Women’s Friendships at Work: Power, Possibilities and Potential

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STREAM: DIVERSITY ISSUES IN HRD

FULL REFEREED PAPER

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INTRODUCTION

A concern for gender and in particular a concern for the experiences and progress of women globally in organizations remains an important area of research. Research suggests that it will take until 2225 to achieve parity of women in the boardrooms of UK businesses and organizations (Lewis and Rake, 2008). Historically research into women’s progress in organizations has identified a range of career barriers. Sealy, Doldor, and Vinnicombe (2009) offer three key explanations to women’s progress on UK Boards: individual causes, as women are misunderstood as lacking the skills or qualifications required, and lack of opportunities; interpersonal causes, e.g. the perception that women lack social capital and are excluded from networking opportunities (Kumra and Vinnicombe, 2010), while board cultures are inhospitable; and finally lack of transparency and information on opportunities and selection criteria (Sealy et al., 2009). Barriers to women’s progress and development potential can be further understood and challenged by considering women’s intra-gender friendships at work with other women and how these are facilitated or constrained within gendered contexts.

Women’s work friendships with women are of importance to Human Resource Development (HRD) as “human beings demonstrate time and again that they wish to find meaning, create social ties, and continue to learn and grow in whatever context they find themselves in. Human development presses for these connections and growth opportunities” (Oglesky, 2008: 420). Work friendships are of importance as they can also help support friends to climb career ladders and provide professional advice and information about job opportunities (Granovetter, 1973; Kram and Isabella, 1985; Pettinger, 2005). We contend that women’s intra-gender friendships, and the gendered contexts where they take place which maintain the gendered status quo in organizations, are important areas to study.
In this paper we explore senior women’s experiences of friendships with other women at work, guided by the following research questions: how do senior women construct friendship? How do they experience friendships and intra-gender friendships with women at work and how do gendered contexts facilitate or constrain women’s friendships with women in organizations? Of particular interest to our study is the potential instrumentality of work friendships in developing women’s homosociality and/or challenging hegemonic masculinity in organizations. We draw upon qualitative data from a wider study of 81 senior women, exploring women’s relations with women at work in the areas of friendship, competition, ambition and cooperation. We begin by outlining what we understand as elements of gendered contexts: our position on gender and hegemonic masculinity, homosociality and homosocial desire within patriarchal organizations and explain homophily as social processes of friendship which take place within these gendered contexts. We then outline our qualitative research approach with senior women working in UK based organisations and present our findings, drawing upon extracts from the women’s interviews and provide our theoretical and practice contributions. Specifically we contribute to HRD and gender in management research by highlighting how senior women construct friendship and how and why they mark the social boundary of friendship inside and outside work. We consider the impact of the findings, where over half the senior women do not ‘do friendship’ at work, on women’s potential for instrumental homosociality as a means of challenging the gendered status quo in organizations and identify areas for future research. Through the process of the research itself we aim to raise consciousness to the potential of positive women’s intra-gender social relations in developing more gender balanced, diverse senior teams and subsequently organizations.
THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Gender

Our position on gender is an important element of the gendered contexts in which organizational relations and friendships take place and we draw upon current research on doing gender well, or appropriately in congruence with sex category (Mavin and Grandy, 2011, 2012), and re-doing or undoing gender. We contend that gender can be done well and differently through simultaneous, multiple enactments of femininity and masculinity (Mavin and Grandy, 2011, 2012). In this way women and men can do gender well (in congruence with sex category e.g. women doing femininities and men masculinities), while simultaneously doing gender differently (e.g. women doing masculinity and men femininity) (Mavin and Grandy, 2011). We agree with Billing (2011) who notes that gender is a fluid concept that shifts over time and place but we question claims that gender can ever be undone. Rather we align with Kelan, (2010), Messerschmidt, (2009) and West and Zimmerman (2009), in that undoing gender is really not undoing gender but re-doing or doing gender differently. We explicitly incorporate sex category (feminine-masculine) into our understanding of doing gender, as we believe it cannot be ignored in experiences of doing gender. This does not mean that gender binaries cannot be challenged or unsettled, rather that the binary divide continues to shape and evaluate how men and women do gender. Through gender stereotypes, women and men continue to evaluate others and themselves and are evaluated against the femininity-masculinity binary divide in organizations.

Recognising that gender in organization and management studies research has progressed from essentialist perspectives which understand gender as the property of women and men manifested through ascribed individual traits, through to appreciating gender as a process, we acknowledge
that the distinction between physiological differences and social norms continues to be debated and problematized (Acker, 1992) and intersectional studies now highlight the salience of other social categories for gender relations, such as class and race (Acker, 2000; Holvino, 2010; Valentine, 2007). For us, rather than being the property of a person, gender is always being redefined and negotiated through every day practices and situations (Poggio, 2006). Gender is a ‘complex of socially guided perceptual and interactional and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine “natures’” (West and Zimmerman, 1987: 126) and as such is a routine accomplishment (West and Zimmerman, 1987; Mavin, Williams and Grandy, Forthcoming).

**Hegemonic Masculinity, Homosociality and Homosocial Desire**

Further key elements of gendered contexts in which social relations and friendships take place are patriarchal organizations within which there is evidence of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005), homosociality (Gruenfeld and Tiedens, 2005; Holgersson, 2012; Lipman-Blumen, 1976) and homosocial desire (Keisling, 2005; Roper, 1994). We position these as interlocking practices and processes (Acker, 2009), which serve to maintain power with the majority group (men) and maintain women’s continued subordination. Hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) is central to contemporary gender struggles which concern power and political leadership, and changes in families and sexuality. Hegemonic masculinity comprises practices that permit men’s collective dominance over women, resulting from “ascendancy achieved through culture, institutions and persuasion”; the production of exemplars of masculinity, symbols that have authority, which dominate and which produce hierarchies of hegemonic masculinities (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 832).
Hegemonic masculinities within organizations are intertwined with homosociality, a concept understood as grounded in gendered power and “the seeking, enjoyment and or preference for the company of the same sex” (Lipman-Blumen, 1976: 16). The concept of homosocial desire further embeds patriarchy, hegemonic masculinities and homosociality. Homosocial desire which emerged from empirical studies of men managers (Roper, 1994, 1996), expresses a “particular type of intimacy in formally heterosexual circumstances that appear non-sexual but nonetheless contain potentially erotic desire” (Holgersson, 2012: 2). For example, Roper (1994, 1996) argues that homoerotically charged feelings between men can influence decisions regarding succession which contributes to the reproduction of gender segregation. More recently, Keisling (2005) argued that men make themselves attractive to other men in a process of homosocial desire, and ‘connect’ with one another personally and emotionally to enable men’s solidarity and the ‘old boys club’ (read homosociality), which play a role in maintaining men’s power in organizations. Thus, hegemonic masculinity, homosociality and homosocial desire contribute as significant elements of gendered contexts for men and women at work.

**Homophily (Friendship)**

Interconnected within gendered contexts, is homophily; as social processes of friendship (Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1954). The significance of homophily is its interrelationship with hegemonic masculinities, homosociality and homosocial desire between men, reflected in the proposition that dysfunctional or excessive levels of homophily (friendship) between men may have dysfunctional implications for an organization, e.g. affecting recruitment decisions (Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1954), thus supporting gendered social relations in organizations. Lazarsfeld and Merton (1954) construct friendship theory as the social processes of ‘who makes friends with whom?’ alongside the role of attitudes, values and social status (i.e. race, sex, class,
social standing) and how friendships are maintained or disrupted. It is the “processes through which social relations interact with cultural values to produce diverse patterns of friendship” (Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1954: 20) which is of interest to women’s intra-gender relations.

From a review of friendship definitions in the social sciences (Matthews, 1983), Brown (1981) positions friendship as a relationship that is voluntary, mutual, flexible and terminable, with friendship relationships emphasizing equality and reciprocity which requires from each partner an affective involvement in the total personality of the other. Kurth (1970) contrasts friendly relations with friendship, the essential components of friendship being voluntary interaction, a sense of the uniqueness of the individuals, a high level of intimacy relative to other relationships and unlimited obligation. Allan (1979) suggests labelling someone a friend is purely subjective. For many people, friendship is a major source of assistance, comfort, emotional sharing and just plain fun (Calwell and Peplau, 1982). Friendship allows people to be themselves, less constrained by role expectations and obligations than in their relations with family and co-workers (Suttles, 1970).

Sociological approaches to friendship have been concerned to demonstrate that ties of friendship are inherently social rather than just personal and rather than just being a matter for the individuals concerned, “friendship is patterned according to social conventions whose roots lie in the broader social and economic milieus” (Allan, 1998). Therefore while friendships are constructed through the actions of individuals, these actions are not free-floating but bound to the social, cultural and economic environment. Friendship as homophily therefore is the result of fluid, not fixed, social processes between individuals which take place in a context which is social, cultural and mediated by structure, agency, power, gender, class, race and other subjectivities. Within this perspective, modes of “doing friendship and sociability more generally
emerge that are consonant with the other sets of relationships in which the individuals in question are embedded” (Allan, 1998: 687). Eve (2002) notes that for all friendships in western societies much of the subjective significance of friendships produces solidarity, and forms identities, drawing upon Papataxiarchis’ (1991) research which highlights the role of ‘friendships of the heart’ in reinforcing gender identities among men in Greece. Research has examined men’s relations within a context of hegemonic masculinity and homosociality, acknowledging men’s friendship relationships in maintaining gendered power in organizations, while women’s intra-gender relations and friendships at work within gendered contexts have received less attention.

Within HRD, organizational studies and management research, studies of friendships are limited. However, Rumens (2010) in Human Relations, following Rawlins (1991, 1992), theorizes friendship as a series of ongoing communication achievements and interpersonal communication as a form of discourse between friends, positions “friendship as constructed and ascribed meaning through the multiple discourses in which it is situated momentarily” and as such does not see friendship as a fixed, essential property of the interaction between individuals but as something that is constructed through the continuous and iterative enactment of friendship norms’ (Rumens, 2010: 1543). Drawing upon sociological and psychological studies of friendship, Sias and Cahill, (1998) contend that friendships are unique workplace relationships in two ways: friendships are voluntary, although people do not usually choose who they work with, they do choose which of these individuals to befriend and friendships have a personalistic focus in which individuals come to know and treat each other as whole persons, rather than simply workplace role occupants. They are also distinct from other types of friendships in that co-
worker friends share unique knowledge with respect to workplace experiences and activities, enabling them to communicate about work issues with depth and efficiency (Ray, 1987).

Employees choose to spend time with their friends both at, and away from work, and workplace friends function as an important source of social and emotional support and enjoyment for one another (Kanter, 1977; Rawlins, 1994); sources of instrumental social support (Sias and Cahill, 1998) and career development (Kanter, 1977). Workplace relations are therefore essential to organizational functioning, as people create social and personal relationships, and these meanings influence their social behaviour (Duck and Pittman, 1994). The development of workplace friendships and their deterioration are influenced by proximity, liking, trust and similarity (Sias, Heath, Perry, Silva and Fix, 2004). As noted earlier, work friendships are also of importance as they can help support friends to climb career ladders and provide professional advice and information about job opportunities (Granovetter, 1973; Kram and Isabella, 1985; Pettinger, 2005).

To summarise our discussion thus far, we have outlined our position on gender as a fluid and shifting concept which incorporates sex category and the gender binary and outlined our assumption that gender can be done well but never be undone, only re-done or done differently. We have highlighted the concepts of hegemonic masculinity, homosociality and homosociality within patriarchal organizations which contribute further to the gender contexts in which men and women work and have outlined why friendships at work are important social relations which support and perpetuate gendered contexts, particularly within organizations. We have also identified the lack of friendship research in organization studies and management research. Thus we have provided a background to the empirical study of senior women’s experiences of friendship with other women at work which take place within gendered contexts.
THE RESEARCH APPROACH

The data for this study derive from semi-structured interviews with 81 senior women working in UK based organizations: 36 women directors/non-exec directors in UK FTSE 100/250 companies and 45 senior women working in a UK region identified by the regional press as ‘influential.’ A flyer detailing the opportunity to engage in the research, exploring women’s relationships with other women at work, was sent once, to 487 women. Senior women self-selected into the project by contacting the researchers directly, with seven women referred by those who self-selected. The deadline for data collection was extended to ensure all women who responded were interviewed and this determined the size of the sample.

The participants are aged between 33-67 years. Seventy three women self declared as white British/Irish/Other white backgrounds; two as black/mixed backgrounds, with six non-declared. Sixty two women worked full time, 14 part-time, with five non-declared. Fifty six face-to-face and 25 telephone interviews were conducted at a convenient place and time for the participants, lasting on average one and a half hours. Informed consent, issues of bio-data collection, confidentiality, anonymity, code identifier, ethical issues and the process of transcription/analysis were sent in advance and discussed at the beginning of the interview. The women identified their own codes to protect anonymity. The interviews were recorded and transcribed by a professional transcribing service and were conducted by a team of three research assistants, who used a flexible interview guide enabling women to speak about their experiences uninterrupted and in-depth. The guide (see Figure 1) began with life/career history, asked participants about their experiences of being a woman moving into senior positions and progressed to areas of friendship, competition, cooperation and ambition.
The women were prompted for their reflection and learning by asking about the key issues women need to be aware of as they progress into senior positions and by including a reflexive prompt asking participants how they were feeling and thinking at the end of the interview. Transcripts were anonymised, coded and returned to participants for approval and further reflective thought before analysis began. This feedback process ensured the findings were ‘true’ to the experiences of participants and part of developing trustworthiness of the research. Individual interview transcripts were initially coded by the first author into headline themes using template analysis following the conventions outlined by King (2004; 2012). Themes were initially devised inductively through the creation of thematic categories by reading through an initial 10 and then a further 16 full transcripts. The initial template was entered into Nvivo to enable more systematic coding and “as the other transcripts were coded into the template the different thematic categories and sub-categories developed” (Cassell, 2012: 3). We focus here upon data which emerged in response to the specific friendship questions but also throughout the interviews which were coded into 13 friendship categories.

In analysing the resulting data, we follow Ladge, Clair and Greenberg (2012) and in an effort to be transparent we present examples of our analytical process in Table 2 to illustrate how we moved from 13 categories to 6 themes: understandings of friendship: strict compartmentalization; risk to professionalism and vulnerability; interrelationships of friendship and competition; time, home and place and friendship as irrelevant-relevant and our concept of marking the social boundary of friendship. While the table “suggests linearity, our data analysis process was highly iterative, as we moved between the phases of coding, literature review, and conceptualization of the data” (Ladge et al., 2012: 1456).
<table>
<thead>
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<th>Questions</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Opening</strong></td>
<td><strong>Cooperation</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>What has it been like as a woman, moving into senior positions?</td>
<td>Can you tell me about a time when you were in a senior position &amp; you</td>
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<td>Is there anything specific about being a woman that is relevant that</td>
<td>knew you were behaving cooperatively with other women/another woman?</td>
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<td>comes to mind?</td>
<td>Do you purposively seek out women to cooperate with at work? Where do</td>
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<td>you think your attitudes towards cooperation come from &amp; why?</td>
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<td><strong>Friendship</strong></td>
<td><strong>Competition-Cooperation</strong></td>
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<td>What is your approach to friendships at work?</td>
<td>There is a view that competition between men is overt/explicit-that men</td>
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<td>Have any of your friendships with women at work changed as your career</td>
<td>are expected to be competitive and yet they can continue to cooperate</td>
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<td>has progressed?</td>
<td>with each other and remain friends. What's your experience/view of this?</td>
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<td>Do you have different groups of female friends in different contexts?</td>
<td>Why do you think this is?</td>
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<td>For example different groups of work friends in the organisation, through</td>
<td>There is a view that competition between women is hidden, they are</td>
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<td>professional networks, informal networks?</td>
<td>assumed to cooperate and be friends. There is a view that women do</td>
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<td>Can you comment on the friendships you have observed between other</td>
<td>subconsciously compete, are not cooperative and are often not friends.</td>
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<td>women in senior positions?</td>
<td>What's your experience/view of this? Why do you think this is?</td>
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<td>Have you lost any female friends at work? What happened?</td>
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<td><strong>Competition</strong></td>
<td><strong>Ambition</strong></td>
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<td>Can you tell me about a time when you have been competitive with other</td>
<td>Can you tell me about a time in your career when you have been ambitious?</td>
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<td>women to develop your career?</td>
<td>Thinking about the ambitious senior women that you have met through your</td>
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<td>Where do you think your attitudes towards competitiveness come from &amp;</td>
<td>career, what successful &amp; unsuccessful behaviours did you observe?</td>
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<td>why?</td>
<td>How do you let people know you were/are ambitious?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Where &amp; when are you aware of competitiveness in relationships between</td>
<td>How did they respond? Thinking about the ambitious senior women that</td>
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<tr>
<td>women in your organisation? How do you respond to competitive behaviour</td>
<td>you have met through your career, what successful &amp; unsuccessful</td>
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<td>towards you from women?</td>
<td>behaviours did you observe?</td>
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<td>As your career has developed have you ever been in a situation when you</td>
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<td>have been competitive with a friend?</td>
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<td><strong>Closing</strong></td>
<td><strong>Ambition</strong></td>
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<td>What are the key issues women need to be aware about/deal with, as they</td>
<td>What are the key issues women need to be aware about/deal with, as they</td>
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<td>progress into senior positions?</td>
<td>progress into senior positions?</td>
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<td>What relevance does ambition, competition, cooperation or friendship</td>
<td>What relevance does ambition, competition, cooperation or friendship have</td>
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<td>for women’s success in reaching senior positions?</td>
<td>for women’s success in reaching senior positions?</td>
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<td>Now that we are drawing the interview to a close, what are you thinking</td>
<td>Now that we are drawing the interview to a close, what are you thinking</td>
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<td>about?</td>
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<td>How do you feel?</td>
<td>How do you feel?</td>
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<td>First Order Themes: Women’s Homophily [Friendships] with Women/at Work</td>
<td>Second Order Themes</td>
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| • ‘True friendship’, ‘very strong friendship’, ‘close personal friendships’, ‘best friends’, not ‘friendly relations’, ‘friendliness’, ‘good working relations,’ or ‘cordial relations’. Friendship is very important & friends are valued – just not at work. Friends are an antidote to work & are outside work.  | Understandings of Friendship  
[Based on bonds between people built over time & life history, which share: intimacy, trust, emotion, reciprocity, equality & are intense, personal, equal].  |  |
| • Friendship requires time & commitment. Deeper, emotional relationships. Friends are: known for a long time. Who you can be ‘yourself’ with. Share deepest, darkest secrets. Share happiness & unhappiness. Share life events/history which ‘binds’ you: school, university, 1st jobs, losing jobs, Motherhood, births, deaths, marriage, miscarriage, divorce, illness. Friends know your family, stay in your home, it crosses a line.  | Friendship When You’re Not the Boss  |  |
| • Friends are: other parents & Mothers in your ‘other life’ when you are not at work.  | Strict Compartmentalization  |  |
| • Friends can be ex-work colleagues, peers from years ago or when you’re no longer the boss.  |  |  |
| • Acid test of friendship: would you have them at your kitchen table? Would you go on holiday with them? If you left the organisation would you still see them? Remains an outside work boundary for senior women.  |  |  |
| • Solidify friendship once leave the organization. Move from friendly relations to friendship when you move on. Friendship moves from work life to home life when no longer the boss.  |  |  |
| • When the risks are mitigated. Peer friendships at lower levels in the organization through life history. First job friendships which sustain.  |  |  |
| • Few senior women “peer friendships” within own organization but some senior women peer friendships from other organizations.  |  |  |
| • In senior position, conscious choices not to do friendship at work. Work & private life as separate spaces. You haven’t got friends - you’ve got colleagues/acquaintances. You don’t go to work to be liked. You go to be respected. No outside work socialization with them. No Face book friends. Arm’s distance, caution with colleagues, draw a line. Friendliness & friendly relations but not ‘true’ friendship.  | Risk/Threat to Professionalism  |  |
| • A line to hold, a rule to follow, a boundary within context of competition & ambition: turf wars, battles, complex politics, promotion opportunities.  |  |  |
| • Big job, Motherhood & family leave no time for work friends. Do the job & go home [I want to go home] to family & friends. No/little time for networking & work friendships. Work friendships are not a priority. Outside work friends get whatever time is left.  | Time-Home-Place  |  |
| • Friendships at work aren’t relevant [are irrelevant] to women’s progress. You’re on the wrong lines. Friendship angle has no resonance to women’s progress.  | Ambivalence in Friendship as Important to Study  |  |
| • Friendship, very important relationships, valuable. Lots written about networking – friendship is a different thing – worth studying. No woman should restrict to networks – friendships source of professional & personal support. Worth paying attention to.  |  |  |
FINDINGS

All 81 senior women were asked about and talked about their approach to friendships and friendships at work and therefore contribute data to the 13 friendship codes. In the following sections we draw upon qualitative data from interviews with senior women to explore our guiding research questions; to further understand senior women’s constructions of friendship and experiences of work friendship with other women and the impact of gendered contexts on women’s intra-gender work friendships with women. Where we discuss friendships, friends and peer friendships, the discussions refer to intra-gender friendships and relationships with other women and the participants are presented as Pnumber to ensure anonymity.

Understandings of Friendship

Existing friendship research, primarily based on quantitative studies, has an issue of defining friendship and establishing how research participants understand the term which has resulted in conflicting studies of how many same-sex friendships men and women have (Calwell and Peplau, 1982). We did not give the women a pre-determined definition of friendship, nor did we specifically ask the women for their understanding of friendship but in their discussions they outlined what friendship and friends mean to them and what relationships construct friendship.

Historically Tiger (1969, 1974) argued that male superiority in friendship reigned, with men better able than women to form lasting bonds with same-sex partners, while Donelson and Gullahorn (1977) posited that women were incapable of friendships and some women accepted this view. For the senior women in our study, friendship and friends in their lives are important, significant and highly valued. Friendship relationships are ‘true’, ‘very strong’, ‘close’ and ‘personal.’
This type of friendship requires time and commitment and is a deep[er], emotional relationship. In this study friendship is personal, intimate, supportive, reciprocal and equal, with friends who are trusted, known over a long period of time and a relationship where people can be themselves; sharing personal information and ‘deep dark secrets’. The women talked of friends sharing happiness and unhappiness in their lives: sharing life events and history which develops ‘bound’ friendships, through for example shared journeys of school, university, first jobs, Motherhood, births, deaths, marriage, miscarriage, divorce, illness. Family members are also often viewed as friends. The women’s constructions of friendship, and the significant value they place on their friends, supports extant research noting the intimate and emotional nature of women’s friendships. For example, women’s friendships are argued to be more significant, involved and frequent (Bell, 1979), affectively richer with intimate confidences (Calwell and Peplau, 1982), and reflect reciprocity via support and help (Weiss and Lowenthal, 1975).

In bringing the masculine-feminine sex-category and binary divide between men and women into the discussion, Bell (1979) and Calwell and Peplau, (1982) have argued that the friendships of women are more frequent, significant and more interpersonally involved that those commonly found amongst men, with women’s friendships affectively richer, involving more intimate confidantes/friends than men, who are argued as disclosing less and receiving less personal information than women. In reflecting on the shared life history basis of the senior women’s friendships, our findings reflect Calwell and Peplau’s (1982) research which argued that women’s friendships orientate towards personal sharing of information while the women participants suggested their experiences of men’s friendships emphasise joint activities.
In relation to comparing themselves to men’s friendships in organizations, P74 summarises a common response from the senior women when reflecting on the perceived differences between men and women’s friendships,

...Because I do really believe that friendship for women is totally different to friendship for men. I really do just think that. I’m not saying that it isn’t important, because I think it is, but I think it serves a very different purpose and I think it’s played out in a completely different way to how it’s played out with women [P74].

A significant issue in our study is that the senior women’s understandings of friendship as intimate, personal, trusting, equal, supportive and reciprocal restrict the women’s perceptions of friendships at work. The senior women’s friendships happen outside work and are ‘an antidote to work’.

**Strict Compartmentalization of Friendship**

Over half the senior women interviewed were clear that friendships at work were inappropriate. The remaining women, who were more receptive to work friendships, had either one or two women friends at work or were receptive to work friendships but did not have the time to invest in these friendships. Those who were clear that work friendships were inappropriate spoke of making ‘conscious choices’ not to do work friendship and following the ‘rule’ of no work friendships. These women discuss strict compartmentalization between work and home, where work and private lives are separate spaces; people at work are work colleagues and those they choose as friends are outside work.
P13 explains this succinctly,

I think I keep a fairly rigid apartheid between my family and my personal life and my work so the people I really confide in are my family and friends who have been friends for a long time and people, almost exclusively, people who I knew well enough... There are friends that I have that I had from before and there are people that I know though work who I would perhaps characterise more as good work colleagues. I have some very good female work colleagues and some very good male colleagues at work as well but I don’t really know them personally. There’s some people I get on very well with regardless of [type of organisation] or nationality or anything, just they’re nice personalities, they’re helpful and friendly and we hit it off and get on well but they’re not really the same as the friends that I’ve had and know personally for a long time [P13].

Regardless of whether the senior women were receptive or not to work friendships, they separate out friendship from ‘friendliness’, ‘friendly relations’, ‘good working’ or ‘cordial relations’ at work. In these relationships there is little or no out of work socialization or self disclosure with work colleagues. P15 reflects the tone of the women’s comments on friendship and grounds this within a context of competition,

I think the whole use of the word friendship and friend is a really interesting one and it goes back to where we started. What actually is friendship? Is it friendliness and cooperation around the workplace rather than a true friendship which would see you through thick and thin in a very different environment and I therefore think that in the workplace it’s very, very rarely friendship. It is always around a friendliness and a cooperation or a collaboration. I think that dependent on the individuals concerned there is always going to be some form of competition dependent on where they see their journey taking them [P15].

**Risk to Professionalism and Vulnerability**

Those senior women who saw work friendships as inappropriate and had an approach of ‘strict compartmentalization’ highlighted that while they may have had work friendships when further down organizational hierarchies, friendships did not fit within the work setting when they reached senior positions. Work friendships pose a risk and threat to their professionalism at work. Here the work context is not perceived as conducive to the type of friendship constructed by the senior women. Work friendships are not equal because of the women’s role and seniority.
Work friendships take place within hierarchies which may require the women to take leadership or managerial action towards friends, therefore developing the same kind of trust, reciprocity, equality and personal relationship as in ‘true friendships’ is difficult. P2 summarises this,

We’ve got our own friends. That’s quite deliberate on my part. And I’m the same with everybody... I think it’s very difficult if you have a particularly close friend who knows you intimately and knows what’s happening, and then for some reason you’re in a situation and you need to take some action or something happens... I just think that is unnecessarily awkward. I’ve only ever broken the rule once and that was with the X business manager who’d been here for X years and we did know each other very, very well and intimately and she was a very, very close friend. But with the exception of [Name] I’ve always applied that rule [P2].

Friendship at work is perceived as a threat to the women’s professionalism and leadership. Work friendships are a risk to ‘decision making’; a risk when ‘restructuring’ and when leading on ‘performance management’. Work friendships pose too many ‘difficulties and problems’. P9’s comments reflect these threats and identify the difference between her own approach, and that of her husband,

I have always taken more or less the approach that work is work and home and my personal life and friends in my personal life are quite separate. Now I always wonder to myself am I missing a trick in the book because my husband always seems to be friends with everyone at work and they do things together and then I always say and what if you’ve got to do something horrible then you’re in a difficult position. I don’t know whether it’s because I’ve spent most of my professional life in X, so I’m always conscious of the fact that there are sometimes difficult conversations, difficult decisions to be made and I may and have been in the seat where you’ve got to give the results of those decisions and outcomes and I always think if you... if you grow too close to people then the boundaries become blurred and I have always kept what I would call professional distance... Your conduct, you’re on show it’s still – and I think the more senior you are in an organisation, whether you’re male or female, that’s always the case... so I would say I have friendships, I have people that I will speak to outside of work but I know I keep a distance and I do not confide in people the way I would of course with friends who are nothing to do with my work and that’s just the way how it works for me [P9].
There are also risks to the senior women’s professionalism: of not being perceived as ‘fair’, of ‘favouritism’ and of others using their friends to get to the ‘boss’. Friendships at work compromise the senior women and render women and sometimes their friends, vulnerable.

For example, P72 comments,

Because I am not comfortable with having those sorts of relationships in organisations....What is it I don’t like about it? I think in terms of being professional and clean and transparent and not having anyone feel that you are favouring anyone and being fair – fairness is like my justice in that it goes right through me. I think you have to keep a distance and as difficult as it is, because there are some people that you like more than others, that is inevitable isn’t it? As difficult as it is, I maintain those boundaries tight so that if somebody gets a job, they get a job on merit. I am meticulous about that. And nobody could ever stand and accuse me of anything other than being fair and proper. I have seen some people I know in organisations who have got very strong friendships with the [X senior role] and they might be really good friends with their [X non-senior role] and go out with the [X non-senior role] and everything is great. I couldn’t do that. It just isn’t me. I couldn’t. A friend of mine is very comfortable about going to New York with three or four members of her staff for a weekend. And it is fine, she is comfortable with that, but I couldn’t do that. I would be constantly on my guard. I couldn’t relax, I couldn’t be me, I couldn’t talk freely or openly, I would be wondering what they would read into, what I’d let slip after two glasses of wine [P72].

In summarising how many of the women view work friendships P14 told us,

I don’t have many. I – there are some people who I would go out to dinner with or I would – again, it’s really changed actually, if I look over the first ten years of my working life, I definitely had friendships. We would go out a lot in the evening, when I was in my 20s, absolutely. We would go out to the pub a lot and there are some people who I met back then or who worked for me or with me who are still very good friends. I’d say since then, so in my 30s and now 40s, partly because I got married and I am partly more wary of it, and partly frankly at the end of the day I want to go home. I’m not interested. ...I think partly when you get to a certain level of seniority you do have to be careful in terms of whether you are going out for drinks with people. There’s a certain level of professionalism which you just have to sort of maintain ... and also then you don’t know whether you are going to end up managing that person and again, you need to be able to take dispassionate and tough decisions at times and if you are a friend with that person it can make that quite awkward. So ... that’s really where I am coming from [P14].
Friendships at work are too ‘risky’ and ‘dangerous.’ They can be ‘disastrous’ and ‘create conflicts’. Some women talk of betrayal by women friends at work or of knowing other women whose friendships had deteriorated at work with horrendous aftermats.

This betrayal shaped their ‘strict compartmentalization’ of work friendships. The women are also ‘very careful’ not to have work friendships because people can get ‘hurt’, friendships ‘fracture’, are ‘never repaired’ and can ‘disintegrate’. Women construct a boundary to this risk of harm, hurt, disappointment and closing off opportunities for work friendships with women to reduce the risk, resulting in women’s unavailability for friendships with women. An area for further exploration is whether this unavailability is mutually understood by other women.

**Interrelationships of Friendship and Competition**

The senior women recognize that work friendships take place within a context of competition, ambition and organizational politics which further shapes their approach to marking the boundaries of [no] work friendships. P15 summarises this as,

But I think we have explored that quite thoroughly in terms of I think it is a risky business to have true friendship at work – I am still not sure how you can have that work-related friendship that can surpass all of the challenges that work and competitiveness and ambition can throw this way. Friendship with women. Yeah, absolutely, with women. I see the path of women in business has been quite isolated and lonely I think there is always going to be competitiveness from men, from women [P15].

When discussing work friendships, women talk of a ‘line to be drawn’, boundaries to be ‘held’, ‘arm’s length distance’ to be kept, within this context.
P16 talks about women’s expectations of work friendships, reflecting the general tenor of the women and also refers to differences between men and women,

And you might say to me well how come that doesn’t work out in the male workplace and it’s like well... it doesn’t because no bloke would, it’s different. ...I had a female colleague who was very good friends with another female in the business. And of course then they sort of got into the position where one was more senior than the other. And I think women seem to have a broad, they expect more from the friendship. Whereas I think men are quite good at the compartment of ‘oh friends we might be round the pub, but in the workplace I’m also this’. Women can sometimes blur that. I think the twist is, I think women, it is the nature of being seen to compete against another female colleague, quote: “Is that frowned upon, is it done?” Well it is there. But it’s not there, it’s kept below the surface. ...I think that’s why I say sometimes women on women reporting in a line in work places, I think people, women get, they expect a high degree of loyalty to come with friendship that may actually just naturally preclude the normal competitive dynamic that goes on in the workplace. Whereas men can just make that much simpler [P16].

P76 is very clear in her position of a no work friendships boundary if people want to progress to senior levels,

...If you’re looking for somebody who’s got loads of female friends at work I’m a hugely bad example just it’s my life but I’m quite comfortable with that because as an individual I choose not to – don’t keep a complete divide but I do keep my home life separate from my work life quite deliberately and pretty much always have done so that’s where I’ve chosen to sit on a friendship continuum. I prefer to be at the cooperative end, I am reasonably competitive and need to be etcetera so I think the most interesting thing to me is they are things that you need to decide where you want to sit and probably if you want loads and loads of friends at work you’re probably also not going to make it to a senior level because it is very – sorry the senior level, maybe you make it more senior, because ultimately you might need to fire that person the next day and I personally think that’s quite an awkward genuine friendship to have [P76].

While intra-gender competition between women is an under researched area in HRD and management studies, it is apparent from this study that competition between women, particularly for scarce resources such as promotion opportunities, shapes women’s intra-gender social relations at work and is an area for future research. Particularly as there is an appreciation in the literature that intra-gender relations between men, whilst they may be competitive (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Keisling, 2005) and instrumental (Collinson
and Hearn, 2005), are characterised as involving degrees of cooperation, support and friendship (Collinson and Hearn, 2005), interconnected with homosocial desire (Keisling, 2005; Mavin et al., forthcoming). However our current research highlights that senior women are not operating on an equivalent basis.

**Time, Home and Place**

Lack of time, and the desire/need, to get/go home from work, featured strongly in the women’s discussions of their lack of work friendships, regardless of whether they were receptive or not to having them. The women also talked about their lack of time for networking. For the senior women, ‘significant’, ‘big’ jobs, Motherhood and family/caring responsibilities leave little or no time for work friends or networking events. Work friendships are not a priority and any little time left over goes to ‘true friendships’. P3 highlights the discussions of many of the senior women,

...The changes that happen over the years. It is a reflection of the time we have available, which as you move up the chain tends to be more restricted for general friendship issues as you are more focused on work, work, work... So in my case I had a family and that takes up a lot of your time, particularly when you’re continuing to work full-time, so sustaining friendships, sustaining family relationships, and doing a senior full-time job is quite a handful, as you may know. So all these things have impact, I suppose, on the amount of time you spend in friendship groups [P3].

P3 focuses on the time issue as well as reflecting on the complexity of the importance of intra-gender friendships between women whilst not being aware of many senior women’s work friendships,

I don’t think most senior women have the time to develop strong close friendships and I think that is a bit of an issue really, because they can be very— I am repeating myself I know, but they can be very valuable in terms of your own emotional well-being and your ability, actually, your ability to do your job. If you feel you have got people who you can talk openly and frankly to and you have a sense of trust then that is actually quite helpful. But I have to say I don’t observe lots of close friendships between women at a senior level particularly, but I wouldn’t say I’ve noticed anything else about why that is other than, apart from anything else, it is probably a matter of time and opportunity [P3].
A test of friendship for many of the women was whether you would have colleagues in your home, at your kitchen table, would you go on holiday with them and if you left the organization, whether you would still see them. Some senior women reflect on how they have solidified friendships with people once they left the organization and transitioned from friendly relations to friendship, once they moved into a different space and are no longer the boss. Women also talk of peer friendships in their life history when in lower hierarchical levels, in first jobs or limited current peer friendships with other senior women, but these were very rarely ‘true’ friendships and the limited discussion of vertical friendships with women while in their current roles and organizations mainly referred to mentoring relationships. Time, home and place are important to senior women’s friendships, with respect to life stage, family/caring responsibilities, home life, career stage and exiting the organization and are further ways in which senior women marked the boundaries to friendship and friendship at work.

**Friendship as Irrelevant-Relevant**

There was evidence in the data of women’s ambivalence towards the questions on friendships and this emerged particularly in the reflexive questions at the end of interviews when asking about the relevance of the areas of questioning and how they were feeling. Many were surprised as to why friendship was included as an area of study into women’s experiences of relationships with women at work. This surprise resulted in somewhat polarized responses. Women either reflected on their approach to work friendships, saying that they found the questions very ‘thought provoking’ and ‘fascinating’, prompting them to reflect further on how they do friendships and commenting that they would think further about the role of work friendships following the interview, or they had very clear views: friendships at work are not relevant to women’s progress and we were covering the wrong areas in our research and interview questions if we wanted to understand women’s progress to senior positions.
P74 reflects those women’s reactions when they were supportive of the friendship interview questions,

Well, based on the conversation you and I have had today, I mean you’ve—I don’t know what it’ll do for you, but you’ve made me think about a whole lot of things that I didn’t know were inside me, that I haven’t expressed maybe ever, but certainly not recently, so therefore the first thing I would say is that this is probably a very useful framework of questions in order to elicit some of the information I hope you’re looking for, and I don’t—I’m trying to think is there anything else I would have put in there—and I don’t honestly think there is, because there’s actually a really—when you said them initially, I thought it was interesting you started with friendship, thought that was fascinating [P74].

While P49 provides an example of the struggles some women experience when reflecting on women’s friendships at work,

I’m not sure friendship I was very surprised… starting with that, I’m not sure friendship—I absolutely want to have constructive positive friendly working relationships with my colleagues at work, because frankly you’re in the office for more of your life than you’re at home. Quite important to have a nice time, to be able to have a laugh and a smile. But that said, I don’t come to the office to make friends. My address book is—my personal address book is my personal address book. As I said I’ve got two friends and whatever. So I’m surprised that that was your first topic. And in terms of a project that’s about women in leadership roles in industry blah-blah-blah and how to progress and how to develop, I wouldn’t have called it one of the four—core …How interesting. …No I was going to say because when you were doing it I kept thinking friendship, friendship [both laugh]. Yeah, I’m going back to your question which is what did I find, I find the focus on friendship as being a driver or an aspect of women leadership surprising because… to me I don’t think it has as much relevance [P49].

An alternative interpretation of senior women’s reticent responses to the friendship questions is a level of discomfort at a surfacing of the unconscious, in that the questions made visible the relational nature of “progression” for senior women in organizations. This may not sit well with women who are committed to a discourse of meritocracy and to women’s progress.
The four areas of friendship, competition, cooperation and ambition covered in the interviews were also received positively by some women, as relevant and as a way of raising consciousness for others as part of development. Women did talk about how women needed to establish their ‘position’ with respect to the four areas so that they could manage their way through to senior management. P76 comments succinctly on the importance of the research areas,

I think the interesting thing about it actually is that if nothing else... you're going back to what I would like to have known as I left university because I think that you’ve got four parameters that you need to work at. Each person needs to work out where they want to sit on them as it were, yes – [P76].

Discussion: Women Marking the Boundaries of Friendship

Supported by our analysis, we contend that a social boundary exists for senior women’s intra-gender friendship with other women, which serves to limit ‘friendship’ as women construct and understand it, to outside work organizations. Drawing on wider social sciences literature, Williams (2012) outlines how boundaries as social constructs demarcate differences between and within individual, social and structural levels of social life (Lamont and Molnár, 2002) and how social boundaries are understood to be constructed when symbolic boundaries become “widely agreed upon”; reifying patterns of social interaction which can lead to constraining effects (Lamont and Molnár 2002: 168). There was thematic resonance in relation to women’s constructions of friendship as intimate, reciprocal, personal, based on trust and developed through life history. Here women’s friendship is inter-personally based and not activity based. This construction of friendship contributes to the social boundary, as such intimacy and reciprocity is inappropriate for the women within their work role and organizations.
This is demonstrated by those women who fear the threats of friendship with women at work and/or have been “hurt” or know of others who have been through the “betrayal” of a friendship gone wrong with another woman at work.

The women have “true friendships” outside the workplace which are cherished and significant in their lives and women devote what little time they have left, post-work, to home, Motherhood and family, to these true friendships in a non-work space. In relation to senior women’s constructions of friendship and Sias and Cahill’s (1998) premise that with work friendships individuals come to know and treat each other as whole persons, rather than simply workplace role occupants, women take this ‘getting to know’ the whole person more affectively in terms of confidences, reciprocity, equality, trust and ‘true friendship’ than men appear to; their friendships, it is argued, are limited by hegemonic masculinity to be formed in particular ways (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005).

We contend that the boundary women construct locates their intra-gender friendship in a space outside the organization because their understandings of friendship are at odds with their views of ‘appropriate’ [read masculine] social relations at work. For both this group of women and for those who were more receptive to work friendships, issues of time, home and place resulted in no or few work friendships. Through processes of marking the social boundary of friendship, senior women are constraining potential for solidarity and identity formation which subjective and significant friendships produce (Eve, 2002). Whatever makes women ‘attractive’ to women as friends outside work organizations as a process of women’s homosocial desire is prohibited inside work, in a way that is facilitated for men.

We noted earlier that men’s friendships are argued to be action and activity based rather than emotional and intimacy based (Bell, 1979; Calwell and Peplau, 1982). Schrack-Walters, O’Donnell and Wardlow (2009) notes that men’s friendships have been studied extensively
(Hammond and Jablow, 1987; Lehne, 1995; Sherrod, 1987; Simmons, 1995) and that some men are unclear about who, in their lives, they would count as a friend, are unable to enumerate more than a few friends for whom they genuinely care, or form friendships in a context of competition (Seidler, 1992, also see Lyman, 1987). However, to some extent, men’s friendships reflect other dimensions of the hegemonic male role (Donaldson, 1993) and we argue, that in a different process of social relations, drawing upon Keisling’s (2005) work, men do make themselves attractive to other men in organizations in a process of homosocial desire, and do ‘connect’ with one another personally and emotionally at some level, to enable men’s solidarity and the ‘old boys club’ (read homosociality), which play a role in maintaining men’s power in organizations. These are complex social relations for men and women in organizations.

The implications of our findings are that senior management, work organizations and gendered contexts allow little space and/or no place for more intimate and significant friendships such as those women seek (and appreciate) with other women. Work friendships remain problematic for senior women. The women’s constructions of friendship result in these relationships being inappropriate at work, with this social boundary reinforced by the risk and threat to their professionalism and threat of vulnerability to themselves and potential friends. These threats are drawn upon to identify what is acceptable/unacceptable to shape the boundary of work friendship and are prohibitive because of the gendered contexts in which work friendships take place. Additionally, over half of the senior women were ‘first women’ in their organizations or fields. It has taken much to achieve their senior positions and their experiences suggest the focus has had to be on the job, and doing the job in the way that is expected within gendered contexts.
This research therefore suggests the senior women remain evaluated against, and limited in their social relations, by sex-category expectations within gendered contexts. Senior women in organizations cannot afford to have friendships which may be interpreted by others as expressions of femininity, played out in ways which risk them being evaluated as having ‘favourites’, being ‘unfair’ or being ‘compromised’ professionally. Constructing a boundary which restricts work friendships neutralises the risk of femininity in these evaluations and reduces the risk of the women being perceived as ‘stereotypical women’ at work.

Women’s socialization to desire deeper and richer friendships restricts women drawing upon homosociality and homosocial desire in organizations to progress their careers. As they want different things from their friendships than men and because men and women do not expect women to engage in homosociality, then homosocial relations for women are difficult. As we have argued, men’s homosociality and homosocial desire contributes to maintaining power, further embeds hegemonic masculinity and continues to benefit men both directly and indirectly in organizations. We contend that hegemonic masculinities and homosociality displaces women’s intra-gender friendships in organizations as risky to the established gendered order, an example being the way that senior positions and senior management are organized around the masculine norm. This is not to point to orchestrated behaviours by individual men, rather to raise consciousness to gendered contexts and social processes which maintain the gendered status quo and prevent challenges, such as the potential power of women’s close friendships, in reducing this homosocial power. Here we see the continued embedded natures of gendered contexts and patriarchal organization which maintain power with the dominant group (men); which serve to shape women’s intra-gender relations so that they are not powerful enough to disrupt or challenge and/or which fog the issues so that women are unaware of the gendered contexts in constraining their experiences.
Having summarised our research we have identified a number of areas for future study, including the impact of work-life balance and work friendships for women and the strangely under researched issue of women’s intra-gender competition at work. In reflecting on our research, we recognize it is not without limitations. Our sample was ‘purposive’ (Silverman, 2000), only 81 of 487 women originally contacted agreed to participate and those who were involved may reflect biases that we are unaware of. Moreover, we recognize that the women who participated in this study are not a homogeneous group and while we have explored senior women’s experiences, not all women or senior women share the same experiences. Also in drawing upon gender binaries we are also susceptible to criticisms that we are sustaining such binaries. However, we argue that the binary divide of femininity-masculinity, which draws upon sex-category, continues to shape and evaluate how men and women do gender and that through gender stereotypes women and men continue to evaluate others and themselves in organizations against this gender binary.

**CONCLUSION**

Friendships at work and intra-gender friendships between women at work are under researched in HRD and management studies. Our study makes a considerable contribution to extending theory in this area and in offering women and men in organizations alternative views of social relations and to some extent, organizational behaviour, at work. We surmise that the women’s marking of a boundary which places friendship outside organizations, limits women’s work homosociality and women’s homosocial desire (Roper, 1994, 1996). Expressing a particular type of non-sexual yet erotic desire and intimacy (Holgersson, 2012), identified between men, has been shown to benefit men and further embed patriarchy, hegemonic masculinities and male homosociality. Placing friendship outside organizations also constrains women’s possibilities of expressing intimacy and may restrict women’s opportunities to be ‘otherwise’.
As we agree with Zerebuval (1991) that all boundaries are socially constructed, and as such are open to being contested and changed, these findings have utility in practice in raising consciousness to the issues with men and women through management and leadership development and management education interventions. This would support the exploration of how gendered contexts and the complexities of social relations at work are shaping opportunities for both women and men.

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