

*Exploring the lived experience of women owner-managers of small construction firms: a social identity approach*

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# EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF WOMEN OWNER-MANAGERS OF SMALL CONSTRUCTION FIRMS: A SOCIAL IDENTITY APPROACH

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Despite the growing number of small construction firms that are owned-managed by women, there is limited research into the lived experience enacted by these women who have direct influence over their firms' strategic direction and operational management. This paper aims to revisit the current narratives on gender prevalent in the industry from a social identity perspective. Social identity approach (SIA) posits that individuals have multiple and salient self-concepts that are defined by their social context and experiences. The exploration of the lived experiences of women owner-managers of small construction firms could shed light on how these women identify themselves. The narrative inquiry methodology will be adopted as it is an appropriate way to gather data about lived experience. Findings from this study will contribute to help policy makers and industry stakeholders go beyond examining structural barriers only when it comes to making the construction industry more attractive to women.

Keywords: women owner-managers, social identity, gender; business owners

## INTRODUCTION

There is a growing number of small construction firms that are owned-managed by women (BEIS 2021a, 2021b). There is, however, a scarcity of research on the experiences enacted by these women who have direct influence over their firms' strategic direction and operational management within the construction industry. Instead, studies on women in construction tend to focus on their professional roles within large organisations, and the identification of the barriers preventing women from entering and remaining in the construction industry (Bridges *et al.* 2020). The male-dominated nature of the industry, for example, has been cited as one of the barriers that explain the under-representation of women (Akinlolu & Haupt 2020) and the difficulties that women face in the progress of their careers (Clarke *et al.* 2017). Gale's (1994) seminal work exploring why only a few women are occupied as construction professionals, is one of the first to establish the importance of contesting the industry's male-dominated culture perception.

Subsequent research, however, has anchored attention on how to improve the image of the industry and thus, it is claimed, attract more women. As a result, a lot of effort has been put into creating strategies or external approaches, but unfortunately, these have

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not delivered the anticipated results (Clarke *et al.* 2017). It could be argued that this direct focus on initiatives solely designed to attract/motivate women to join/remain in the industry has rendered women as needing motivation to join and remain in the industry.

It might inadvertently produce a counterproductive narrative about the disparity of opportunities available for women within the construction industry. Perhaps more importantly, these external initiatives that are designed to attract women to joining and remaining in the industry might have overlooked the question of whether women see their gender as a motivational factor that influence their behaviour and decision making into joining/remaining the industry.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Nevertheless, the existing literature, with its examination of the individual experience of women in construction, continues to be relevant not only to identify the barriers affecting the attraction and retention of women in the industry (Navarro-Astor *et al.* 2017) but also to identify the success factors behind the progress of some women in the industry (Francis 2017).

Hasan *et al.* (2021) reflect on the scarcity of studies which highlight the positive experiences of women and success attributes related to their employment in the construction industry. Becoming an owner-manager of a small construction firm could be perceived as a success indicator for some individuals. Therefore, exploring women in owner-managers roles within the construction industry could serve as examples of positive career development. Hasan *et al.* (2021) propose that exploring the experiences of women in construction, their successful career paths, and their contributions to the sector could potentially enable to revisit some of the current narratives on gender prevalent in the industry.

Hence, exploring women's advancement and success as leaders in their roles as owner-managers, rather than the focus on the external barriers hindering their career development, could be argued to offer a complementary perspective into the experience of women in the construction industry. Additionally, the literature suggests that concepts such as leadership and business ownership are traditionally male gendered concepts (Ahl & Marlow 2012). Hence, exploring the experience of women owner-managers who are at the top of the hierarchy of their firms; who are actively involved in the management of their organisations; and who might have fulfilled their career aspiration in the industry, might expose a contrasting view to the way women are traditionally presented in the literature.

In the existing construction literature, a significant number of studies have turned their attention to the exploration of gender relating issues affecting the experience of women in the sector (Hasan *et al.* 2021) and the discourses about gender that might reproduce their absence in the industry (Ness 2012). The literature reports the impact of gender in the career progression of women working in the industry, highlighting the differences in the career progression for women and men due to perceived gendered practices in the industry (Dainty *et al.* 2000; Francis 2017; Lu & Sexton 2010). In addition, the effects of gender in the leadership role of women in the industry is also a recurring theme which captures the specific challenges faced by women in leadership roles within a male-dominated sector such as construction (Thayaparan *et al.* 2014; Watts 2012).

Within the existing literature, studies exploring specifically women as owner-managers in construction is limited. Those studies covering women experience as owner-managers in other industries focus on the identification of the gender factors negatively affecting the experience of women in self-employment and business ownership roles, despite paradoxically women identifying business ownership as a means to lifting gender-related restrictions to their career advancement (Arenius & Kovalainen 2006; Carter & Shaw 2006). These three aspects of the lived experience of women in construction and women owner-managers: career progression, leadership role and business ownership, provide a general overview of how gender affects the experience of women in construction. There is however limited research available regarding how these aspects relate to the lived experience women owner-managers of small construction firms.

Whilst the literature reports on the effects of gender inequality (Powell *et al.* 2010), gendered perceptions (Akinlolu & Haupt 2020) and gender related barriers (Naoum *et al.* 2020) affecting different aspects of the experience of women in the construction industry, little is known about the value that women themselves give to gender. Whether women working in the industry perceive gender as a constrictor or a source of empowerment; or whether they perceive gender as having a considerable, little or no influence at all in their day-to-day experience.

It is proposed that exploring this alternative focus allows the examination of whether initiatives created specifically designed to attract/retain more women into construction might be putting a lot of effort and resources into a social idea that might not have the expected significance for women; or resonate to them as being deeply important in their decision making or behaviour. Since little is known about the experience of women owner-managers of small construction firms, they provide a seemingly ‘valid research gaps’ to test this empirical consideration. To test this proposition, social identity approach (SIA) is proposed as it offers a series of tools that allow the identification of whether gender is a salient self-concept for women owner-managers of small construction firms.

This paper is organised as follows. First, the proposed - social identity theoretical framing is presented, with a general overview into this approach and a review of how it can be applied to explore the lived experience of women owner-managers of small construction firms. Second, proposed research design and methods are discussed. Finally, conclusions are presented.

### **Theoretical Framing - Social Identity Approach (SIA)**

#### *Introduction to SIA*

Social identity theory (Tajfel 1978) and its related theory of self-categorisation theory (Turner *et al.* 1987) are often jointly described as the ‘social identity approach’ or the ‘social identity perspective’. These two distinct, but intertwined, theories have been regarded a significant theory dedicated to understanding group processes and intergroup relations (Hornsey 2008). Social identity theory (SIT) developed by Tajfel (1978) and later modified by Tajfel and Turner (1986), posits that individuals have multiple and salient self-concepts that are defined by their social context and experiences. Self-concept is defined as “those aspects of an individual’s self-image that derive from the social categories to which he/she belongs” Hornsey (2008, p. 206). Social categories refer to the social groups that individuals categorise themselves (Trepte & Loy 2017). Hogg and Vaughan (2008) further describe social identity as the individual’s self-concept derived from his or her perceived membership

of social groups. Van De Mieroop (2015, p. 408) explains that every individual can be within several different social groups and further argues that "these groups are the result of an individual's segmentation of the social world into categories on the basis of variables such as similarity, common fate, and proximity". SIT proposes that people tend to favour members of their own social category (in-group) over members in other social groups (out-group) (Ullrich *et al.* 2005), hence causing intergroup conflict.

Self-categorisation theory (SCT) (Turner *et al.* 1987) represents a later elaboration of social identity theory (SIT). SCT moves away from the focus of SIT on intergroup dynamics and social conflict; instead, it proposes that depending on the importance of a certain situation, an individual's behaviour is driven either by social or personal identity processes (Trepte & Loy 2017). According to this approach, identity refers to "a shared set of meanings that define individuals in particular roles in society" (Stets & Serpe 2013, p. 31). Ely (1995) explains that identity is comprised of two components: (1) a personal component derived from idiosyncratic characteristics, such as personality and physical and intellectual traits, and (2) a social component derived from salient group memberships or social categories, such as ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, nationality, vocations, relationship, gender, sexual orientation, class, etc.

SCT indicates that both personal and social identities can be at work simultaneously and the self is perceived as being determined by both personal and social identities (Trepte & Loy 2017). Davis (2009) further differentiates between individual and personal identity by claiming that individuals' personal identities are constructed by individuals themselves, while their individual identities are socially constructed in terms of their different group memberships. Social identity can be perceived as the link between individuals' personal identities and individual identities. The combination of SIT and SCT has been applied in the exploration on the salience of gender as a self-concept as it facilitates the understanding of the multi-faceted nature of gender and the ways that it shifts with influences such as current motives (Bosson & Michniewicz 2013; Wood & Eagly 2015).

Hornsey (2008) explains that SCT and SIT share most of the same assumptions and methods. The two theories however can be differentiated based on their views on social and personal identity. Whereas SIT suggests a variety of interpersonal versus intergroup behaviour exists, SCT asserts that both social and personal identity processes may be at work concurrently (Hornsey 2008). For this study, the combination of these theories will be referred to as 'social identity approach' (SIA). Ellemers *et al.* (2004) explain that SIA specifies the conditions under which a particular self-definition or social identity is likely to become salient.

Haslam *et al.* (2010, p. 348) define self-category salience as "the level of self-categorisation at which a person defines themselves and the particular self-categorisation that serves to guide behaviour". Under SIA it is understood that certain group memberships tend to become more powerful determinants of behaviour than others, and salient identities are effective forces to influence motivation and behaviour (Ashforth & Mael 1989). SIA, a theoretical approach that focuses on capturing individuals' identity attachments or self-categorisation, aligns with this paper proposition to explore the perceptions of women owner-managers of small construction firms regarding specific key aspects of their lived experience that have been previously associated to gender.

*SIA Applied to Women Owner-Managers of Small Construction Firms*

To date, scant attention has been paid to the value that women in the construction industry themselves put into their gender identity. The fixation of the literature on the narrative that women need motivation to join and remain in the industry, might need to be re-considered by evaluating the importance that women themselves give to their gender identity. Under a social identity approach (SIA), gender is perceived as a self-concept, hence exploring the lived experiences of women owner-managers of small construction firms will shed some insights into how they identify themselves. SIA could allow exploring the significance of gender in women owner-managers' self-categorisation and it might indicate the level of relevance that these women place on their gender in the social context of the construction industry.

Hence this approach might provide a complementary perspective to re-examine traditional gender views in the industry. Condry (1984, p. 485) describes the process of gender identity as “the self-attribution of culturally bound concepts of masculinity and femininity”. Although the salience of gender is maintained by many social institutions, Condry (1984) further argues that as society begins to treat the sexes more equally and as social roles become more widely shared, the value of gender is expected to decrease proportionately, and its position as hallmark of social identity is projected to recede as well.

Furthermore, literature about women business ownership often treats them as a homogeneous group (Carter & Shaw 2006). SIA allows to explore their experience at an individual level. An individual level analysis allows to focus on human actors and the identification of the characteristics of human decision making (Nau 2019). The adoption of SIA could shed light on whether there is any linkage between the 'actual' lived experience of women who own and manage small construction firms and gender self-categorisation.

In addition, it might stress which other identities these women identify themselves in their professional careers, their leadership roles, and their roles as business owners. SIA could be operationalised to explore which self-category relate and motivate women owner-managers. This could be then translated into tailored recommendations based on their lived experience. This paper proposes the need to explore women's perceptions about gender in specific social contexts and to identify the level of relevance that being a 'woman working in a male dominated industry' has to them. If gender results as a salient self-concept for these women, this might re-enforce the continuous discussion on addressing gender-related issues affecting women in the construction industry.

If instead, gender is not an important salient self-concept for women owner-managers of small construction firms, it could be then recommended for this empirical consideration to be tested with other women within the industry to assess whether recommendations to attract and retain more women in the industry might need to be re-evaluated. In either case, this study might display positive examples of career development, along with introducing the perceptions of a group of women working in the industry that has been overlooked so far by the construction-specific literature.

Examples in the construction-specific literature have used SIA to explore how the social structures at large construction sites facilitate the development of social identity among site workers and how this may affect safety behaviour (Andersen *et al.* 2015); to identify the influence of group norms on construction worker's personal standards regarding safety behaviour (Choi *et al.* 2017); and to identify the socio-psychological

factors relevant to co-operative behaviour among project participants (Phua 2004). All these studies point to the richness and broad influence of this theoretical approach and its applicability to research interests such as this one, seeking to explore the effect that social identities have on individuals and the social contexts that influence motivation and behaviour individuals.

## METHOD

In line with the proposal to employ SIA to develop an understanding of the lived experience of women owner-managers, a methodological approach which aligns with this aim, is narrative inquiry methodology. Kramp (2003) argues that as a methodology, narrative inquiry is as an appropriate way to gather data about lived experience. Narrative inquiry focuses on how individuals assign meaning to their experiences through the stories they tell (Moen 2006). Singer (2004, p. 438) further explains that “to understand the identity formation process is to understand how individuals craft narratives from experiences, tell these stories internally and to others, and ultimately apply these stories to knowledge of self, other and the world in general”.

Indeed, there is a seemingly close linkage between identity and narratives. Within SIA, narratives are perceived as a window into the process of identity construction (Riessman 2008). Hence the use of narratives provides an entry to the identity and self-perceptions of women owner-managers of small construction firms. Riessman (2008) further argues that individuals’ narratives about themselves are what they regard as their personal identities, or their identities as they themselves see them. The introduction of narrative inquiry methodology to explore the lived experience of women owner-managers is argued to be an appropriate approach which also aligns with the adopted SIA theoretical framing.

Butina (2015) explains that a defining feature of narrative inquiry methodology involves the collection of narrative (stories) from individuals or small groups. These stories tell of individual experiences that often exposes the researcher to the identities of that individual (Butina 2015). Narratives are often collected through interviews. The interviews can be open-ended and unstructured, or semi-structured and guided. Some of the techniques that relate to this approach include the narrative interview method (Hollway & Jefferson 2008), the biographic narrative interpretive method (Wengraf *et al.* 2002), and narrative-oriented inquiry (Hiles & Cermák 2008). This study proposes the use of the narrative interview method as a technique to generate stories about the research participants’ experiences. The narrative interview method has been chosen as it allows to tailor questions specifically situated for certain aspects of the lived experience of the research participants, which would be more difficult with the open question nature of the biographical approach.

Narrative inquiry methodology views participants as storytellers (Smith 2010). More specifically, narrative inquiry methodology uses the stories the research participants tell as the primary source of data and is appropriate for determining meaning and aiding understanding of life experiences (Smith 2010). Many studies using narrative depend on oral accounts, such as interviews which are then transcribed. These interviews can then be thematically analysed. It is proposed the use of semi-structured interviews as a mean to derive narratives. The large qualitative data resulting from these interviews will then be analysed by employing thematic analysis using NVivo software. The coding process will incorporate the areas of experience that have been associated to gender by the literature: career, leadership, and business ownership, but



offering the flexibility to discovering new themes. The analysis aims to identify common words, codes, as well as recurring self-concepts generated from the data. This exploration will allow the identification of whether gender is a salient self-concept within the experience of women owner-managers of small construction firms.

It is proposed for the participants in this study to be women and men who are owner-managers of small construction firms. The inclusion of men's experience allows the presentation of balanced view regarding gender in the construction industry and the avoidance of favouring the views of a group over the other. However, since the focus of this study is on the exploration of whether gender is salient self-concept in the experience of women owner-managers, the number of female participants could be favoured to capture a broader sample of women and gather insights into their live experiences.

The criteria for the selection of participants are twofold. First, participants must be legal business owners from consultancies or trade service providers in the construction industry and have day-to-day management responsibilities within their firms. This is to account for the interest of this research in the experience of women owner-managers in leadership roles. Second, participants come from limited construction firms with and without employees (including limited companies where only the directors/partners are 'employed' and these firms 'employ' external self-employed professionals), and sole proprietors' owner-managers or part of a partnership. The labour-intensive nature of narrative inquiry methodology accommodates the use of a small sample frame. Therefore, the initial intention of this research is to interview between 10 to 15 women and men business owner-managers of small construction firms<sup>2</sup>. The sample will be accessed through the researcher's personal and professional networks, online research, and the snowballing method (Snape & Spencer 2013).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This paper presents the need to add a complementary perspective to the traditional gender related studies within the construction literature which tend to focus on the examination of gender related barriers to make the industry more attractive to women. As an alternative this paper proposes to explore the relevance that women themselves give to their gender identities within the context of the construction industry using a social identity approach (SIA). SIA allows the exploring of the significance of gender for women owner-managers, and it might indicate the level of relevance that these women place to their gender category in the context of the construction industry. The proposal highlights the specific areas of interest within the lived experience of these women which are perceived as relevant when it comes to gender. Results from the exploration will contribute to help policy makers and industry stakeholders to go beyond examining structural barriers only when it comes to making the construction industry more attractive to women.

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<sup>2</sup> According to (BEIS 2021a, 2021b), small firms are enterprises with 0 to 49 employees.

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