honest with you, being an academic was not my first choice. Put it this way: working in university presented the best option at the time – lots of time and provisions for research, and I love writing. It was a position that offered flexibility ... I wasn't planning on staying for ten years. Actually, I did have other options. [W7]

Career planning? None. Getting into university was a pure coincidence. It just happened. Once I was in, I decided to do a good job. People were surprised how quickly I was promoted to being department head ... The first time the dean asked me to take up the post, I said I wasn't ready. The second year, he said, "You have to do it. I'm just informing you." Honestly, I wasn't prepared. Unlike others who had planned their careers step by step, I had done absolutely nothing. [W10]

However, although the female academics had not initially planned their careers, this did not necessarily mean that they had no career aspirations. W10 cited herself as an example:

Yes, it is true that I hadn't planned on being a leader, but it didn't mean that given the opportunity, I wouldn't want to become a top academic. I, too, have my career aspirations.

Most respondents learnt to identify their needs in life and at work after a period of exploration in academia, and they then became extremely focused. W7 talked about her own experience:

After 1993, I knew very well that big projects were what I was after ... So I changed direction. I spent one-fifth of my time doing my regular work, and fourth-fifths of the time on having my work published ... Between 1993 and 2003, I focused on a main chunk of research projects. Before that, I wasn't sure what I wanted in my academic life.

6.2.2 Focusing on essential tasks

All of the respondents emphasised the importance of knowing what they wanted, setting priorities, and being focused. Because there were many demands on their time, they all felt a need to focus their efforts on essential tasks. Being “focused” meant identifying their core interests and skills, and concentrating most of their time and effort on one area of strength.

The serious researchers among the respondents focused on their research and avoided the distraction of administrative work. The following two comments reflect this point of view:

I do have strategies. I make a special effort to avoid taking up too much administrative work. My supervisor told me, “The last thing I want to do is to be a department head”. It's time-consuming, and I believe it's a thankless job, too. It distracts you from being a good scholar. [W6]

To me, admin work is a burden ... I focus only on what is important; for the rest, I do the minimum. It's important to go to the core of knowledge ... I focus on building my research profile and publication record. I network with my peers, be seen in public, focus on research, and refuse to be distracted. [W7]

The importance of knowing what they wanted and setting priorities was exemplified by W5, who did not like research work. For this respondent, and others like her whose main interest was not in research, “essential tasks” meant something quite different. W5 explained her situation in the following terms:

My strengths are in recruiting people, finding the right people, monitoring projects ... I like starting-up things and building things. I focus on increasing my human capital, getting exposed to the outside world, and knowing more about the continuing education market.

The core interests of W1, W2, W4, W9, and W11 revolved around students and curriculum innovations. The efforts of these respondents were devoted to teaching and course development, as revealed by the following comments:

I know I can only work on things that I believe in, that is, teaching ... I know I am making a contribution to the students. My colleagues can see that my heart is with the students. [W1]

This is the first university that offered a full-time sports education degree. I wanted to contribute to making it a success. [W11]

6.2.3 Building up academic reputation

Some of the respondents mentioned that “being seen and heard” is crucial to an academic career. In this regard, W7 had this to say:

It is vital to establish your networks: you need to organise your professional knowledge and your interpersonal relationships. They are the most important. You could bury your head, work until you drop, and no one knows. If no one knows about you, it’s a waste of your effort. You have to have a vision, and you need to promote your ideas. If the promotion is done well, you’ll have more recognition in return.

Her strategy was to raise her profile through networking, appearances on television, speaking in public, writing columns in local newspapers, and winning community awards.

Although all the respondents recognised the importance of building up an academic reputation, some did not like doing this. For W6, developing a reputation also meant “aggressive moves, and to a certain extent, doing some self-advertisement”. W6 and W9 found this kind of academic socialising “meaningless” and “distasteful”. They preferred to “make their names” through research, publication of academic papers, or teaching.

6.2.4 Being politically astute

W2, W5, W7, W8, and W11 displayed an astute political awareness of the importance of organisational socialisation. In their view, learning about the culture, systems, hierarchy, and values of the institutions in which they worked was useful in solving internal problems and enhancing their credibility, especially when their work involved demonstrating managerial leadership and collaboration with other departments.

W5, who was adept in this area of organisational politics, offered the following view:

To be a good administrator, you have to be familiar with the system. You need to know how your bosses think ... You have to take initiatives.

The same respondent also stressed the importance of networking, which she described as follows:

Talking to more people helps. More communication, particularly with “people upstairs” [more senior people] ... Networking helped me a lot. At least I know what they are thinking upstairs, and I understand their concerns.

Although all of the female academics acknowledged that being adept at organisational politics would assist in the advancement of their careers, some were too involved in their research work to allow time for socialising. Others were simply reluctant to become involved in organisational politics, about which they were generally cynical.

6.2.5 Taking up opportunities

The word “opportunity” was prominent in some of the respondents’ accounts of their career histories. These respondents emphasised the importance of being flexible, alert, and ready for opportunities, as the following examples illustrate:

Very often, women just happened to be around; then they were offered the opportunities; probably jobs that nobody wanted, they took them on, and did a good job. [W4]

I think I am more or less all right now, and I don't particularly want any changes. However, when opportunity knocks, and the timing is right, I might still be interested. You never know what's around the corner ... [W5]

From my own experience, it's a matter of having the opportunities. I happened to meet people who wanted to help me. I really had no ambition. I didn't fight for anything myself. Opportunities came to me and I took them up. I didn't set out to fight for anything ... Sometimes, I was even persuaded to take things up. [W8]

6.2.6 Managing time

The importance of time was often mentioned in conversations with the respondents about strategies. They variously mentioned having to “guard”, “allocate”, “make”, or “manage” their time. Most of them worked long hours, often starting early in the morning before normal office hours and/or working late into the evenings – as the following comments testify:

Research is an endless job. I often don't leave the laboratory until midnight. Basically, there is no holiday ... No rest days ... I combine my meetings, conferences and duty visits when I travel. [W3]

First of all, I don't have holidays. When do I find time to write my papers and do research? When I'm on long leave. Summer is very important to me. I hide at home for a month or so. That's the time when I can write, and analyse my data. [W10]

To manage her time, W7 trained herself to compartmentalise her efforts. She divided her waking hours among different tasks – research, writing, community work, teaching, student consultations, university committees, and family responsibilities. She said that she was able to concentrate fully on each individual task at any given time, and not be bothered by her other responsibilities.

All of the respondents claimed that they were reasonably good managers of their time, and they usually prioritised tasks and tried to adhere to their work schedules. Nevertheless, although these women talked about “good time management” and being able to “make time” to meet the various demands of work and family, none mentioned allowing time for herself.

6.2.7 Refining research and publication skills

All of the respondents agreed that research and academic publishing is still the most important professional activity for academics, and that the success of their careers depended on their doing good work in this area. All respondents affirmed that their academic reputations and career prospects were dependent on their research profiles, research grants and published articles.

W10 was aware from the beginning of her academic career that it was important to refine her writing skills and enhance her academic reputation by having her work published in prestigious journals. This respondent recounted her thoughts in the following terms:

My supervisor advised me that I should always send my articles to the top journals. I'd expect them to reject me but that was OK. I would go for the top journal, and then revise my work based on their feedback. Sometimes, I had to do a few revisions, and eventually my work was published. I wasn't born with the skill of writing. I learnt it through hard work. [W10]

W7 tried to get funding for a research team, so work could be done faster. She stressed the importance of relating all activities to the team's core research interest:

I lead a team of researchers. Everything I do is related to my research topic. I'm not interested in other areas. I focus on one area and do things in different forms.

6.2.8 Thinking positively

Several of the respondents exhibited a resilient ability to find positive meanings in their life experiences. These respondents had a propensity to reframe personal sacrifices as personal choices. For example, W2 had a strong dislike for administrative work, which she described in the following terms:

Research is my interest whereas admin work doesn't give me any satisfaction. It's more of a burden. To be in this position, I have to sacrifice lots of time – time that could be much better spent on reading and writing up research.

Nevertheless, this same respondent was able to explain her move to a post with a heavier administrative load by focusing on the benefits it brought:

There are obvious advantages. For example, in resource allocation, I have my own say. That means, I can do what I want to do – things like a big research project implemented by a team. I wouldn't be able to do this if I wasn't in the position. I have to count my blessings.

Most of the respondents displayed tolerance and endurance in facing a heavy workload. In particular, W7 explicitly stressed the importance of managing her emotional load and taking control of events in her life:

For a project to move forward, you have to allow one-fifth of your energy for handling problems. I always make that sort of allowance in time as well as in effort. I look at it as part of the job. Every job comes with it. The world is not perfect ... even in the teaching world there are politics. My upbringing tells me not to expect things to be perfect. Some people give up too quickly. Some of my colleagues gave up, saying, “I can’t stand their discriminating against Chinese”. They can’t stand it, fine. I can. Say, in publishing [academic articles], I have to work with publishers, editors, and translators ... I allow one-fifth of my time to handle them; same with my children. I expect problems to emerge. This way, I don’t get frustrated, and I can deal with them peacefully. That’s why I regard EQ management as vital.

6.3 Riding the Tides: Factors Hindering Career Advancement

6.3.1 Family/work role conflicts

All the respondents stated that conflicts between their family role and their work role placed constraints on the advancement of their careers. Those who were married regarded their family role as the more important. Indeed, they all stated that they were prepared to give up their careers for their families. The following comment illustrates this view:

When it comes to making any decisions, family interest always comes first ... particularly in difficult times. A few years ago, I might have big plans of going for this and that at work. After a period of cuts, I now feel very strongly that no matter how hard you work, things can change overnight ... family won’t. I put time into it, and I know I’ll have a family that stays together. Family is what supports me at the end of the day. [W2]

The respondents planned their careers around family needs. Those who had young children were especially aware of the difficulties of juggling their academic and homemaking roles. W2, who referred to her family and children as a “burden”, stated:

For us females, family is a burden, a barrier to academic success. It's not easy for us to publish because it takes a lot of time. I see my male colleagues producing papers, but it is much harder for female colleagues. We do our research in our non-teaching hours, and it is close to impossible when you have a family. I can't sit down and read quietly at home. Once I'm home, I give my children all my attention.

Similarly, W5 and W9, who also had child care and domestic responsibilities, revealed that they had difficulty in finding time in which to read academic literature. In addition, it was almost impossible to find sufficient "quiet time" in which to undertake research and write up academic papers.

Some of the respondents reported stress as a result of their wishing to achieve more academically, but not having enough time or energy to accommodate all their duties. They also stated that having children was the biggest impediment to finding sufficient time and having sufficient autonomy to pursue their career aspirations. The following comments reflect this view:

Put it this way, if I was rid of family burden, I could have done better, been more efficient, and perhaps picked up more projects. [W2]

Do I have to make sacrifices? I was invited by a political party to go in their election. If I were single ... if I had no children, I would have gone ahead. I'm busy enough now ... If I went into politics, something would have to go – work or family? What about time conflict? I couldn't possibly attend meetings in the evenings. [W7]

If I didn't have any children, or if my children were bigger, I could have achieved more. [W9]

To minimise conflicts between work and family, all of the respondents had enlisted the help of others – such as domestic helpers, tutors, and relatives. They used domestic helpers to take care of mundane domestic chores, and solicited the assistance of their parents and members of their extended families to take responsibility for their households. Those with school-age children tried to cope by drawing a clear division between work and family time. As W2 noted:

I start early and do all my work in my office. I go home late but once I'm home, I give my children undivided attention. As a mother, I take care of their homework, and many other chores.

Adequate supervision of children's schoolwork was a major concern for the respondents. Some of them employed private tutors to assist in this regard. Others tried to diminish the need for schoolwork supervision by sending their children to international schools, which were less demanding in their academic requirements.

The respondents attempted to fill their children's free time with a variety of extra-curricular activities. W9 said that, at one time, she had enrolled her child in seven different classes in an attempt to ensure that the child would not suffer by her mother's absence.

The mothers harboured a sense of guilt about the lack of time that they had for their children. Two respondents talked about their guilty feelings:

Do I feel guilty? On normal days, no; but when they are sick, yes. I can't say I'm not affected. [W7]

The guilt feeling for females is much stronger than that for males. My girlfriends kept telling me, "Don't complain. In a few years' time, your children won't want you near them. Enjoy your time with them now." So, the pressure was on me to give them as much time as possible now. [W9]

In contrast to these comments from respondents who were married with children, the following comments from single respondents, or those without school-age children, are of interest:

Without a family, I have more time for work and research. I can work until late in the office. [W1]

There is always a trade-off. If I were married, I might not have gone this far ... The way I worked, I wouldn't have time to look after a family ... a family would be in my way. [W4]

Oh yes, I enjoy being single. My colleagues ask me for advice when they have personal problems. Sometimes, I can help because my values are different. [W6]

6.3.2 Woman in a man's world

The respondents were of the opinion that male academics do not experience conflicts between work and family to the same extent as female academics do. Some respondents commented that, despite Hong Kong's cosmopolitan make-up, most people in Hong Kong maintain a strong Chinese cultural identity – whereby there is still a clear gender division between work at home and work in the workplace.

Reflecting on their work achievements, eight out of the eleven respondents expressed the belief that, given the long hours and effort they had put into their work, they would have done better in their careers if they had been male. The following comments reflect these views:

If I were a man, I would have achieved more. I can't tell you exactly what the difference would be, but I have always felt that things would have been easier for me if I were a man. [W1]

Probably! Maybe it would have been easier. But of course it would still depend on my ability. However, if I were a man, I wouldn't have to defend myself for not being at home ... even if they're in the same position, doing the same job, I'd say that women have to work harder. [W2]

For women's work to be recognised, they have to work twice as hard and be twice as good as men. [W5]

We have never had a woman dean in our school. We all know that, in this field, women have to be much better than the males before they get promoted. [W7]

Although most of the respondents did not feel that there were any “glass ceilings” impeding their career prospects, nor any deliberate exclusion from the so-called “old boy network”, they did mention that they felt constrained by their gender. Many of the respondents talked about the difficulty of working with male colleagues because they had a different agenda or goals in life. Speaking of their male colleagues, W1, W2, and W5 made the following observations:

You know, when it comes to making important decisions, taking a stand ... They [male colleagues] looked at their jobs; they looked at their positions. Their career is too important for them to risk it. That’s the problem: self-interest. They don’t want to offend anyone. So they become passive. [W1]

I find my male colleagues to be less flexible and more indecisive ... They are more traditional, and do not accept new ideas readily. My female colleagues are more reflective and open to new ideas. [W2]

They are more focused, and they spend more time on research and publishing matters. [W5]

6.3.3 Lack of female role models and mentors

Although none of the respondents in this cohort had had any formal experience of having been mentored, most of them stated that they had been helped or mentored informally by supervisors and bosses, who were mostly male. The respondents acknowledged that it would have been ideal to be mentored by other senior women; however, the likelihood of this had been limited by the relative paucity of senior women in higher-education institutions. Had there been more senior female academics with similar backgrounds and experiences to their own, the respondents felt that they might have found it easier to model success.

Another reason offered by some respondents for the lack of female mentors was that some senior female academics were “unsympathetic” and “territorial” [W9]. Two respondents who did have contact with female seniors reported that their experiences had not been entirely positive. They had recollections that were in keeping with the so-called “queen bee” phenomenon (Staines, Travis and Jayerante 1974).

I left the university because of her. I would have stayed on, had she allowed me to do research. She was head of the department. I had just received my PhD and I would have loved to continue doing research. She was the kind of person who demanded 100 per cent obedience ... Before I had a chance to tell her my research plan, she started publicly attacking me and another colleague in the staff meetings. We met six times a year and every time, we were criticised. [W4]

Yes, I encountered one female academic who is like this. I was assisting her in her project. When I asked her to help me, she was really selfish. She didn't want me to get a better job, for fear that I wouldn't have so much time to assist her in her project. ... I think she was worried that I would compete with her. [W6]

6.3.4 Self-confidence and crises in confidence

A sense of self-confidence was another issue that was frequently raised by the respondents. They stressed the importance of believing in themselves as being academically able.

W10, for example, admitted that she initially lacked confidence in her ability to progress up the academic ladder. She described initial feelings of inadequacy about her ability to produce academic papers:

I wasn't sure of my own ability, and I was often frustrated. My pet line was, “It's time to go back to my old job. Who wants to be an academic?” You can imagine how down I was. Now, it still takes me two weeks to recover from a paper rejection. In the past, it was two months!

W8 described herself as a “perfectionist”, and described how she undermined her own confidence by setting her expectations too high:

I’m kind of a perfectionist. I expect to do the best. My entire career life has been like that ... I made it hard for myself; I’m never a hundred per cent satisfied with myself. I always felt that I could do better, so I became kind of nervous.

Many of the respondents spoke of the encouragement they had received from their colleagues and supervisors to pursue an academic career. These respondents were of the view that their colleagues’ confidence in the respondents’ academic abilities had been of importance in their later success in academe.

6.3.5 Restrictive mindsets

According to W8 and W10, many educated women in Hong Kong are still conditioned (and constrained) by cultural expectations and gender-differentiated socialisation. They stated that the success of a woman is still often assessed on the basis of whether she maintains a happy marriage, raises children who do well in school, and supports her husband in pursuit of his career. Although there are opportunities for women to establish an academic career, these respondents argued that some women tend to confine themselves to domestic roles in the interests of their families. W10 made the following observations:

I came across female colleagues who are very bright, women of very high calibre; but they restricted themselves. This had something to do with their upbringing. They all said that family was the most important. I asked them why they didn't do further study. One said, "I don't want to be as busy as you are ... I would have no time for my children." Perhaps, their support system is not as good as mine, but they are restricting themselves by not even wanting to improve themselves ... Sometimes, colleagues and students asked me "gendered" questions that were really amusing. They came out with questions and comments such as, "Did you date your husband first or did he date you first?" and "You're so strong, so bright. Who would dare ask you out?" At times I stayed at work until late. Even the janitor said, "Professor, you'd better go home; otherwise, your husband will divorce you." They meant well, but this kind of view is a product of socialisation. I really like my colleagues. They are bright but they don't give themselves a chance. This is the fault of society. They have internalised this gendered view of society and our culture has limited their development.

W8 noted that:

Virtues, such as dedication, diligence, assertiveness, and confidence, which are praised in men, can be misconstrued as "over-ambitious", "selfish", "too loud", and "arrogant" for us.

She went on to say that the difficulty of being a professional woman is striking a balance between family demands and work demands. She argued that some traditional males still see women as inferior, and that Hong Kong, despite its appearance of being Westernised and liberal, is still "very Chinese" – with few men being able to accept that their wives might be more socially successful than they are. According to W8 and W10, women have to display courage and confidence to withstand the pressure and the guilt feelings that culture and society place on them.

6.4 Balancing Act: Management of Multiple Roles

All of the respondents said that they had to assume multiple roles at home and at work – as mother, daughter, wife, carer and housekeeper at home, and as teacher, administrator, researcher, writer and academic leader at work. In managing their multiple roles, most stressed the importance of knowing what they wanted and of setting priorities. Because of the multiple demands on their time and energy, they all felt a need to focus their efforts on essential tasks.

W7 said that it was important to identify an area of interest and expertise. She talked about how she managed to identify a core role and a core interest after an initial period of “not knowing what I want and where I want to go”. Once she had identified and accepted her core role, all her other activities seemed to fall into place, and all her efforts were directed at establishing her expertise in her core role.

A common problem, mentioned by a few respondents, was that they had wasted part of their academic lives pondering what to do while trying to do everything right. For example, W2 recalled being torn between what she described as “self-interest” and “department interest” in her early years. She eventually decided to put aside research (which was her “self-interest”) to focus on expanding the department (which was her “department interest”). According to the respondents, a conflict between research and management/administration is a perennial issue for all academics. They claimed that the administrative workloads of Hong Kong academics are heavy; moreover, as they progress up the hierarchy, Hong Kong academics are faced with even greater administrative duties. Some respondents were reluctantly forced to forgo research because of their heavy administrative workloads, whereas others were happy to have finally divested themselves of the research burden to follow their real interest.

W4 was an example of the first type. She expressed regret when she talked about her choice, as the following comment reveals:

In retrospect, I went into administration too early. I mean it was all good experience, but then my research suffered. My research profile could have been better. I had gone into higher education to start my research but I got caught up in administrative work ... The admin work was so heavy that I just didn't have time for research. I didn't even have time for sleep. I worked over the holidays. I couldn't keep up with my research, and in the end, I had to give it up.

W4 thus accepted her own limitations, and decided to make good use of her strengths and interest to seek a sense of fulfilment in helping her students.

W1 and W2 also decided to forgo their research profiles to focus on the development of their other roles. W2 stated that she assumed managerial leadership because she believed that it would benefit the university and students. She talked about having to work within confines, and stated that her coping strategy was to “put my energy into something that was within my control, and benefit the students”. W1 identified her role as being a curriculum innovator and manager. As she explained:

At a point in time, I realised that I had started my career much later than my colleagues. I did my PhD after having worked for some years. I knew it was a bit late to start an academic career, so I went for a managerial role.

In contrast, W5 was an example of the second type – those who were comfortable with the notion of dispensing with research. She described the experience in this way:

When I was an academic, the situation was quite depressing. I didn't have enough journals, the pressure of publication was great, and I didn't know where to start ... Once I moved out of the research position, I have had more contact with people and I am a happier person.

The respondents acknowledged the assistance that they had received from various people, such as mentors, former teachers, employers, and spiritual directors, who had facilitated their management of multiple roles. For the married respondents, especially those with children, support from husbands, parents, and friends had been much appreciated. These people had formed valuable support networks for the respondents.

6.5 Good Samaritans: Support Networks

Certain relationships had exerted a significant influence on the respondents' career orientations. These included relationships with mentors, role models, teachers, former employers and supervisors, spiritual directors and others who had shown faith in the respondents. For the married respondents, especially those with children, support from their husbands was most important. These people had formed valuable support networks for the respondents, as described in Chapter 5 (Section 5.3.2.3 "Significant others").

In addition to the support networks described in Chapter 5, other sources of vital support came from friends, parents, colleagues, and religion. Some respondents also mentioned the importance of self-help.

6.5.1 Friends and parents

According to the married respondents, friends and parents had provided childcare and household support, and this had given the respondents time and energy to pursue their careers. In addition, those with school-age children said that they had employed tutors, drivers, and domestic helpers to ease their workloads. Nevertheless, the management of their households and their children's day-to-day activities continued to be a source of stress – partly because of their own feelings of guilt. Most respondents admitted that they could not attain peace of mind by employing domestic helpers and tutors, and were much happier when they knew that their children were under the care of someone whom they believed to be genuinely interested in the children's welfare. The support offered by friends, parents, and family members was thus greatly appreciated, as the following comments reveal:

I've been extremely lucky to have my mum around. Without her help, I wouldn't have been able to cope with all the demands on me, at home and at work. At least, I know that my kids are in good hands, and that gives me peace of mind to focus on my work issues. [W9]

How did I manage? My family helped and I have a few friends who are superb. I remember when I was busy doing my PhD, one of my friends rang me and said, "I can see you'll have to study again this Saturday and Sunday. Let me take your two kids out." [W10]

Friends, both inside and outside academia, had also provided emotional support by offering advice at critical moments and by listening to the respondents at stressful times. The following comments reflect these views:

Some old friends ... they are not academics, but I could talk to them about my work problems. Just whingeing. They couldn't help, but I did feel better to let things off my chest. [W2]

Several of my friends have helped me. At critical moments, they told me what I should do ... In the university, I have friends who help me out with my work. [W10]

6.5.2 Colleagues

Several respondents said that support from people at work was important. W3 and W7 both led teams of researchers, and both stressed the importance of teamwork. Similarly, W5 praised her colleagues for their efficiency, and said that she could not function without their support. W1 also acknowledged that reforms and curriculum changes could not take place without the support of her colleagues. These positive recollections are reflected in the following observations:

The colleagues in my office understand what I have been trying to do, and they are very supportive of my ideas. [W1]

It is team work. Provided we get along well, hard work does not matter. One person alone cannot do everything ... when the team matures, people are happy even if they have to work hard. [W5]

A few of my colleagues help in promoting the department. They are doing a good job. Slowly, we develop team work. [W10]

6.5.3 Religion

Religion has had an impact, to varying degrees, in shaping the overall development of some of the respondents. W6 decided to take up an academic post to serve God through her research publications. W1 discovered that teaching was her special calling through participating in church-related activities. W7 and W8 reported that they had gained strength through religion, and that in times of difficulties they turned to religion for spiritual support. The following two comments illustrate this view:

My support came from the church. I'm a Christian, quite devoted ... I'm not the traditional kind, and my mission is certainly not preaching in China. I feel I can contribute in another way – as a professional, as an academic. Christian training helps to improve my EQ. I don't mind suffering and I have great tolerance, and my mission can go beyond my present limitation. [W7]

My character is very strong and I tend to follow my own orientation; but in times of crises, my support came from God, from my religion. [W8]

6.5.4 Self

Self-help was considered the best help by some respondents. Both W2 and W9 maintained that people should not rely on external support networks. W2's statement below represents this view:

I believe that the best source of support is from myself, yes, myself ... call it internal support. Of course, family support is important but more important is yourself. Family can't be with you every minute, right? You'll have to support yourself ... tell yourself that you're very fortunate to have the opportunity to do this work.

6.6 Advice to Aspiring Female Academics

The respondents provided a variety of responses to the question, “What advice would you give to women who are in pursuit of senior academic positions?” Their various responses are summarised below, in order of popularity.

6.6.1 Publish

Of the four major aspects of academic life – administration, teaching, research, and publication of academic papers – the respondents were unanimous in maintaining that research and publication were the most important in terms of advancing their careers. They noted that universities often determine promotion on the basis of the number of internationally refereed articles that have been published in an author’s name, and they insisted that academic reputations depend on research profiles, research grants, and published articles.

W2, W3, W4, W6, W7, W8, and W10 stated that survival in the academic world was a case of “publish or perish”. They advised young academics to begin publishing early in their careers to enhance their credentials and reputation. They also encouraged them to seek guidance in proper academic writing style from senior colleagues. The following comments reflect these views:

Academically the first six years is very important. Now, I say to my juniors, “You have to publish more in the first six years, and allow your research habit to be formed.” [W2]

They should get as many papers out as possible. They have to publish while they are young. When they get older, they start losing their memories and can’t stand working through the nights. [W8]

Research wise, you have to be brave and take the initiative to learn – things like how to write a good proposal and how to put together a good paper. You have to be brave and show your proposals and papers to others. People will tell you whether the paper is good enough ... Having a good master makes all the difference. [W10]

On the question of choosing a journal to which to submit papers, W6 made the following suggestion:

They should look at their publications in tiers: first tier, second tier, and third tier. When they are not mature enough to go for higher tiers, they should publish in the lower ones to gain experience. They have to have a sense of achievement, build up confidence and go up step by step.

W7 provided a different perspective:

I'd advise them to go for the top journals. They shouldn't short-change themselves, but should be prepared for rejections and numerous revisions. They'll learn from the reviewers' feedback. [W7]

6.6.2 Plan and begin early

All of the respondents insisted that it was important to plan an academic career. Some of them felt that they had not been adequately prepared for a career in higher education, and some respondents, such as W1 and W2, lamented the fact that they had missed opportunities by not beginning their academic careers at a younger age.

W4 suggested that aspiring academics should formulate their plans from the beginning of their careers:

To guarantee an orthodox career path, one way is to get a postgraduate degree from a top institution, such as Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, Yale, etc. That means you really have to plan a career in research education. You find out very soon whether a research career is for you or not.

Based on their personal experiences, and those of their colleagues, several respondents stressed the importance of young women seeing a possible academic career in the context of their overall life choices. In particular, they related career planning to family planning. W6 recommended that aspiring young female academics should see themselves as having a ten year development period in which they have to develop their research profiles; according to W6, they should plan their families from a young age so that work and family are not in conflict.

W2 and W10 made similar observations:

Start early if you want to be an academic woman. Your marriage and family life have to support your academic life. Early planning is a must. [W2]

My PhD thesis writing, the birth of my children, and being head of the department happened at about the same time. Those few years of hard labour almost killed me! I think you either have children early or forget about having children. [W10]

6.6.3 Get the “right” husband

All of the respondents maintained that finding the “right” husband is vital to career success. They cited many examples of other female academics whose academic lives had been compromised by unsympathetic husbands and family duties, or whose marriages had ended in divorce. W2 cited the example of a colleague:

She is having problems at home. There are things that she wants to do but her husband is not supportive. They’re both in the tertiary sector. The husband’s attitude is, “You’re the mother, and you’re asking me to put time into the children? If one of us has to make sacrifices, it should be you and not me!”

6.6.4 Show dedication and diligence

Some respondents suggested that young people today are too pragmatic and cynical. The following comments reflect this point of view:

A lot of times, one shouldn’t care about the outcomes – I mean, rewards. Just do one’s best ... I see some junior staff around me; they care too much about what they get in the end. If a person keeps asking questions such as: “What benefits do I get out of this?”; “How will this help my future career?”; “Why do I have to take on this task?”; and “How come he doesn’t have to do it?”; then my advice is, “If self-interest is your starting point, you’re creating obstacles for yourself.” [W1]

The young ones today are more intelligent than I was at their age. But somehow because of their intelligence, they have become “slack”. Concentration and diligence are most important. What do they bank on if they don’t even work hard? Luck? Or relationship? [W6]

They cited their own career experiences to illustrate their view that they had achieved success through dedication, diligence, and hard work. They talked about these experiences in the following terms:

I wasn’t thinking about being a professor; I was more concerned with doing what I was interested in. I did so many things not because I wanted a promotion but it came with the hard work. People recognised my work, and I went up. [W7]

I’m a very committed person ... I wasn’t thinking about what I’d get out of a good job. I just did my best, and somehow they all fell into place for me. I started writing about my work experiences, I applied my experience to my teaching, and I began to publish. One thing led to another, and now I’m a dean. [W10]

I’m not sure if you’d like my advice, which is: Don’t think too far. It’s impractical to think too far ahead if you can’t even finish what you have to do today ... If you do the best you can now, you’ll get new opportunities. [W11]

Several respondents recounted how their sense of mission for education had led them to a career in higher education. W1, W2 and W9 urged young academics to show genuine concern for students and to be dedicated to teaching.

6.6.5 Develop interpersonal skills

W4 recounted how a female colleague had fallen from grace as a result of her lack of interpersonal skills. W4 described it as follows:

She got a PhD from Harvard. If she had played her cards right, she could have become head of the department, but she blew it. She ended up resigning ... You know what Hong Kong is like. It's a small fish tank; news spreads very quickly, and everybody knew about her wild temper. She accused men of being chauvinistic, ... couldn't hold her tongue, and blew up for the most tedious reasons ... Her personality ruined her career.

Several respondents talked about the importance of interpersonal skills in different ways. The following comments reflect these views:

I'm not very patient. When the outcome is not what I had hoped for, I become quite frustrated. Most of the time, the frustration was directed at myself. I've learned to manage my negative feelings. When I feel it coming, I go and hide. This is to avoid causing bad relationships. [W8]

I maintain good human relationships Anything I don't know, I seek advice and ask people about it. People don't normally mind, but you have to take the initiative to ask. [W10]

6.6.6 Maintain a professional image

W6 was especially concerned about the demeanour of some female academics whom she had met. She went into great detail in describing her perception of a female professional. In particular, she warned junior female academics not to be "gossipers":

Don't be a petty woman. I mean, don't abuse the advantage of being female ... We spread knowledge and information, not gossip.

The same respondent encouraged female academics to "compete with men on equal grounds ... do not expect men to help you because you are a woman." In addition, she stressed the importance of "not only behaving like a professional but also looking like one."

She explained it further:

Act and dress like a professional. You might have to forsake the worldly pleasures, such as shopping and wearing colourful dresses and heavy make-up. Why? Your academic image will suffer if you're dressed like a peahen. If you focus on your looks, they assume that you have no brains.

6.6.7 Learn by example

W3, a world-renowned scientist and researcher, who had overcome much hardship to reach the peak of her career, summarised her advice to aspiring female academics as follows:

- Dedication is most important.
- Choose the life you want to live, go forward and don't look back.
- Life might be hard, but it is your choice.
- You might have to sacrifice family time, but it is your choice.
- You cannot have everything in life. If you want to be an academic, you have to accept the challenges.
- Try your best to develop your potential; add new knowledge.
- People who are too materialistic or too idealistic do not make good academics.
- Those with extreme intelligence and personality will not make good academics. They might be suited only to a research role, and remain in the laboratory.
- Leadership is important because a senior academic has to lead and to look after the juniors.

6.6.8 Think before you leap

W4 said that all women who are considering an academic career should:

... find out what it is like to be an academic woman before they jump ... Think before you leap. It takes a lot of ambition and determination to get there. In the end, you ask yourself, "Is it all worth it?" A lot of women are asking themselves this question – women who made it.

6.7 Summary

This chapter has presented data that were collected in relation to the last five of the eight research questions. The chapter has examined: (i) career strategies; (ii) factors hindering career advancement; (iii) management of multiple roles; (iv) support networks; and (v) advice to aspiring female academics. The data have revealed that the respondents in this study had not planned their academic careers at the beginning of their working lives. When asked about the influences that had prompted them to follow an academic career, three main factors emerged: (i) family needs at the time; (ii) mission drivers; and (iii) unsolicited opportunities. Despite a lack of deliberate planning in the initial stages of their careers, after a period of exploration in academia the respondents became extremely focused on their career paths. The strategies they used, their perceptions of factors that hindered career advancement, and the advice they gave to aspiring female academics were influenced by their personal, social, and professional attributes.

The following section provides a summary of the data collected in relation to questions 4 to 8.

6.7.1 Question 4

The fourth question was presented to the respondents in the following terms: “What strategies, if any, do you use to attain top positions?” With respect to Question 4, the data can be summarised as follows:

- Strategies employed by the respondents to enhance their career development included: (i) focusing on essential tasks; (ii) building up academic reputation; (iii) being politically astute; (iv) taking up opportunities, (v) managing time; (vi) refining research and publication skills; (vii) thinking positive; and (viii) responding to the needs of students and departments.
- Although all of the respondents agreed that the strategies were effective, they did not put them all into practice, and the respondents’ interpretations of the strategies differed according to their individual personal, social and professional attributes. For example, their perceptions of “essential tasks” were very different, and three groups emerged as a result: (i) W3, W6, W7 W10, focused on research and publication, and most of their tasks were related to their core research activities ; (ii) W1, W2, W9, W11 focused more on teaching and the majority of their time were spent on students and/or course-related affairs; and (iii) W4, W5, W8 were more flexible and they tended to respond to the needs of the institutions, and their time were spent on projects, teaching and staff management.
- Consequently, they employed different strategies in enhancing their career developments: (i) W3, W6, W7, W10 – building up academic reputation; managing time by focusing on research; refining research and publication skills; (ii) W1, W2, W9, W11 – responding to the needs of students and departments, and trying to strike a balance between teaching and course development /management; (iii) W4, W5, W8 – being politically astute, taking up opportunities; multi-tasking and focusing on projects, teaching and staff management.

6.7.2 Question 5

The fifth question was presented to the respondents in the following terms: “What factors, do you think, have affected your career advancement?” With respect to Question 5, the data can be summarised as follows:

- The respondents nominated the following as factors that hindered their career advancement: (i) conflicts between their family roles and their work roles; (ii) strong societal gender norms and role differentiations; (iii) lack of female role models and mentors; (iv) crises in self-confidence; and (v) restrictive mindsets (both self-generated and culturally mediated).
- These factors did not affect all respondents equally. The degree of constraint produced by any given factor varied with the family and work roles of the respondents, their personalities, their life goals, and their different socialisation experiences. It appeared that W2, W5, and W9 were more affected by (i) conflicts between their family roles and their work roles and (ii) strong societal gender norms and role differentiations; and they conceded to assuming a nurturing role at work and at home rather than focusing single-mindedly on academic pursuits.
- While none of the respondents had any formal mentoring experience, W3, W6, W7, W8 and W10, reportedly, benefited more from assistance/directions given to them informally by different significant others, such as teachers, bosses, PhD supervisors and academic seniors.

6.7.3 Question 6

The sixth question was presented to the respondents in the following terms: “How do you manage your multiple roles?” With respect to Question 6, the data can be summarised as follows:

- The respondents in this study had to assume multiple roles – most commonly as mother, daughter, wife, carer and housekeeper at home, and as teacher, administrator, researcher, writer and academic leader at work.
- Most respondents stressed the importance of knowing what they wanted, of setting priorities and of staying focused. Once a core interest or role had been identified, all efforts were directed to establishing the core role.

- The conflict between research responsibilities and management/administrative responsibilities was stated to be a perennial issue for all academics. Some respondents were forced to make a choice between research duties and other duties because of the heavy workload, whereas others were happy to have finally dispensed with their research burdens to follow their real interest.
- In view of their varied roles as teachers, scholars and administrators in academe, the respondents said that they often had to make decisions regarding their priorities and their workloads. Based on a comparison of the workloads and priorities according to the major roles assumed by the respondents at the time of the interviews, they could be grouped as follows: (i) Scholar/researcher – W3, W10, W6, W7; (ii) Educator/teacher – W1, W2, W9, W11; (iii) Manager/administrator – W5, W8, W4.
- In various ways, other people, including husbands, parents, mentors, former teachers, employers, friends and colleagues, had facilitated the respondents' management of multiple roles.

6.7.4 Question 7

The seventh question was presented to the respondents in the following terms: “What kinds of support are deemed necessary?” With respect to Question 7, the data can be summarised as follows:

- In various ways, other people, including informal mentors, former teachers, employers, colleagues and friends, had rendered support to the respondents, and these people formed valuable support networks for the respondents.
- For the married respondents, especially those with children, support from husbands and sometimes parents and friends were critical.
- Some respondents (W1, W4, W6, W7 and W8) found support in religion.
- Two respondents (W2 and W9) believed that self-support was the best form of support.

6.7.5 Question 8

The eighth question was presented to the respondents in the following terms: “What advice would you give to women who are in pursuit of senior academic positions?” With respect to Question 8, the data can be summarised as follows:

- The respondents provided a variety of advice to women who are in pursuit of senior academic positions. This included: (i) publish; (ii) plan and start early; (iii) find the “right” husband; (iv) show dedication and diligence; (v) develop interpersonal skills; and (vi) maintain a professional image.
- W3 who had overcome much hardship to reach the peak of her career provided a list of suggestions for aspiring female academics.
- W4 reminded all women who are considering an academic career to “find out what it is like to be an academic woman before they jump”.

Chapter 7

Substantive Theory of Selective Attribution in Career Trajectory and Typology of Senior Female Academics

7.1 Introduction

Chapters 5 and 6 of this thesis presented a summary of the data collected from conversations with eleven senior female academics in Hong Kong. The data showed: (i) how the personal orientations, career aspirations, and career developments of these women were influenced by their personal, social and academic attributes; (ii) how these developed through socialisation, particularly in their early life experiences; and (iii) how their attributes and career aspirations and strategies were constructed, and subsequently affected, by the relationships they had with significant others and by critical events at various stages of their lives. The findings constitute the basis of a proposed theory of “selective attribution in career trajectory” introduced in Chapter 4. This theory explains how the dominant attributes of individuals (personal, social, and academic) interact with socialisation experiences in shaping career trajectories. The present chapter provides a comprehensive description of this proposed theory, together with a typology of senior female academics, within the context of the life experiences of the eleven senior female academics (as described in Chapters 5 and 6).

The present chapter is comprised of three main sections. Following this introduction, Section 7.2 is an exposition of the categories and concepts that constitute the proposed theory of selective attribution in career trajectory. Individual attributes, which constitute the core category of the proposed theory, are categorised and examined under the headings of “personal”, “social” and “academic”. The moderating influence of socialisation experiences on attributes is also discussed. Section 7.3 provides a typology of the senior female academics by undertaking a comparative analysis of the dominant attributes of the senior female academics. The section also explains how the interplay of attributes and socialisation experiences account for variations among the career orientations and career strategies of the respondents. Section 7.4 summarises the salient features of the two related sets of propositions underpinning the theory of selective attribution in career trajectory.

7.2 Categories and Concepts of Selective Attribution

7.2.1 Attributes

Attributes constitute an important construct of the proposed theory of “selective attribution in career trajectory”. The literature attests to the reciprocal relationships that exist between personal attributes and personal identity, relationships, career orientation and career trajectory (Super, 1953; Holland 1997). The reciprocal relationship that exists between socialisation experiences and the development of attributes is also part of the theoretical framework of the proposed theory. In particular, attributes are posited as powerful determinants of personal behaviour, and thus as significant influences on career trajectory.

Using Glaser and Strauss' (1967) constant comparative method, three core categories of attributes were identified from the data: (i) personal; (ii) social and (iii) academic. Concepts that described different facets of attribute properties were also identified at the open-coding stage. These properties were: (i) focus; (ii) commitment; (iii) clarity; (iv) consistency and (v) strategies. *Focus* indicates the area of concentration of effort, whereas *commitment* refers to the degree of concentration of effort. *Clarity* refers to a respondent's sense of clarity in attribute priority. *Consistency* indicates congruity in application of attributes in similar circumstances. Finally, *strategies* describe how certain attributes were used by the respondents.

Table 7.1 presents an overview of the categories, dimensions and concepts related to attributes.

Table 7.1 Categories and dimensions of attributes in selective attribution.

Categories	Dimensions	Concepts
Personal attributes	Personality	Intelligent, independent, non-conforming, self-motivated, investigative, perseverant, diligent, introspective, receptive, committed, risk-taking, positive, resilient
	Personal identity	Missions, core values, perceived roles, self-efficacy, driving forces
	Competency	Intellectual competence, language competence, organisation/management, time management, social skills
Social attributes	Age	Entry age, motivation, promotion, limiting factor, research profile, family planning
	Socio-economic status	Parental occupations, schooling, overseas education
	Social and cultural identities	Autonomy, role definitions, social and cultural expectations, stress, guilt
	Gender	Male ego, equality, constraints, social circle, "old-boy network"
	Marital status	Being wife and mother, expectations, conflicts between family and work
	Religion	Faith in God's will, sense of calling, going beyond personal limits, support, religion and work, church people
Academic attributes	Academic self-concept	High achievers, determination to excel, research and publication experience, parental influence, teacher recognition
	Professional identity	Researcher, teacher, administrator, manager, project coordinator, level of commitment, multi-tasking

7.2.1.1 Personal attributes

As shown in Table 7.1, three dimensions of personal attributes were identified in the respondents: (i) personality; (ii) personal identity and (iii) competence. Each of these dimensions is explored in greater detail below.

7.2.1.1.1 Personality

According to Holland (1997), career choice is an expression of a person's personality. His theory of "person-environment fit" rests on the premise that "people search for environments that will let them exercise their skills and abilities, and express their attitudes and values" (Holland 1997, p.4). Thus, members of a given occupation often exhibit similar personalities and histories.

The respondents in the present study exhibited many similar character attributes, which the women confirmed had been crucial to their career success in higher education. The descriptions applied to these personality attributes at the open-coding stage of analysis included, "intelligent", "independent", "non-conforming", "self-motivated", "perseverant", "diligent", "introspective", "receptive", "committed" and "positive" (in terms of their willingness to take up challenges and face adversities).

7.2.1.1.2 Personal identity

The construct of "identity" (or "self-concept") is a general term that describes a person's image of self. According to career theorists, such as Super (1953) and Holland (1997), this construct plays a significant role in the career development of an individual. Super conceived of "career" as being a synthesis of a person's self-concept with the external realities of the work environment. According to this author, this synthesis gradually develops as the person becomes aware of his or her self-concept, notes the opportunities and requirements of certain occupations, and experiences the implementation of the self-concept.

The personal identities of the present cohort of senior female academics were examined by noting and comparing their concepts of mission and core values, perceived roles and self efficacy. Each of these is described below.

With regard to *mission and core values*, all of the respondents stated that their families constituted the most important aspect of their lives. They asserted that monetary rewards, titles, and promotions were not primary considerations in their career decisions. They all said that they would apply for jobs only if they enjoyed doing them and found them meaningful. Many of them used the term “mission-driven” to describe their careers. They talked about these “missions” in the following terms:

- W1: “to provide quality education”
- W2: “to be a curriculum leader”
- W3: “to benefit mankind through research”
- W4: “to make a difference in students’ lives”
- W5: “to bring about changes and to create new meaningful projects”
- W6: “to search for truth and new knowledge”
- W7: “to bring about law reforms in China”
- W8: “to improve the education system”
- W9: “to be a good teacher”
- W10: “to serve others and to train future leaders”
- W11: “to promote sports education”

With respect to *perceived roles*, all of the respondents said that they had to assume multiple roles at home and work – as mother, daughter, wife, carer and housekeeper at home; and as teacher, administrator, manager, researcher, writer and academic leader at work. In managing their multiple roles, most stressed the importance of knowing what they wanted and of setting priorities. Because of the multiple demands on their time and energy, they all felt a need to focus their major efforts on a core role at work, based on the missions and values they held, their strengths, and workplace requirements. In view of the varied roles as teachers, scholars, and administrators in academe, the respondents said that they often had to make decisions regarding their priorities and their workloads. Table 7.2 presents a comparative analysis of the workloads and priorities according to the major roles assumed by the respondents at the time of the interviews.

Table 7.2 Comparative analysis of workloads and priorities.

Perceived role (focus)	Workload (commitment)	Priority (clarity)	Respondents
Type 1: Scholar/researcher	high	high	W3, W10, W6, W7
	low	mid	W8, W11, W4
	low	low	W1, W2, W5, W9
Type 2: Educator/teacher	high	high	W1, W2, W9, W11
	low	mid	W3, W4, W5, W7, W8, W10
	low	low	W6
Type 3: Manager/administrator	high	high	W5, W8, W4
	high	mid	W1, W2, W9
	high	low	W10
	low	low	W3, W6, W7

The term *self-efficacy* was interpreted by the respondents as referring to their personal judgements of their capabilities to produce desired outcomes in accordance with the roles and responsibilities that they had assumed. They stressed the importance of believing in themselves as being academically able. The data showed that their academic efficacy was affected by (i) past academic achievements; (ii) encouragement from colleagues and supervisors; (iii) expectations of self; (iv) ability to produce academic papers; and (v) recognition from students, peers, and significant others. Those who claimed to have high efficacy often exhibited a resilient ability to find positive meanings in their various life experiences, including the adverse. The respondents had a propensity to reframe personal sacrifices as personal choices, and most displayed tolerance and endurance in facing a heavy workload.

7.2.1.1.3 Competence

The respondents discussed certain competences and skills that had helped them to advance in their careers. These included: (i) intellectual competence; (ii) language competence; (iii) social skills; and (iv) time-management. Data from the conversations and the supplementary documents indicated that not all claimed to possess the same competences and skills; moreover, in areas in which they all claimed competence, it was apparent that they did not make use of their abilities in the same way. For example, with respect to time management, although all said that they worked extended hours, their focuses and strategies in managing their time varied in accordance with their perceived roles in academe, as shown in Table 7.3.

Table 7.3 Perceived roles and time-management strategies.

Perceived role	Focus	Commitment	Clarity	Consistency	Time-management strategies
Type 1: Scholar/ Researcher (W3, W10, W6, W7)	Research	Most tasks related to core research activities	Very focused	Hard-headed about prioritising commitments	Compartmental-isation of self; focus on research
Type 2: Educator/ Teacher (W1, W2, W9, W11)	Teaching	Majority of time spent on students and/or course-related affairs	Focused on teaching	Set priorities but willing to respond to student and department needs	Attempts to strike a balance between teaching and course development /management
Type 3: Manager/ Administrator (W5, W8, W4)	Project management, teaching	Time spent on projects, teaching, and staff management	Flexible	Flexible and willing to attend to contingencies	Multi-tasking

7.2.1.2 Social attributes

7.2.1.2.1 Age

The individual women of this cohort had varying perceptions of the extent to which their ages had influenced their career development. W1 and W2 lamented that their being older on entry had limited their career development. In contrast, W3, W6, W8, and W11, all of whom had entered academia at about the same age as W1 and W2, did not feel that their careers had been compromised.

Age had a moderating effect on the respondents' use of attributes. Those who were close to retirement age were, in general, not so keen to seek further promotion; they were more interested in working on tasks that they enjoyed. Some were looking forward to retirement and having more time to pursue their personal interests.

All of the respondents were adamant that it was important to plan an academic career at an early age. Several respondents stressed the importance of young women seeing a possible academic career in the context of their overall life choices, and that young female academics should plan their families at an early age (and decide, as part of that plan, to give birth to their children earlier or later) to minimise potential conflicts between work and family.

7.2.1.2.2 Socio-economic status

Although previous research has suggested that socio-economic status, as measured by parental occupation, is a consistent predictor of an individual's career aspirations and attainments (Goodale & Hall 1976), most of the parents of the successful female academics in the present study had relatively humble backgrounds, and many had not received much education. Of the eleven respondents, two said that they were from a well-to-do background, with the rest being from low- or middle-income families. However, in general, the socio-economic status of the respondents did not appear to have had a significant influence on their career orientations.

7.2.1.2.3 Social and cultural identities

Although individual respondents identified with Chinese cultural and social values to varying degrees, the data revealed that these values had influenced the career experiences of all respondents. In many ways, childhood experiences of family and education had shaped the women's self-concepts, their attitudes to the traditional roles assigned to women in Chinese society, their views on career and family, and their perceptions of their ability to situate themselves in academe. For example, W9 and W10 had grown up amidst expectations that they would place primary importance on their roles as wives and mothers; it took courage and resolve for them to deviate from this traditional path. The two single women, W7 and W8, expressed concern about the difficulty of breaking into male social circles – which was exacerbated by their desire not to be socially associated with any male colleagues. W8 said this about her relationship with male colleagues:

Since I'm single, I don't want any misunderstandings. Therefore, I maintain a very clear, formal work relationship. After work, I avoid having any social or informal meeting as far as possible.

7.2.1.2.4 Gender

Gender played an important role in some of the career decisions made by the respondents. It had not only influenced their self-image, but also influenced others' perceptions of them as academics. W2, W6, and W10 all reported having grown up in environments in which they felt that they had been treated unfairly because they were female. Such perceptions of inequality had driven some of the respondents to prove their abilities.

W2 and W10 lamented that, to be accepted as serious scholars, they had often been required to make frequent “identity shifts” between being an academic and being a wife and mother; these shifts had created considerable stress for these respondents.

Many of the respondents felt the pressure of being a female leader in a male-dominated environment. They believed that, to succeed in academe, they had to be “better” than their male colleagues. Reflecting on their work achievements, eight of the eleven respondents (W1, W2, W4, W5, W6, W8, W10, W11) expressed the belief that, given the long hours and effort they had put into their work, they would have done better in their careers if they had been male.

7.2.1.2.5 Marital status

Seven of the respondents were married, with children. They stated that conflicts between their family roles and their work roles placed some constraints on their careers. All regarded their family roles as being more important than their careers; indeed, they had initially planned their careers around family needs.

Several reported stress as a result of their wishing to achieve greater academic success, but not having enough time or energy to accommodate all of their duties. They also stated that having children was the biggest impediment to finding sufficient time and having sufficient autonomy to pursue their career aspirations.

7.2.1.3 Academic attributes

7.2.1.3.1 Academic self-concept

The academic self-concepts that the respondents had of themselves were important influences on their career decisions. Unlike the successful women in the study of White, Cox and Cooper (1992), not all of the respondents in the present study had been high achievers in their early years at school. Moreover, not all had enjoyed “smooth” experiences in the early stages of their school lives. However, positive feedback and encouragement from teachers, supervisors, and peers had been important in forming their self-image as emerging scholars.

One distinctive characteristic that emerged from the data is that those classified as “scholars/researchers” (that is, “Type 1” in the axial coding) had all been academic high achievers from a young age, and all had displayed a passion for knowledge. The academic self-concepts of these respondents had been nurtured from a young age by teachers and others who had offered academic support in the form of study opportunities and/or encouragement.

7.2.1.3.2 Professional identity

On the subject of professional identity, Dimmock (2006) argued that:

People learn to adopt expected roles through their socialisation experiences at work and elsewhere; their perceptions of how they perform these roles allow them to form a sense of professional identity ... in terms of the positions and roles to which they aspire or otherwise, and whether or not they stay in or leave the profession; and if they stay, whether or not they seek promotion.

Although each of the respondents in the present study had a strong sense of professional identity as being primarily a dedicated researcher, teacher, or educator, most stated that they had been socialised into a flexible combination of roles as required by the particular cultures and practices of their workplaces. Each of them thus worked as a “researcher-cum-educator”, or as a “teacher-cum-administrator”, or as an “educator-cum-project manager”, and so on.

7.2.2 Socialisation experiences

Socialisation experiences emerged as another important construct of the theory of “selective attribution in career trajectory”. The influence of socialisation experiences on individuals’ attributes and their subsequent career trajectories has been advocated by career theorists such as Super (1953), who suggested that an individual’s self-conception is a product of social learning, that this evolves over time as the person passes through various life situations, and that it becomes increasingly stable over the person’s life span.

The career histories of the respondents in the present study revealed how the attributes and socialisation experiences on the respondents interacted to affect their identities, values, career orientations, and career strategies. Significant others in the lives of these women (such as parents, family members, teachers, peers, and colleagues) and critical events in their lives (such as opportunities for education, overseas study, job change, marriage and child-bearing) all had an impact on the women’s career decisions. It was apparent that the interpretations attached to these significant others and critical events had provided the respondents with meaning and purpose in their lives (Blumer 1969). At various stages in their career trajectories, this interplay between their dominant attributes and their personal and professional socialisation experiences affected their personal orientations – thus producing individual variations in their career orientations, strategies, and pathways. Figure 7.1 is a diagrammatical representation of the findings.

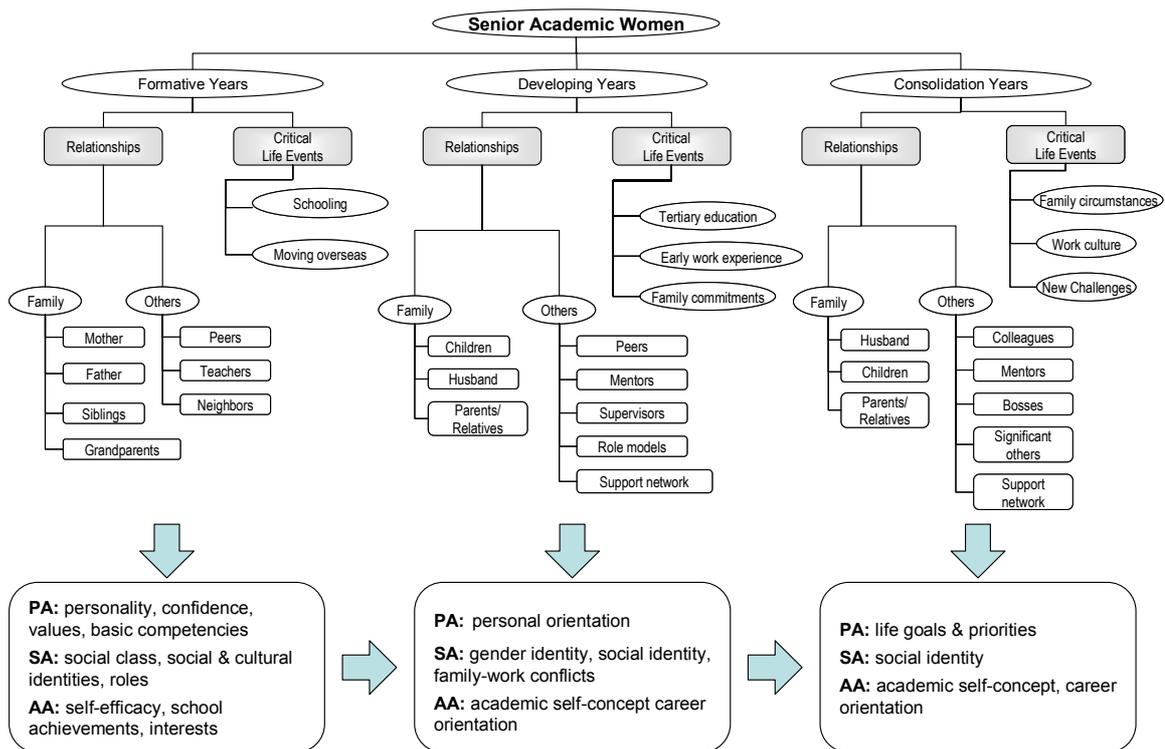


Figure 7.1 Overview of socialisation experiences at different career stages and their impacts on individual attributes.

All of the respondents were able to identify significant relationships and life events that had a positive influence on their personalities and careers. In their early years, most of the parents had supported their daughters' achievements in various ways, had encouraged them to be autonomous in making decisions about their lives, and had provided them with freedom to construct their own identities. In particular, the respondents' mothers had contributed to shaping the personalities, attitudes and self-confidence of their daughters.

All of the respondents had benefited from their early education. Most had been inspired and motivated by their teachers. As a result of growing up in a nurturing and stable school environment, the respondents developed important attributes – such as independence, confidence, trust in others, and a sense that all people were equal. Even less-desirable experiences – such as failures in examinations and disruptions to schooling – had provided an impetus for some of the respondents to develop positive attributes that were useful in meeting later challenges in life.

As the respondents embarked on their careers, their socialisation experiences had a significant effect on how attributes were constructed and redefined over time. Critical experiences that had helped to lay the foundations for the development of the women's careers were (i) overseas education; (ii) events that led to the development of a sense of mission; and (iii) the experience of adversity in life. Relationships that had a significant influence on the respondents' career orientations included those with (i) mentors; (ii) role models and (iii) significant others.

Key attributes were developed and nurtured through socialisation; these included: (i) a sense of mission; (ii) dedication; (iii) dealing with adversity; (iv) being different; and (v) being positive. Competences that supported career advancement were also developed through socialisation, including: (i) language; (ii) time-management; (iii) research skills; (iv) social skills and (v) networking skills.

Another fundamental concept that emerged from the data was the reciprocal relationship that exists between socialisation experiences and the development of attributes as illustrated in Figure 4.1 (Chapter 4). The women's attributes were continuously modified by socialisation experiences – such as family and work needs, significant relationships and critical life events. The interplay of attributes and socialisation experiences influenced the women's career trajectories; conversely, their careers had a reciprocal influence on the women's attributes and socialisation experiences. This finding is in accordance with Blumer's (1969) "symbolic interactionism", according to which a person's identities and actions are modified through an interpretive process as the person matures through socialisation experiences. This was evident in the gradual changes in the respondents' identities, together with the subsequent changes in career orientations and strategies that occurred (as reported in Chapter 6).

7.3 Typology of Senior Female Academics

7.3.1 Dominant attributes and typology

A major outcome of the present study was the emergence of a "grounded typology" of attributes. This typology is of assistance in describing and explaining how the respondents used their dominant attributes to achieve career success.

Three divergent patterns of attributes became apparent, and on the basis of these distinctive patterns of dominant attributes, three types of senior female academics were identified:

- Type 1: "career academics";
- Type 2: "career educators"; and
- Type 3: "career opportunists".

Although the types share several attributes in common, the most influential attributes in terms of their career trajectories were distinctive. Table 7.4 provides a comparative analysis of the dominant attributes.

Table 7.4 Dominant attributes of the typology.

	Career academics	Career educators	Career opportunists
Personal characteristics	<i>Attributes in common:</i> independence, intelligence, perseverance, resilience, commitment to work, diligence, receptivity, reflectiveness, high energy level, positiveness		
	Visionary, investigative, self-disciplined, research-oriented	Easy-going, people-oriented, caring, humanitarian, student-oriented	Flexible, versatile, politically astute, opportunistic, people-oriented
Personal identities	Scholar, researcher	Educator, teacher, administrator	Educator, teacher, administrator, project manager
Missions and core values	To contribute to knowledge development	To educate and to serve	To bring about change to improve the quality of teaching and student education
	Passion for knowledge	Passion for education	Passion for innovation
	Driving force: to achieve breakthroughs in research; to inspire students	Driving force: to see improvements in students and courses	Driving force: to achieve self-satisfaction, see improvements in students and courses
	Pleasure: discovery of new knowledge	Pleasure: student and department recognition	Pleasure: new projects and leading effective teams

The typology of senior female academics summarised in Table 7.4 is described in greater detail in the following sections.

7.3.1.1 Career academics

The dominant attributes of Type 1 (the “career academics”) were found in respondents W3, W6, W7, and W10. The most prominent characteristic of this type was the respondents’ passion for knowledge – the furthering of existing knowledge and the discovery of new knowledge. Their main motivation in pursuing an academic career was to make a contribution to knowledge development in their respective areas of expertise.

W3, W6, W7, and W10 were all “visionary” people who tried to make a difference to the world through research. W3’s vision was to improve life for mankind by “expanding the boundaries of science through research” (W3). Under her leadership, her research team had identified a gene linked to the cause of schizophrenia, the devastating neurological disorder that affects around 1% of the world’s population. W6’s quest for truth had prompted her to be outspoken (even on sensitive issues) regarding church-state relations, and had also led to her moving to Taiwan after her recent retirement in order to complete a comprehensive comparative study of religion in Greater China. W7’s vision was to contribute to legal reforms in China, and she had written on Chinese law in both Chinese and English. W10’s passion for family therapy had led to her conduct clinical work and research in Hong Kong and China.

It was thus apparent that this type regarded research and publishing as central to their academic lives; indeed, they were all prolific authors of journal articles and books. They derived pleasure from being leaders in their fields, from working on ground-breaking research and publications, and from the excitement of discovering new knowledge.

As students, the members of this type had been bright and eager to learn. They had been fast learners and academic high achievers in school, and even at a young age they had been self-disciplined about learning and had resolved to excel in their studies. W6 recalled being the “smartest” of her siblings, and being a “top student” in school. Her resolve to strive for academic excellence had been augmented by her enduring desire to prove to her father that she was worthy of his love. W3 recalled having been taken away from junior high school for ten years; however, through self-study, she had still managed to gain admission to a medical school at the age of 25. It had taken her five years to complete her medical degree, and a further five to obtain her PhD. She had then embarked upon a second PhD in Canada, followed by postdoctoral research in the UK.

The career trajectories of the “career academics” had been marked by the presence of significant others – such as teachers, mentors, supervisors and influential senior academics. Their intellectual competence, dedication, and perseverance had attracted attention from like-minded senior academics who were prepared to provide opportunities for them. All respondents in this group in the typology stated that they had been mentored by people who had provided them with guidance, encouragement and opportunity at various stages in their careers. W3 and W6 reported that it had been especially important for them to have had mentors who nurtured their interest in research and showed faith in their work. W10 said that her teachers had “opened doors” for her.

7.3.1.2 Career educators

The dominant attributes of Type 2 (the “career educators”) were found in respondents W1, W2, W9, and W11. The most prominent characteristic of this type was the respondents’ sense of mission to serve and improve student education – sometimes originating from their religious commitment. They were team leaders, who often adopted a nurturing role in managing people. They were willing and able to respond to institutional and student needs. As academics, these respondents saw their primary goal as improving the quality of education. They focused on teaching, and considered the education of students to be their main vocational responsibility.

W1 said that she had decided to come back to work in Hong Kong after several years’ teaching abroad because she wanted “to teach Asian students, [including] Hong Kong students ... to change their narrow mindsets”. W9’s mission in life was to teach and to pass on her values to other people.

W2 and W11 were committed to their discipline: their mission was to develop their subjects in tertiary education and to instil the same sense of mission in their students. W11 reported that her move from an administrative position (in which she had served for fourteen years) to an academic position was motivated by a sense of mission. She was happy to “make a sacrifice” because:

I wanted to follow my mission. There was no monetary gain, no increments, and status wise, it was lower than before ... but I really wanted to educate the next generation of young people in Hong Kong ...[to] instil in them a sense of mission.

Although the “career educators” recognised the importance of a substantial publishing output to an academic career, research was often regarded as a luxury and a privilege. Because the welfare of their students was their first priority, most of these respondents had to reduce their research output to allow time for student-related work and teaching, and the research they did conduct was often teaching-related. W2, for example, described the work of her team of teachers as follows:

I can't totally ignore research because we need it to inform and support our teaching. So we do teaching- and learning-related research activities ... So our way of developing material is more scientific, more research-based ... We have only 24 hours in a day, so we have to rack our brains to ensure that the 24 hours are well spent.

The “career educators” were easy-going and versatile individuals who were caring and people-oriented. They were academically able, but had not necessarily been outstanding achievers in school. The respondents in this group in the typology said that they had enjoyed their studies at school because certain teachers had shown special interest in them. They had all decided to undertake study for a doctorate because they wanted to teach at the tertiary level. W1 had studied for a PhD after she had identified that teaching in a university was her “special calling”. W2, W9, and W11 had enrolled in PhD programmes after they had been teaching in universities for a few years. As well as ensuring that they had the requisite qualifications to remain competitive in academe, their decisions to study for higher degrees were made for reasons of personal development.

7.3.1.3 Career opportunists

The dominant attributes of Type 3 (the “career opportunists”) were found in respondents W4, W5 and W8: flexibility, versatility, confidence and political astuteness. They took on challenges and new opportunities as they emerged, and they were not deterred by hard work. Their main motivation at work was to bring about change – thereby improving the quality of their teaching and student education.

The members of this group in the typology were invariably positive about potential new ventures, and they derived pleasure from developing a department, completing new projects, and leading effective teams of staff members. As W8 observed, “Personal satisfaction is the biggest driving force.” W5 provided a summary of her vocational philosophy, and that of this group of respondents, in the following words:

I like to see growth in the things I build up as well as growth in the students.

I like to see the product works, and ... that the students benefit from the use of it. Then, my work has a value ... I love starting things and building them up. It’s like building a house for yourself.

Unlike the two types described above, the “career opportunists” did not have clear career orientations; indeed, their career goals were often short-term and fluid. As W5 put it:

It’s a matter of responding quickly; see where the needs of the university are and offer help whenever it is needed.

The members of this group in the typology were versatile and flexible people. For example, W8 reported that she found satisfaction in many different roles:

When I was involved in my scholarly work, research, paper-writing, data analysis, etc., I could be totally immersed in them for many days, forgetting meals, everything ... However, when you see administrative results – such as setting up new departments, colleagues being promoted, staff size expanding – then even administrative work becomes satisfying. For a long period of time, I looked into how to improve the profile of the school, how to lead the staff, how to negotiate with the government, Education and Manpower Bureau, University Grants Committee, etc. I found the work interesting and rewarding ... Teaching is very rewarding, too.

Because of their diverse roles, most of the members of this group did not regard research and publication as their core academic work. W4 and W8 were interested in research, but both indicated that they were distracted by administrative duties and by projects that were, in their estimation, more interesting and urgent. W5 saw research and publishing as “academic red tape”, rather than as a scholarly pursuit, and she admitted that she felt relieved when she managed to get out of the “publishing games”.

Nonetheless, the “career opportunists” were intelligent individuals who had made effective use of professional opportunities to enhance their careers in higher education. Although they did not have obvious career orientations, they understood the organisational systems in which they worked, and they were able to make effective use of opportunities to enhance their careers. W5, for example, reflecting on her own success, said:

I am a sensitive person. I learnt, from my own academic background, what works and what doesn't for the faculty; and [I learnt] how to package them.

7.3.2 Attributes and career trajectories

The typology described above (defined in terms of respondents with different sets of dominant attributes) not only revealed groups of respondents with distinctive missions, personal identities, and core values, but also revealed types who followed different career trajectories. It was thus apparent from the analysis that, in addition to influencing the respondents' varied perceptions of self, the distinctive attributes of each type also affected their career orientations, career strategies and career outcomes through socialisation experiences. Figure 7.2 illustrates these relationships.

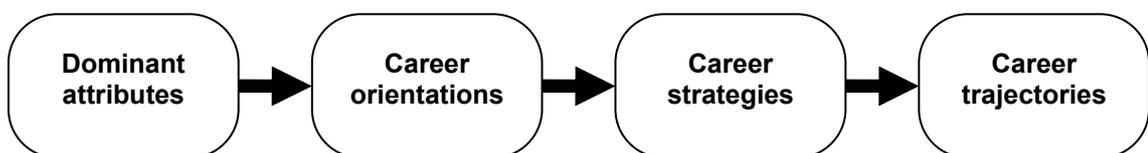


Figure 7.2 Relationships between dominant attributes, career orientations, career strategies, and career outcomes.

7.3.2.1 Career academics

In terms of career orientations and career strategies, the “career academics” (W3, W6, W7, and W10) had perceived, quite early in their lives, that they had the ability to succeed academically. As a result, they had all decided to excel in their studies and vocations, although some had displayed this characteristic more strongly than others. W7, for example, had decided that law was her area of interest. W3 had known that she wanted to find cures for diseases. Even W10, who claimed that she had not planned her studies or work career, had done very well at university in the area of study in which she eventually pursued a successful career. The interest of these respondents in their chosen areas of expertise was thus apparent at a relatively early stage.

In addition to displaying aptitude at an early age, the respondents in this group in the typology had also demonstrated early commitment to an academic career. In particular, research was central to their academic vocations, and they had all developed a corpus of published articles early in their careers. Indeed, W3 and W10 had begun to publish even before completing their doctorates. W3 had realised from the beginning of her career that her mission was in research, and she recalled working in a poorly equipped laboratory in a medical school in China in pursuit of this calling. She had then begun publishing her research findings in international journals when she was studying for her master’s degree and doctorate in China. W6 had decided on a research career when she entered academe because she knew that her strongest skills lay in research. Although W7 admitted that being an academic had not been her first choice of career, she had discovered an interest in research, and thus her career orientation, soon after entering academe. Once she had identified her aptitude for this work, she made use of her dominant attributes and worked out a career plan for herself.

All of the respondents in this group had decided to devote most of their time and effort to research and publication. W6 said categorically that she was not interested in other aspects of the work of a senior academic; indeed, she described administrative work as “petty”. W10 had served a 3-year term as dean – a position that she had accepted as a result of a sense of duty to the university – and had then promptly returned to her preferred role as a research scholar. W3, having achieved a breakthrough that was acclaimed as a major accomplishment in genetic research, was aiming to accomplish another through applying her latest research findings in another study.

The members of this group were single-minded in consolidating their established research profiles and constantly seeking to extend the boundaries of research in their areas of expertise. They set goals and deadlines for writing and developed a routine whereby they wrote regularly and frequently. They contributed to the most prestigious refereed journals and maintained contact with other scholars at conferences. They also sought out international scholars who were doing research in similar areas to explore the possibility of joint projects.

Table 7.5 provides a summary of the career orientations and strategies of this group of respondents.

Table 7.5 Career trajectories of Type 1 (“career academics”).

Dominant attributes	Career orientations	Career strategies
Visionary, investigative, self-disciplined, and research-oriented	Early determination to be different and to excel	Established reputations as academics through research and publications
	Early commitment to an academic career	Constantly sought to extend boundaries and make an impact in theoretical or practical knowledge
	Research-focused—emphasis on knowledge development through research and publication	Developed corpus of published articles early in careers; were encouraged and assisted by supervisors
		Set goals and deadlines for writing; developed a routine for writing regularly and frequently
		Contributed to prestigious refereed journals
		Maintained contact with other scholars at conferences
		Sought out scholars to explore possibilities for joint projects

7.3.2.1 Career educators

Although the “career educators” (W1, W2, W9, and W11) had all identified, at an early age, that education (or teaching) was the area in which they wanted to work, these respondents, unlike the “career academics”, did not obtain an academic post early in their careers. W2 and W9 had both begun their careers in education as secondary school teachers, which they had maintained for a few years. W11 had been an administrator in the tertiary sector for more than a decade before she moved to an academic post. The members of this group saw their primary goal as academics as seeking to improve the quality of education, and they therefore focused on teaching and curriculum development. They also assumed a nurturing role, and considered the education of students to be their major vocational responsibility.

Although these “career educators” recognised the importance of research work to an academic career, they tended to regard such work as a “luxury” and a “privilege”. As conscientious teachers, the welfare of their students was their first priority. In contrast to most of the “career academics”, who regarded administrative duties as chores, the “career educators” in this study were, as W11 put it, “happy to have the opportunity to serve”. Most saw more value in student education than in having articles published, and they were therefore willing to reduce their research output to allow more time for student-related activities. W1, for example, said that she had chosen a management role to do things she enjoyed, as well as to make contributions to student education.

In terms of career strategies, the “career educators” were aware of the consequences of not having an impressive research profile, and they accepted the limitations that this might have on their academic careers. They had focused on teaching, curriculum development, and the provision of a quality education for their students, and led departments and committees to maximise the benefits for students. W2, for example, accepted an external development portfolio to raise funds from alumni and to find job placements for graduates. Within the university, she had also developed enrichment programmes for students, and had worked with other departments to promote student welfare. W2, W9, and W11 had spent most of their time on departmental and student-related affairs, although they had attempted to maintain a modest research output to satisfy their own intellectual interests and university requirements.

Table 7.6 provides a summary of the career orientations and strategies of this group of respondents.

Table 7.6 Career trajectories of Type 2 (“career educators”).

Dominant attributes	Career orientations	Career strategies
Easy-going, people-oriented, caring, humanitarian, and student-oriented	Assumed nurturing and teaching roles	Focused on teaching; perceived teaching students as major responsibilities
	Longer periods of career exploration; academic work not their first jobs	Research regarded as a luxury and a privilege, and of secondary importance
	Aware of (and accept) own academic career limitations without an impressive corpus of published research work	Welfare of students first priority; willing to reduce research work to allow time for student-related work and teaching.
	Student-oriented—emphasis on quality of education and services provided to students	Most do applied research, action research, short projects; teaching-related projects
	Focused on administrative and committee work	Network with other colleagues and departments to promote student welfare
	Teacher, assist students, nurturing role	

7.3.2.3 Career opportunists

A notable characteristic of the “career opportunists” (W4, W5, and W8) was their flexibility in adjusting their career goals. Unlike the “career academics” and “career educators”, this group in the typology did not have fixed perceptions of their occupational roles; rather, their flexibility allowed them to adjust to new career goals and redefine their roles as required. Although they adhered to broad missions – such as “taking on challenges” (W5), “effecting change” (W8), “improving student education” (W4), and “doing meaningful tasks” (W4) – they did not have clear career orientations. They were task-oriented people with short-term and fluid career goals.

In terms of career strategies, the “career opportunists” were intelligent individuals who made effective use of professional opportunities to enhance their careers in higher education. Although they did not have clear career orientations, they had an ability to understand the organisational systems in which they worked, and were able to make effective use of opportunities to enhance the development of their careers. They understood the political processes in their own departments and the universities, especially where the power lay and how decisions were made. W5 said that an important strategy was to “make yourself known to people at the top, and think from their perspective”. Without a fixed long-term career plan, the “career opportunists” had been able to take up jobs that were interesting or convenient to them at the time. They made constant evaluations of their career opportunities, made appropriate adjustments, and repositioned themselves at work and at home.

As a result of their diversified roles, they did not regard research and publication as their core activities. For example, W4 and W8 indicated that they were distracted by administrative duties and projects that seemed to be more interesting or urgent at the time, and W5 perceived research and publishing as “academic red tape” rather than a scholarly pursuit.

Table 7.7 provides a summary of the career orientations and strategies of this group of respondents.

Table 7.7 Career trajectories of Type 3 (“career opportunists”).

Dominant attributes	Career orientations	Career strategies
Flexible, versatile, politically astute, opportunistic, and people-oriented	Followed intuition, no clear career orientations, career goals often short-term and fluid	No long-term career planning Took up jobs that were interesting or convenient
	Task-oriented—emphasis on effecting change and collaboration	Active in internal networking; developed career interest and know-how quickly
	Possessed management and organisational skills	Understood political processes in their own departments and the university, where power lay, and how decisions were made
		Saw research and publishing as an academic requirement for promotion or as “red-tape” Constant evaluation of career opportunities, and making adjustments accordingly Repositioned themselves at work and at home

7.3.3 Moderating influences on effect of attributes on career trajectory

The dominant attributes of the respondents were continuously influenced by various factors, including attribute properties and the personal, social and institutional factors that emerged in the women’s socialisation experiences. These factors modified the effect of attributes on career trajectory. Figure 7.3 is a diagrammatical presentation of this concept.

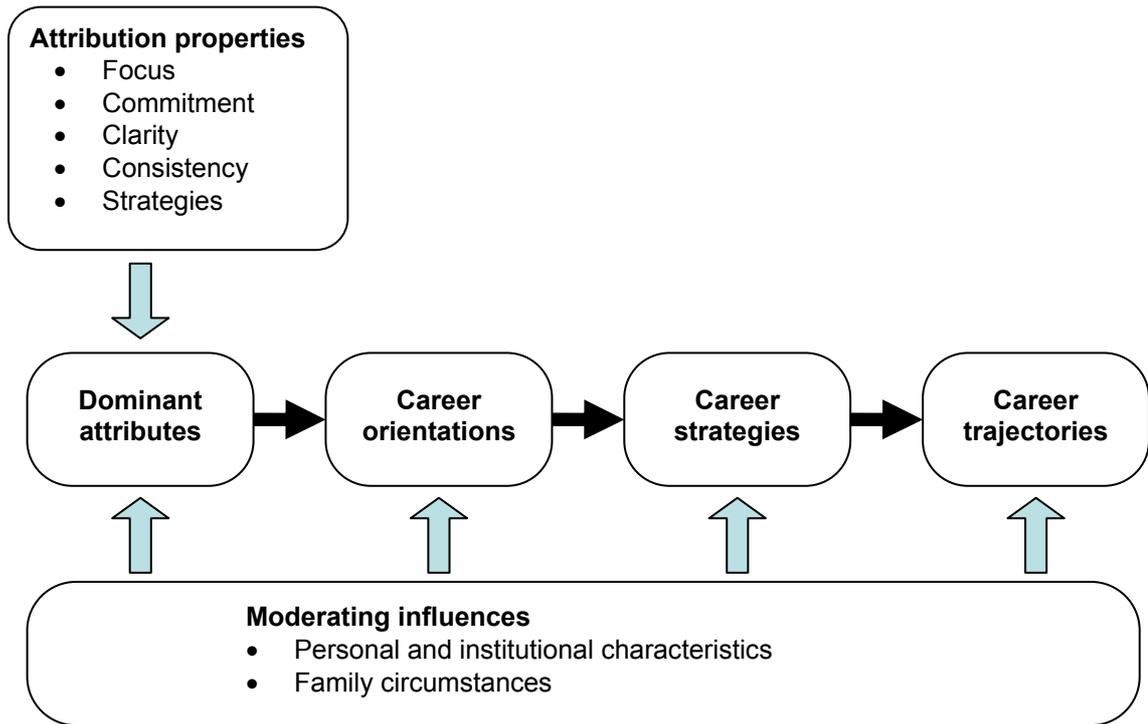


Figure 7.3 Moderating influences on effect of attributes on career trajectory.

7.3.3.1 Attribute properties

As noted above, various properties of attributes were identified at the open-coding stage.

These properties were:

- *focus*: the area of concentration of effort;
- *commitment*: the degree of concentration of effort and level of dedication;
- *clarity*: the sense of clarity in attribute priority;
- *consistency*: congruity in application of attributes in similar circumstances; and
- *strategies*: how certain attributes were used.

These attribute properties can be utilised to explain the differences in the career decisions made by the respondents, and thus to account for the emergence of the typology described above and individual differences among respondents of the same type. For example, W5 and W8 were both classified as “career opportunists”, but they displayed some differences in terms of focus, commitment, clarity and strategies. Although both were flexible, versatile and opportunistic, they differed in terms of the attribute property of “focus”. W5 wanted to “bring about changes and to create new meaningful projects”, whereas W8 wanted to improve the existing education system. This difference in focus led to differences in commitment.

W5 thrived on new projects; she had ceased to be a teaching and research academic in order to take on management work. She had also changed departments within the same university on four occasions, and on each she had undertaken a different portfolio of work. Her motto was, “I want change; if this doesn’t work, try a different way”. Her strategy was, “a matter of responding quickly, see where the needs of the university are, offer help whenever help is needed”.

W8’s focus was different, and thus her career path had been less adventurous. Having worked as an academic overseas for many years, she had taken the opportunity to return to Hong Kong and assume a senior academic position. She had then focused her attention on developing the department that she headed with a view to having a positive effect on the education system of Hong Kong. Although she was committed to introducing new ideas to the existing systems, she was also aware of the importance of maintaining equilibrium among all aspects of the work required of an academic. Therefore, in terms of strategy, she tried to spread her time evenly among the administrative duties required of a dean, teaching, and maintaining a reasonable level of research and publication.

7.3.3.2 Personal characteristics

Personal characteristics, such as age, cultural and social identities, experience, competences and religious faith, also affected the respondents' use of their attributes. For example, W7, who was classified as one of the "career academics", differed from the other members of this type in preferring not to spend most of her time on research and writing; in contrast to the other members of this group, she had a high public profile. She appeared on television, was a newspaper columnist, and sat on several public advisory committees. She saw these activities as being part of her desire to consolidate her social identity as an expert in her field. In addition, her bilingual competence enabled her to write several books in English and in Chinese, which had also helped to lift her profile as a leading academic in her field.

Age appeared to have a moderating effect on the respondents' use of their attributes. Those who were close to retirement age tended not to be so keen on promotion. They were interested in working only on tasks that they enjoyed, and some were looking forward to having time to pursue their personal interests in retirement. W11 had the following to say:

Honestly, I don't really mind. I'll be retiring in 4 or 5 years. Even if they decided to promote me ... I suppose, it doesn't matter any more.

7.3.3.3 Family circumstances

Family circumstances had a significant moderating effect on the respondents' use of attributes. All of the married respondents in the present study regarded their family role as the most important aspect of their lives, and they had planned their careers around family needs. Those who had young children stated that they were prepared to give up their careers for their families. W5's career trajectory had reflected this view.

W5 had recently had her second baby when the present researcher began data collection. Because she knew she would be very busy when she returned to work, she requested that her interview with me be held at the hospital a few days after the birth of the child. With respect to her immediate goals, she spoke in the following terms:

Personally I don't have any vision, apart from giving birth to this baby ... I don't have any particular visions now. I think I am more or less all right now, and I don't particularly want any changes.

After returning to work from her maternity leave, she focused her energies on building a new portfolio that she had assumed before she had gone into hospital. The project expanded and was very successful under her leadership. When the university offered voluntary redundancy to members of its staff, she took the opportunity to leave work to look after her second child, who required medical attention.

7.3.3.4 Institutional characteristics

Institutional characteristics had some moderating effect on the respondents' use of attributes. Supervisors or work environments often had effects on the respondents' self-efficacy, and hence on their career orientations. For example, W4, who was classified as a "career opportunist" in the typology adopted here, had resigned from an academic position that she had enjoyed, to assume a teaching/administrative position to avoid public humiliation being imposed on her and her colleagues by her superior. On reflection, she said, "I would have stayed on, had she allowed me to do research."

W10, one of the "career academics", admitted that she had initially lacked confidence in her ability to ascend the academic ladder. She talked about her initial feelings of inadequacy, and said that she had been encouraged by many colleagues, especially her former department head. W10 described her experience as follows:

I said to my department head, "Please, don't ask me to be the co-coordinator." He said, "Trust my judgement; I give work only to people I know have the ability to do it well." Now being a dean myself, I know he's right. I don't delegate work to just anybody.

Similarly, school and departmental policies could inhibit or encourage women in higher education. W2, whose department was facing cuts in funding at the time of the second interview, had this to say:

There is a sense of insecurity here. We have put in a lot of effort in building this department, but all the good work could disappear without sufficient funding. There are things beyond my control. Now, I begin to think perhaps I should spend more time with my family. That's the only thing that stays and matters.

Although most of the respondents did not feel that there were any “glass ceilings” impeding their career prospects, nor any deliberate exclusion from the so-called “old-boy network”, they did mention that they felt constrained by being a woman in a “man’s world”.

7.4 Substantive Theory of Selective Attribution in Career Trajectory

The major outcome of the present study was the emergence of a grounded theory that describes how this group of senior female academics had made sense of their attributes, and how they had used their dominant attributes effectively to achieve success in their academic lives. A fundamental concept of the “theory of selective attribution in career trajectory” is the reciprocal relationship between an individual’s attributes (personal, social and academic) and that person’s socialisation processes, and career trajectory.

The theory can be understood as two related sets of propositions. The *first* relates to the overall theory of how the female academics selectively used their attributes to determine their career trajectories. The *second* relates to the typology of the senior female academics developed here – whereby the respondents can be classified into three types according to the different clusters of attributes that have affected their individual career trajectories.

7.4.1 Propositions relating to the overall theory

Few of the participating academics began their academic lives with a clear career plan. Most began to examine their career options and strategies seriously after they had been in their jobs for a few years. Once they had identified their preferred roles, they were able to make best use of their dominant attributes to enhance their career trajectories.

The women's attributes were continuously modified by socialisation experiences, such as family requirements, work situations, significant relationships, and critical life events. The interplay of attributes and socialisation experiences influenced the women's career trajectories; and their careers had a reciprocal influence on the women's attributes and socialisation experiences. These interactions accounted for variations in their career orientations, strategies and pathways (as previously illustrated in Figure 4.1).

A detailed exposition of the theory as a "story line", a series of propositions, and a sequence of categories and concepts has been presented in Chapters 4, 5 and 6 respectively.

7.4.2 Propositions relating to the typology of the female academics

This cohort of senior female academics shared many desirable attributes in common, which had largely been formed and nurtured through various socialisation experiences, particularly in the early stages of their lives.

Divergent patterns of dominant attributes could be discerned in the following respects: (i) personal identities; (ii) values; (iii) career orientations; and (iv) career strategies. On the basis of these divergent patterns, three types of senior female academics have been identified: (i) "career academics"; (ii) "career educators" and (iii) "career opportunists".

In accordance with the dominant attributes they exhibited, women of the same type had similar personal identities, held similar values and career orientations, and employed similar career strategies.

The dominant attributes of the female academics were continuously influenced by various factors – including attribute properties (focus, commitment, clarity, consistency and strategies) and various other emerging personal and institutional characteristics that constituted the women's socialisation experiences. These moderating influences modified the effect of attributes on career trajectory, and they also accounted for individual differences among female academics of the same type.

Detailed descriptions of the typology have been presented in Chapter 4 and in the earlier sections of the present chapter.

7.5 Summary

The present chapter has provided a detailed exposition of the categories and concepts that constitute the theory of “selective attribution in career trajectory”. Attributes, as the core category of the theory, have been explored, and the various clusters of dominant attributes that determined the typology of the senior female academics have been carefully examined to explain how the interplay of attributes and socialisation experiences account for variations in the women’s career orientations and career strategies. This chapter has also outlined the salient features of the propositions underpinning the theory of selective attribution in career trajectory.

Chapter 8

Summary and Implications

8.1 Introduction

This final chapter comprises three main sections. Following this introduction, section 8.2 provides an overview of the aims and purposes of the study, the methodology employed, and the theory that emerged as a result of the investigation. Section 8.3 examines the implications of the research findings for theory, practice, and future research. Finally, Section 8.4 presents a concluding epilogue to this thesis.

8.2 Overview

The overall aim of this study has been to develop a substantive theory of how life events and experiences shape the careers of successful female academics. The focus is on the life events, experiences and career pathways of a cohort of senior female academics in the universities of Hong Kong. The initial impetus for the study was the observation that there are few senior female academics in Hong Kong. This initial impetus was further spurred by a call from the [Hong Kong] Women's Commission (2002a, p.4) for academics in Hong Kong to:

... conduct more research in this area and contribute ideas on how to enable and facilitate women to participate in the private and non-governmental sectors more fully in all fields and at all levels.

With that background, it seemed appropriate to address these concerns by designing a study with the following purposes:

- to identify the circumstances and factors which, according to the perceptions of a cohort of senior female academics, have contributed to the development of their careers;
- to identify relationships, educational experiences, and life events that have affected the development of their careers;
- to highlight attitudes and skills that they deem to have been critical to their success;
- to focus on the strategies and career paths that they used to reach the senior levels of higher education, and the factors that influenced these paths; and
- to profile the female academics with a view to providing role models for women aspiring to success in academia.

An interpretive, life-history approach was deemed to be the most appropriate means of understanding the routes travelled by the successful female academics in this study. This methodological decision was made because perceptions, relationships, attitudes, and life-history accounts cannot be objectively measured or replicated, as would be required in a quantitative approach. In contrast, qualitative methods (such as interviews and documentary analysis) were more likely to yield rich descriptive data for understanding the complex and subjective human experiences involved (Bogdan & Taylor 1975).

The limitations imposed by the scale and size of the present study meant that the chosen approach had to be topical and edited – such that it focused on only one aspect of the female academics' lives: the interactions between the women's attributes and the phenomena that had influenced the development of their careers.

The main research question of this study was formulated in the following terms:
What, in the life histories of particular senior female academics in Hong Kong, has contributed to their success?

In addressing this question, several subsidiary questions became apparent:

- How did the childhood experiences and education of these women affect their careers?
- What life events and relationships have helped to lay the foundation for the development of their careers?
- What experiences, attitudes, and skills were deemed to have been critical?
- What strategies, if any, did they use to attain senior positions?
- What factors were perceived to have affected the advancement of their careers?
- How did they manage multiple roles?
- What kinds of support did they deem as being necessary?
- What advice would they give to women who aspire to senior academic positions?

These questions served as a guide in developing a semi-structured aide-memoire for a series of interviews with respondents. An inductive grounded-theory methodology, based on the meta-theory of symbolic interactionism, was then employed to analyse data from these interviews, and from documents pertaining to the respondents. This process involved a continuous interplay between data collection and data analysis. As Strauss and Corbin (1998, p.12) noted, following such grounded-theory methodology ensures that a substantive theory is “derived from the data, systematically gathered and analysed through the research process”.

Purposive sampling was employed initially to ensure a spread of respondents, the aim being

... to uncover as many potentially relevant categories as possible, along with their properties and dimensions ... this openness, rather than specificity, ... guides initial sampling choices. (Strauss & Corbin 1990, p.181):

At the selective-coding stage of analysis, theoretical sampling became more directed. Persons and documents were then chosen with a view to maximising opportunities to verify the storyline.

To ensure theoretical density (Strauss & Corbin 1990), eleven senior female academics with a range of academic backgrounds, disciplines, and life experiences were included in the study. Taken together, the respondents held positions as deans, associate deans, heads of departments and professors in the arts, humanities, social sciences, law, science and engineering departments of the eight universities in Hong Kong.

A pilot study was conducted in mid-2002 to trial and refine the interview guide and to enhance the theoretical sensitivity of the researcher. The process of substantive data collection began in August 2002 and continued until May 2005. Data were primarily collected through face-to-face interviews with the respondents. These data were predominantly respondents' verbal disclosures, observable feelings and body language – as collected through transcripts of recorded interviews and field notes. All the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. In addition, analysis of various documents pertaining to the respondents and issues relevant to the study was undertaken. This study was maintained throughout the process of data collection and analysis to validate and expand upon the data provided by the respondents, as well as being a means for triangulation.

Open coding was applied to all of the interview transcripts and some of the supplementary documentation. The data were broken down and compared to yield preliminary topic categories. Axial coding was then applied (Strauss & Corbin 1990) to establish connections among the categories and subcategories identified in open coding. In selective coding, a core category is selected, and this is systematically related to other categories to develop a single storyline. In the present study, the core category of selective attribution was identified to explain how the senior female academics' selective use of their distinctive dominant attributes has affected their career trajectories.

This study of the pertinent features in the life histories of the women in this cohort revealed that they shared many desirable success attributes, which were largely formed and nurtured through various socialisation experiences. However, the extent of selective attribution varied among the female academics, and this selective use of various attributes by individuals led to different clusters of dominant attributes being formed. On the basis of these divergent patterns, a typology of senior female academics was identified. The major outcome of the present study was, therefore, the emergence of a grounded theory that describes how this cohort of senior female academics had made sense of their attributes, and how they had used their dominant attributes effectively to achieve success in their academic lives. Figure 8.1 illustrates the model of the substantive finding of the study:

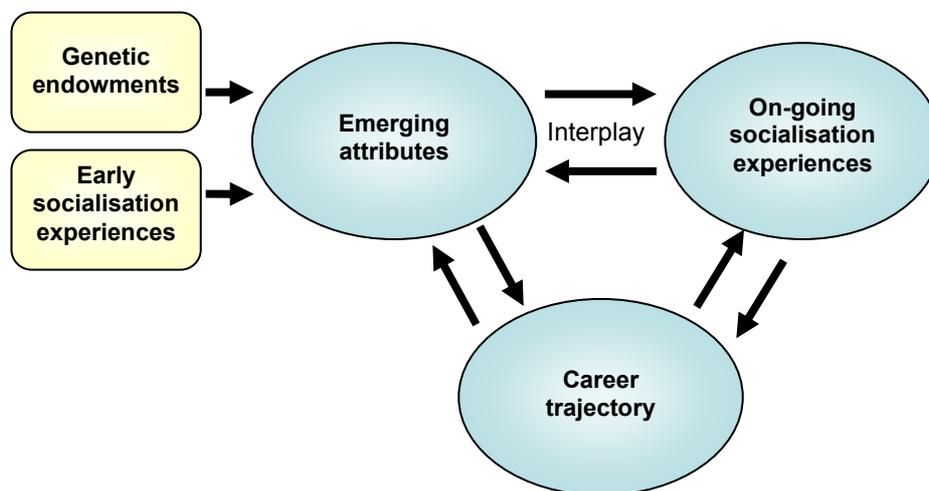


Figure 8.1: The theory of selective attribution in career trajectory.

A fundamental concept of the theory of selective attribution in career trajectory is the reciprocal relationship between an individual's attributes and that person's socialisation processes and career trajectory. In accordance with Blumer's (1969) perspective of symbolic interactionism, it is assumed that a female academic decides what is important to her, and arranges her priorities in life accordingly, with a view to achieving what she considers to be "success" in her professional life. Thus, the typology of senior female academics identified in the present study – "career academics", "career educators" and "career opportunists" – represents three types of female academics who have achieved success according to how they selectively made use of their dominant attributes to shape their career trajectories.

8.3 Implications

Although it is acknowledged that the theory of selective attribution in career trajectory, as presented here, is generalisable only to female academics in situations similar to the actual cohort of senior female academics studied in Hong Kong, the findings of the present study do have pertinent implications for theory, practice and further research. These implications are discussed below as follows:

- 8.3.1: Implications for theory;
- 8.3.2: Implications for practice; and
- 8.3.3: Implications for further research.

8.3.1 Implications for theory

8.3.1.1 General implications

The findings here, presented from a life-history perspective, supplement the extant literature on female academics. In particular, they contribute, from an interactionist perspective, to an understanding of why there are so few female academics in the higher echelons of academia – a question often raised by researchers and, increasingly, by university administrators.

Soliman (1998, p.3) referred to a “cumulative disadvantage” and argued that this “ is characteristic of the experiences of the majority of academic women”. In a similar vein, Kettle (1996, p.63) stated that:

... there is a common theme whereby each respondent considers her university to be deeply hierarchical; where criteria for promotion are weighted in favour of men; where aggressive management promotes unfriendly working practices, where informal networking goes hand in hand with a devaluation of what are considered to be feminine attributes.

In contrast to these unhelpful organisational characteristics from women's viewpoints, the theory of selective attribution posits that the cohort of female academics in the present study decided on what was important to them, and then arranged their priorities accordingly to achieve what they considered to be "success" in their professional lives. An important premise is that the women's dominant attributes (which determined their career orientations) were continuously influenced by certain "attribute properties" (focus, commitment, clarity, consistency and strategies) and by the women's socialisation experiences (personal, social and institutional). These factors (attribute properties and socialisation experiences) modified the effect of attributes on career trajectory.

The identification of the moderating factors on the effect of attributes on career trajectory also represents an important contribution of this study. Detailed analysis of this sort has not previously been conducted.

In terms of research design, the combined use of the life history approach and grounded theory methodology also represents a significant departure from previous studies on female academics. Several qualitative studies of women in academia have been reported in the form of stories or narratives of life histories (David & Woodward 1998; Soliman 1998). In contrast, the grounded-theory methodology employed here has enabled categories of dominant attributes to emerge through constant comparisons – leading ultimately to the emergence of a comprehensive theory and a typology of senior female academics.

8.3.1.2 Implications for knowledge base on female academics in Hong Kong

The report of the Women's Commission (Wu 2002) asserted that there is a need for more qualitative study of women's issues. The motivation for the present research was, in part, a desire to respond to this call. As such, it contributes to increased knowledge about one specific group of women in Hong Kong – female academics in higher education.

The literature review reported in Chapter 3 of this thesis revealed that few studies have been conducted on female academics in Hong Kong. Local literature on women's issues is largely concerned with employment, work/family conflict, domestic violence and the success stories of particular female professionals and entrepreneurs. Apart from Luke's (1997) case studies of eleven academic women in senior positions in four universities in Hong Kong, conducted as part of a larger study of women in higher-education management in South-East Asia, little has been said in the literature about women in the higher-education sector of Hong Kong. This study is a contribution towards addressing this deficit, and the findings might encourage others to conduct further research in this area.

A full understanding of the experiences of any participants in a qualitative study requires an examination of the prevailing cultural values and practices in their particular situation and in society at large (Mead 1934; Denzin 1989; Luke 1998). Having examined the career experiences of a cohort of senior female academics in the prevailing cultural setting of higher education in Hong Kong, and by exploring the factors that have enhanced and impeded their career progress in that setting, the present study can claim to have bridged a significant gap in the extant literature.

In summary, the substantive theory and the typology of senior female academics that emerged from the present study have laid the groundwork for the development of a more comprehensive theory of how life events and experiences shape the careers of academically successful women in Hong Kong. In combination with other studies of women's issues that have adopted different perspectives, this study is significant in contributing to a wider understanding of women's experiences, situations and career trajectories.

8.3.1.3 Implications for theory in other fields

In addition to having implications for the specific area in which the theory is grounded, the findings of the present study also have relevance for theory in other fields. In particular, the substantive theory of selective attribution in career trajectory has implications for career theory in general. Established career theories have explored the relationships among: (i) career choice, personality and environment (Holland 1997); (ii) vocational choice, self-concepts and social learning (Super 1953; Super, Savickas & Super 1996); and (iii) vocational aspirations and sex-role socialisation (Gottfredson 1996). The present study augments these approaches by exploring the reciprocal relationships among attributes, socialisation experiences and career trajectories – with a research focus on senior female academics. The concepts, categories and processes that comprise the substantive theory of selective attribution in career trajectory thus add to the literature on career trajectories and how career decisions are made.

The findings here also have relevance for the theoretical literature on the effects of formal and informal mentoring on female academics. Although all of our respondents recognised the importance of being mentored, none of them had had any formal mentoring experience, and only five had had some informal mentoring relationships. Nevertheless, the present study produced three findings of interest with respect to mentoring: (i) the respondents who had been mentored perceived the mentor to have been knowledgeable as well as impeccable in character; (ii) the mentoring relationship lasted for a long time; and (iii) the respondents who had been mentored were often “approached” or “chosen” by their mentors because of their outstanding qualities. It is uncertain whether the particular social and cultural context of these Chinese respondents affected their attitudes to, and establishment of, a mentoring relationship. Nevertheless, the present research claims to have made an interesting contribution to the literature on this general subject.

8.3.2 Implications for practice

8.3.2.1 Implications for female academics in Hong Kong

From a practical perspective, the theory of selective attribution to career trajectory has the potential to generate practical change among academic women in Hong Kong. This could be achieved if those who were not involved in the present study were able to resonate with certain aspects of the life experiences of the respondents, and thus be stimulated to examine their own dominant attributes and the effect of the interplay between these attributes and their socialisation experiences on their own career trajectories. The theory of selective attribution in career trajectory emphasises the view that the careers of individual women are more influenced by their selective use of dominant attributes than by gender or other structural barriers. The perceptions of our respondents with respect to structural barriers varied, but none suggested that their careers had been inhibited by a so-called “glass ceiling” – although they were all adamant that they had to work harder than most male colleagues to prove their worth. Moreover, although all respondents in the present study faced difficulties – such as a lack of time for research, heavy teaching loads, a sense of isolation, a lack of encouragement and support from work, excessive committee work, and having to perform multiple roles to cope with the demands at work and at home – they were able to overcome these by selective use of their dominant attributes, which were powerful determinants of their personal behaviour. An awareness of these findings thus has potential for significant practical implications among female academics in Hong Kong.

In addition, our review of the literature revealed that women are more likely to look to their own gender for occupational role models in learning how to balance the demands of home with the demands of a career (Stephenson & Burge 1997). The present study therefore has practical implications for female academics in Hong Kong by providing useful information about the attributes and strategies employed by the limited number of successful female academics. In particular, the typology developed in the present study has implications for other female academics. It was apparent that the respondents shared many desirable success attributes; however, there were also certain distinguishing attributes, which enabled a typology of senior female academics to emerge from the study. As noted above, three types of senior female academics were identified:

- Type 1: “career academics”: strong in their quest for knowledge; investigative and research-oriented;
- Type 2: “career educators”: strong sense of mission to educate; humanitarian and student-oriented; and
- Type 3: “career opportunists”: capacity to thrive on challenges; opportunistic and people-oriented.

It is anticipated that other female academics in Hong Kong might be able to identify with the attributes and strategies employed by a particular type of senior female academics with career orientations similar to their own – thus providing valuable practical guidance in their own careers.

8.3.2.2 Implications for aspiring female academics in Hong Kong

The participation of many of the respondents in this study was predicated on their belief that they would be helping aspiring academics by sharing their own success stories. Success had not come easily for many of the respondents; indeed, several had come from humble backgrounds, and most had to overcome many obstacles and disappointments to attain their present eminence. They had achieved this by choice, persistence and skilful use of their attributes. Their life stories will motivate those who aspire to an academic career in Hong Kong.

In addition to being in a position to motivate the younger generation, the senior female academics of this study could also serve as occupational role models and providers of cogent advice for younger female academics in Hong Kong. The advice they offered through the present study (Chapter 6, Section 6.6) was based on the strategies and experiences that had worked well for them. Their reflections and strategies offer valuable insights for those who aspire to similar positions.

Although younger generations of female academics in Hong Kong will inevitably face somewhat different issues from those faced by the respondents of the present study, one message that emerges from this cohort of successful female academics that will stand the test of time and context is that aspiring academics should take control of their own careers, and recognise that the best way to achieve success is, simply, to work towards it.

8.3.2.3 Implications for higher education in Hong Kong

As higher-education institutions in Hong Kong adapt their structures and processes to the demands of globalisation and an increasingly diversified student population (“Academic development” 2001; “Number of international students in HKU” 2005), university policy-makers are likely to consider greater diversity in the composition of their academic staff (Tierney 2000-2001). The theory of selective attribution in career trajectory is potentially of assistance to such policy-makers in enhancing their level of understanding of the important issues that are faced by female academics in Hong Kong. Moreover, an awareness of the dominant attributes, career orientations and coping strategies of the various types of female academics identified here (“career academics”, “career educators” and “career opportunists”) facilitates the achievement of diversity among staff, as well as providing guidance in the provision of adequate and appropriate support for each type.

Apart from its implications for policy-makers, the present study also has implications for enhanced awareness of gender issues among colleagues in the academic workplace. Such awareness is likely to improve workplace relationships. As one of the respondents in the present study observed, much of the apparent “gender bias” among males with respect to their female colleagues is a result of ignorance and a lack of communication – rather than being a manifestation of malicious intent. The information contained in this study might therefore play a part in raising awareness of gender issues and diminishing ignorance and insensitivity in the academic workplace.

8.3.3 Implications for further research

The theory of selective attribution in career trajectory that emerged from the present study, has implications for the further development of theory in this subject area. Further research might: (i) refine the present theory; and/or (ii) enhance generalisability by expanding and varying the sample population. For example, research could confirm or vary the typology suggested here by examining the life histories of a larger pool of female academics in Hong Kong, or academic women in other areas of the world. Future research could also compare how female academics of different ethnic backgrounds make selective use of their dominant attributes to achieve career success.

As noted above, the findings of the present study could also have relevance to theory in other fields of study. Further research on female academics could therefore be undertaken in such specific areas as networking, mentoring, conflicts between family and work, and coping with multiple demands. An area of research worthy of immediate attention is the mentoring behaviours of Chinese female academics – with the aim of identifying appropriate career-supporting relationships in lieu of formal mentoring.

8.4 Epilogue

The findings of this study provide insight into how a cohort of senior female academics in Hong Kong selectively made use of their dominant attributes to manage their careers. As such, it is a contribution to the literature on the process of selective attribution, and how female academics perceive, respond to, manage, and balance the multiple demands that are placed upon them in their academic and family lives. Although the theory of selective attribution in career trajectory is generalisable only to female academics in similar situations to the cohort of senior female academics studied here, it has wide implications for the development of theory and for practice. More generally, the theory might serve as a useful reference point for female academics and other readers to reflect on their own life goals and experiences, and then act with new insights into the meanings of their own lived experiences.

The value of this study is summarised in the following quotation from Soliman (1998 p.261):

It is important to document, celebrate and to learn from the stories of our colleagues. Their achievements allow us to envisage our own possibilities and their struggles resonate with ours. Their stories, therefore, have the power to develop empathy and solidarity among women regardless of their location on the academic ladder.

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