

Investigating Diversity Management and Flexibility For Female Managers In The Australian Retail Sector

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The concept of diversity management (DM) is a human resources management (HRM) technique which has been shaped in Australia by legislation and public policy debate. In addition, the concept of DM has been applied to initiatives that promote and celebrate the differences between employees based on the business case arguments for diversity at the workplace. This paper proposes a research strategy which investigates the impact of DM initiatives on managerial women using flexible work practices whilst pursuing their career, as a means of balancing their home and work responsibilities. The research strategy is a qualitative approach using three case studies and semi-structured interviews, investigating the use of flexible work practices by managerial women in the Australian retail sector. This research will contribute to industry knowledge and practice – particularly through its contribution to HR and EEO Manager's knowledge. One of the outcomes of this research will be recommendations for management practice. In addition this research will contribute to debates in the area of HRM and DM, research into women in the workforce and the development of public policy.

Field of research: Human resource management

1. Introduction

For twenty years the concept of DM has been applied to initiatives that promote and celebrate the differences between employees based on the business case arguments for diversity at the workplace. It has been well documented that diversity in organisations should be encouraged because employers who promote themselves as 'inclusive' organisations can become 'employers of choice'. Effective DM enhances employers' ability to attract and retain skilled and talented employees (Foster & Harris 2005) and employers get productivity benefits from more satisfied employees who are able to pursue their careers on the basis of merit irrespective of their age, race or sex (Sinclair 2000). These popular business case arguments have been used to promote the advantages of flexible working and to support the implementation of work-life balance initiatives.

This paper takes as its starting point the conundrum that if there are such strong business case arguments for DM, why is it so hard for women to use flexible work practices and pursue a career in managerial positions as a means of balancing their home and work responsibilities? The paper also asks why is it that after twenty years of exposition of the business case for DM initiatives, many employers are unable to part from the traditional male model of work and life; a model which advocates women still only succeed at work when they work 'like men' (Cockburn 1991; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 2008).

In the vast literature of HRM and DM there is a research gap regarding managerial women's ability to access flexible work practices as a means of balancing their work and home responsibilities, and their ability to maintain and pursue their careers in the Australian retail industry. The key research questions are:

1. Does the implementation of DM strategies at the organisational level enable women to use work-life flexibilities in managerial positions as a means of reconciling their work and home responsibilities? If so, how?
2. What are the factors that enable or impede women in managerial positions being able to maintain and pursue their careers whilst using work-life flexible work practices?
3. Does the public policy framework surrounding women using work-life flexible work practices, support access to work-life flexibilities and career development?
4. What are the 'business case' reasons that encourage employers to offer flexible work practices to women working in managerial positions?

2. Background to the research problem

The context of this paper is that firstly, there has been a significant increase in the number of women working in managerial positions in Australia from 14 per cent in 1980 to 28 per cent in 2004 (ABS 2004 ; Office for Women 2004; Powell & Graves 2003; Standing Committee on Family and Human Services 2006). Secondly, the number of women seeking a way to manage their work and home responsibilities has increased dramatically and thirdly there has been a substantial increase in the number of women working part-time (Corwin et al. 2002). Research indicates that providing flexibility for managers is a key challenge for the Australian retail sector (ARA, DEWR & EOWA 2002) and that employees who utilise work-life flexible work practices in managerial positions experience difficulty maintaining their careers (Corwin et al. 2002; Parris, Vickers & Wilkes 2008; Skinner 1999).

3. Review of relevant research and theory

This section of the paper provides a review of the overarching theory and literature relevant to women using work-life flexible work practices in managerial positions. Firstly, a definition of work-life flexible work practices is outlined, before moving onto a discussion of the extant theories and concepts that assist in gaining a better understanding of women in managerial roles that seek to use or use, flexible work practices as a means of balancing their work and home responsibilities. The section then provides a brief overview of women in the Australian workforce and a discussion of the nature of employment in the retail sector. Lastly this section canvasses the circumstances under which employers have women working as managers whilst using flexible work practices before outlining the issues relating to women using work-life

flexibilities in managerial positions. Part-time work has been situated as central to achieving work-life balance and the most used flexible work practice (Jeffrey-Hill et al. 2004; Pocock 2003; Tomlinson 2007); consequently a large focus of this paper is the use of part-time work as a means of providing flexibility and the use of part-time work in the retail industry.

3.1 Work-life balance and flexibility in management

The general concept of flexibility arose with the need for Australia to compete more effectively in international markets and the associated shift to competitive advantage being achieved through the effective use of human resources (Pfeffer 1994). Through firstly award restructuring and then the shift to enterprise bargaining more flexible forms of work were encouraged as a way of increasing organisational effectiveness and maximising productivity (Fox, Howard & Pittard 1995). The significance of flexibility was highlighted when the Howard Liberal-National government introduced the *Workplace Relations Act 1996 (Cth.)* which provided (in the objects of the Act) for the encouragement of competitiveness and productivity through a flexible labour market. The significance of flexibility has been further heightened in the provisions of the *Fair Work Act 2009 (Cth.)* introduced by the Rudd Labor Government this year.

Flexibility was initially seen as a means of increasing competitive advantage through the ability of management to flexibly adjust the available labour in line with the labour supply and demand of the market and was attached to the management of human resources (Holland & Deery 2006, p. 242). At an organisational level flexibility was focused on the integration of human resource policies and practices and organisational structures to create the capacity to adapt and manage innovation (Atkinson 1987). The shift to organisations managing their employees effectively as a means of competitive advantage required a move away from the traditional ways of managing people. Traditionally human resource policies were based on the assumptions that all employees could be managed the same way which fostered workforce homogenisation (Kramar 1998; 2002). However as a result of the need for organisational labour flexibility non-standard forms of work increased which required human resource policies that supported the notion of diversity and difference rather than homogenisation. Consequently flexibility became a HRM policy (Wooten 2001).

Running parallel to the economic need for flexibility was the increase of women's participation in work; the notion of how domestic responsibilities and the work could be managed effectively and legislative changes that required large organisations to implement policies that allowed men and women equal opportunities at work (Kramar 2002). As a result flexibility became associated with the achievement of work-life balance and was sought by employees as a means of managing their work and home responsibilities.

Work-life balance can be described as the desire to achieve and the achievement of, satisfying experiences in all life domains (Kirchmeyer 2000, p. 81) which has been shown to be positively related to quality of life and is most commonly sought as a means of reconciling work and family responsibilities (Greenhaus, Collins & Shaw 2003). Work-life flexibility can be described as the practical means through which work-life balance is achieved, in other words the policies and procedures that employers offer their employees as a means of balancing their work and family

responsibilities (Kelliher & Anderson 2008; Sheridan & Conway 2001). Generally flexible work practices have been used to describe a number of different working arrangements such as, remote working (including working from home), reduced hours (part-time), different hours (flexi-time), annualised hours or ways in which periods of work can be broken up, such as career and employment breaks (Papalexandris & Kramar 1997; Tomlinson 2007). The next section of the proposal provides an overview of the theories and concepts that help to predict the experience of women seeking to use flexible work practices in managerial positions.

3.2 Theoretical contributions to understanding managerial women

This paper suggests that the primary theory which is useful to examine for this paper is career theory. In addition to career theory the concepts of diversity management and the glass ceiling are discussed in the context of their relevance for women seeking flexibility managerial positions.

Career Theory

Since the late 1980s the consideration of the career development of women has gained broader recognition and taken into account the diversity and complexities of women's work experiences. For example, Woodd (2000) argued that the shift to more flexible forms of working, away from the traditional full-time working model has impacted on career development models, because flexible forms of working required organisations to re-think the way that careers can be managed (Morgan 1990). In 2003, Pringle and Dixon proposed a broad flexible model that aimed to recognise and include the number of changes that women encountered in their career paths (associated with their domestic and childcare responsibilities). More recently, O'Neil and Bilimoria (2005) developed a model of women's career development that recognised the differential impact of family responsibilities and women's under-representation at higher managerial levels. O'Neil and Bilimoria's study has particular significance for this research because family responsibilities are one of the key drivers for women seeking flexibility in managerial positions. Consequently this research proposes to explore the relevance of career theory for women using flexible work practices in managerial positions.

Diversity Management

DM can be traced back to 1987 when the Hudson Institute published its *WorkForce 2000* report (Lorbiecki & Jack 2000). Over the last 20 years DM policies have been introduced into a wide range of private and public sector organisations in Australia and other developed economies (Strachan et al. 2007). The rationales for DM policies have included a means of increasing and maintaining the participation rates of women, ethnic minorities and the disabled (Johnston & Packer 1987; Lorbiecki & Jack 2000) and as a risk management strategy to minimise potential claims of discrimination (Gaze 2005). Business case arguments for DM policies rest on the concepts that employers who promote themselves as inclusive organisations become 'employers of choice', which enhances their ability to attract and retain skilled and talented employees (Foster & Harris 2005), and that employers get productivity benefits from more contented employees who are able to pursue their careers on the basis of merit irrespective of their age, race or sex (Sinclair 2000). Although DM

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policies are generally viewed as a positive strategy there is a counter argument that DM can propagate rather than reduce inequalities at work, because the focus is on individual differences and choice (Lorbiecki & Jack 2000). In Australia, DM is directed by legislation stemming from the associated debates over economic and social policy; in effect DM is not simply a matter for HRM but a serious and continuing concern for governments implementing their economic and social agendas.

In recognition of the fact DM is an issue of significance to society, federal and state government policies around diversity have grown. The federal Government released a Work and Family Issues Paper in September 2006, supporting the need for flexibility and outlining the flexibility provisions available under the WorkChoices amendments to the *Workplace Relations Act 1996 (Cth.)*. At a state level the Victorian Government introduced the *Work and Family Balance Manual* in March 2007, aimed at assisting employees and employers to work together to improve work and family balance in their workplaces. In partnership with the Western Australian and South Australian governments, the Centre for Work and Life reported on work-life outcomes in the Australian Work and Life Index 2007. More recently (Duxbury & Higgins 2008) released their comprehensive report, *Work Life Balance in Australia in the New Millennium: Rhetoric versus Reality*, which aimed to provide Australian government, businesses, labour leaders and policy makers with an objective *big picture* view of work-life balance in Australia (Duxbury & Higgins 2008: 2).

The Glass Ceiling

The term the glass ceiling was first used by (Kanter 1977) to describe the relatively invisible barrier preventing women from climbing the corporate ladder. Since 1991 the theory of the glass ceiling has been described as a 'national mainstream economic and social issue' (Joanna Foster, Chair Equal Opportunities Commission and President of the European Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities, in (Davidson & Cooper 1992) and a 'major concern' of the ILO (Juan Somavia Director General of the ILO in (Wirth 2001). In explaining the invisible barriers of the glass ceiling, (Davidson & Cooper 1992) argued that women faced barriers at all levels of management and that the more senior women became the barriers they faced changed and became more difficult to overcome. For example managing the relationship between work and home responsibilities became more complex, because longer hours became a feature of their work – based on long work hours being central to men's faster career progression (Wirth 2001). Also the fact that many promotional opportunities were based on the availability of managers to be geographically mobile became problematic for women (Davidson & Cooper, 1992; Wirth 2001). Essentially these issues demonstrate that some of the fundamental barriers that women faced were whether they were able to conform to the male model of work, which is difficult for women using flexible work practices. Therefore the conflict between roles (at work and at home) can become the determiner of whether women are able to progress their careers.

This section of the research proposal has outlined the relevant literature, research and theories that contribute to understanding women using flexible work practices in managerial positions. The next section of the proposal provides a discussion of the nature of employment in the retail sector whilst providing the context for work-life flexible work practices.

3.3 Employment in the retail sector

The retail sector has traditionally been and is still a large employer of women (Traves, Brockbank & Tomlinson 1997), yet women are under-represented at managerial levels. Retail is the largest of the 17 broad industries in Australia, employing 1.5 million people or 14.5% of the Australian workforce and has dominated employment growth over the last 5 years (ABS 2008)).

Over the last 20 years there has been a growth in large retailers, intensified competition and an increase in trading hours, which has meant that cost effectiveness and the optimisation of staffing budgets has become an essential component of success in the retail sector (McIntyre 2000; Price 2005). In response to the need for cost effectiveness part-time employment in retail has grown to 47 per cent (DEWR 2007).

The increase in the use of flexible work practices (particularly part-time), has been accompanied by the recognition by retailers that their employees can be a source of competitive advantage (Broadbridge 1996). Large retailers particularly have placed greater emphasis on providing training and development for their employees and offering career progression. In addition retail has been seen as an occupation in which women have more likelihood of becoming managers (Broadbridge 1996).

3.4 The circumstances under which organisations employ women using flexible work practices in managerial positions

There are a number of factors that impact on an employer's decision to have managerial women working flexibly, which are outlined below.

- The culture and strategy of the organisation (Cornelius & Skinner 2005).
- The primary benefit of flexible work practices for employers is the retention of good employees (Johnson 2004; Skinner 1999).
- Legislative pressure may sway or positively influence employers (Gaze 2005).
- One of the key distinguishing factors about flexible work practices in managerial positions is that employees have to negotiate the flexibility (Corwin et al. 2002; Epstein et al. 1999; Skinner 1999).
- The policies and practices of an organisation with respect to work-life balance (Edwards & Wajcman 2005; Elloy & Smith 2003).

Whilst the extant research highlights a number of circumstances under which employers may have women using flexible work practices in managerial positions, this has not eliminated the barriers which may have an impact on the ability of professional women to pursue a career. The next section outlines the obstacles and challenges that these women continue to face.

3.5 Issues relating to flexible work practices in managerial positions

Whilst more managerial women are seeking work-life flexibility by working part-time and although managerial women exhibit some control over their employment (because they have initiated it), ultimately the nature of flexible work practices are dependent on employers. Some of the key research findings relating to this issue are:

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- That the ability for women to acquire flexibility in a professional and managerial position appears to be driven by the business case for flexibility (Fleetwood 2007; Sheridan & Conway 2001)
- While DM is a critical issue for employers, women who utilise flexible work practices in managerial positions experience difficulty maintaining and pursuing their careers (Corwin et al. 2002; Skinner 1999).
- While it is possible for women who utilise flexible work practices to be promoted in managerial women positions, there is limited evidence of this actually happening (Corwin et al 2002; Skinner 1999)
- The shorter hours worked by part-time managerial women identify them as being less committed and less hardworking than their full time colleagues (Corwin et al. 2002; Lane 2004)
- Women working part-time in managerial positions tend to have the breadth of their roles narrowed (Epstein et al 1999)
- Part-time managerial women are not able to access training as readily as their full time colleagues (Chalmers, Campbell & Charlesworth 2005; Harley & Whitehouse 2001)
- Women working part-time in managerial positions are unable to pursue their careers because senior positions require a full time commitment (Liff & Ward 2001)
- Current work structures often favour an 'ideal worker': male, without any visible caring responsibilities and able to work for more than the usual full time hours in a week (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 2008)

The following section presents the conceptual framework and the proposed methodology.

4. Conceptual Framework

The emphasis of the research paper is on understanding the experience of women who work or who want to work, flexibly in managerial positions. The conceptual framework below (Figure 1) has been devised from the theories and literature outlined above and consideration of the research questions.

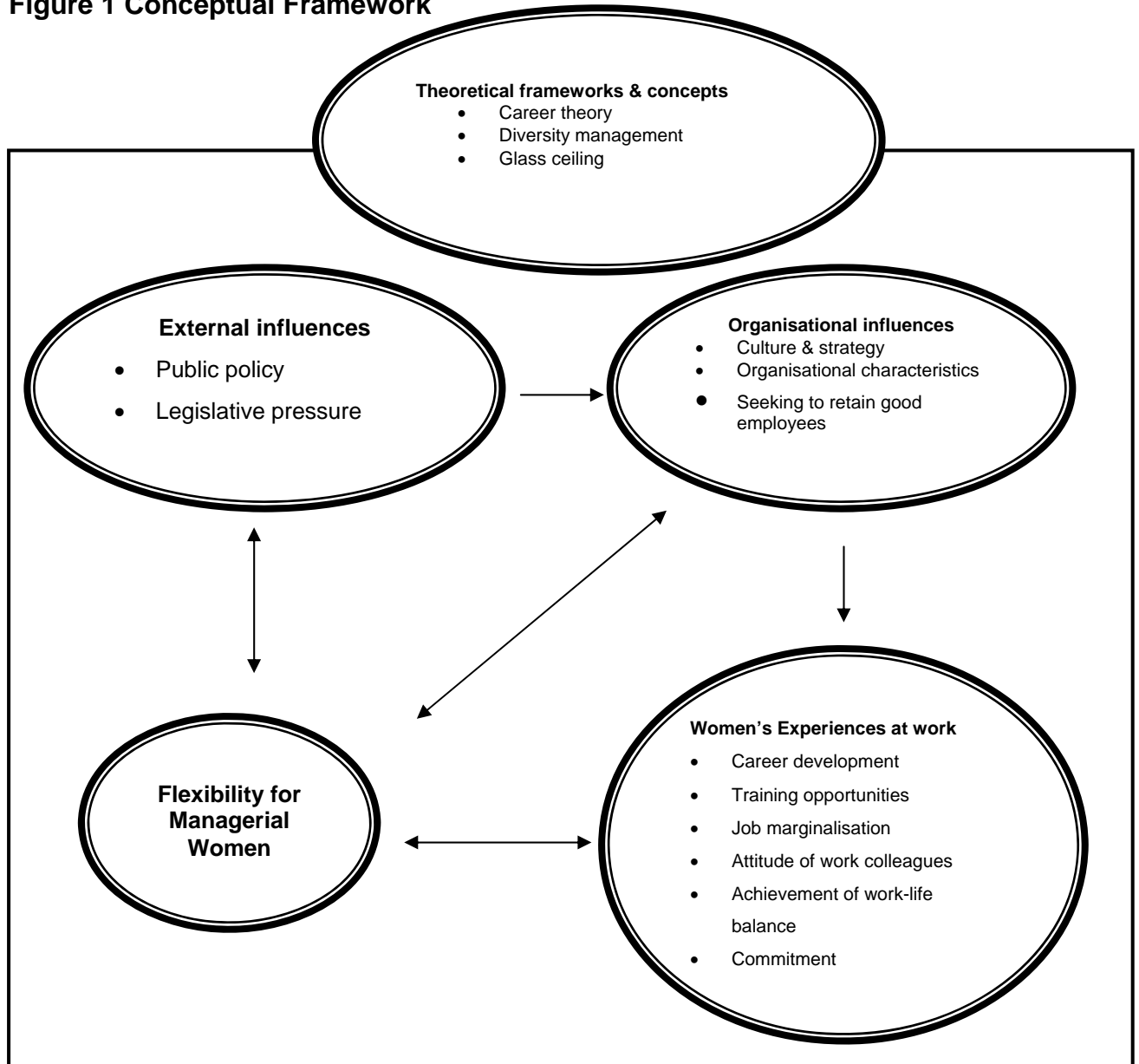
The conceptual framework highlights the findings of the literature review which have been divided into three considerations that influence the ability of women to obtain and use flexible work practices in managerial positions, while pursuing their careers:

- External influences
- Organisational influences
- Women's experiences at work

5. Methodology and research design

The research strategy will take a qualitative approach, with adaptive theory being used as the main methodological technique, because it enables the extant theories to inform and guide this research but allows the discovery of theory. Adaptive theory as described by Layder (1994; 1997; 1998) attempts to combine an emphasis on prior theoretical ideas and models which feed into and guide the research but at the same

Figure 1 Conceptual Framework



time generating theory from the ongoing analysis of data. Adaptive theory is useful for this research because it attempts to understand the reciprocal influences and interconnection between people's activities and the wider social environment (Layder 1998). In the context of this research this is the experience of women seeking to use or using flexible work practices in managerial positions and how the organisational influences, external influences impact and direct their experience, as demonstrated by the conceptual framework (Figure 3

The research strategy proposes to use an exploratory case study approach applied to the Australian retail sector encompassing case studies conducted in large retail organisations. A total of three case studies will be conducted in large retail organisations following successful negotiations with retailers by the researcher who has a background work history in the retail sector. The research topic is quite personal and subjective in nature despite having societal and economic ramifications. Consequently it is believed that case studies are an essential part of the design. Data

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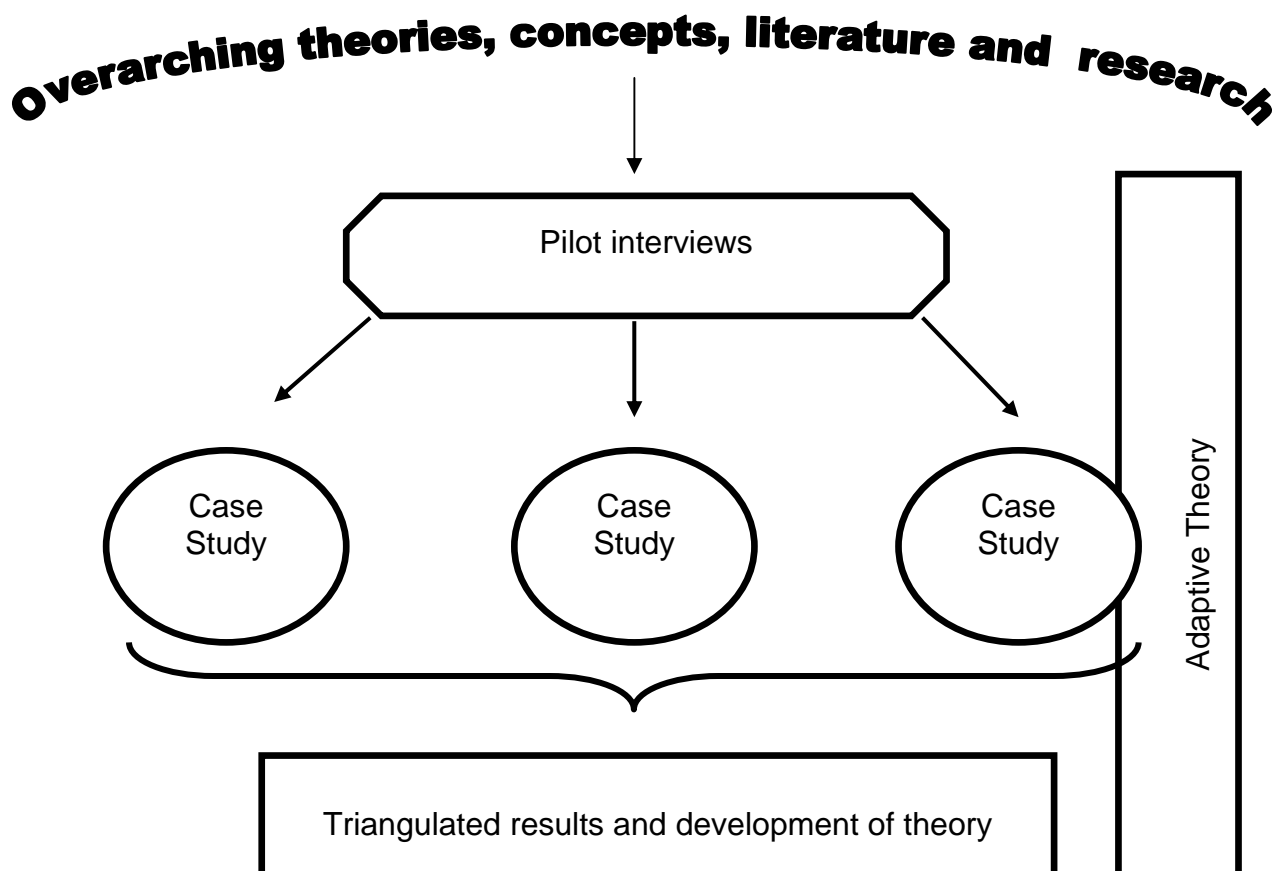
will be collected via semi-structured interviews and a review of appropriate documentation.

The case studies are the organisations, which will be selected from large national retailers. The first part of the case studies will be a review of the organisations industrial instruments; policies that relate to women seeking to use or using flexible work practices in managerial positions (such as the DM, flexible working policies); the organisations Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Report (EOWA) for the last 2 years and the organisations employee statistical reports.

The second phase of the case studies will be interviews. It is proposed that in depth semi-structured interviews be held with firstly, women in each of the case study organisations. The interviews will be conducted with women that fall into one of the following four groups.

- I. Women working full-time in managerial positions with dependent children
- II. Women using flexible work practices in managerial positions with dependent children
- III. Women on parental leave from managerial positions
- IV. Women who have used flexible work practices in managerial positions in the last 5 years

Figure 2: Methodology



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Secondly the managers of women using flexible work practices in managerial positions (i.e. the managers of the women in Group II) and thirdly, the HR Managers of the case study organisations will be interviewed.

The research proposes using an exploratory approach using multiple case studies (Gerring 2007; Yin 1994). The data collected at each stage of the research will be analysed and triangulated with the other stages (Layder 1998). Triangulation should enable a more complex and in depth understanding of the results of the data collection (Denzin & Lincoln 2003). Consequently, the overarching theories, research and literature review will be triangulated with the results of the case studies to discuss what was learned overall and to generate new theory or extend the extant theories (Layder 1994; 1998; Milton et al. 2008). Figure 2 represents the methodology in a diagrammatical form.

6. Conclusion

In the vast literature of HRM and DM there is a research gap regarding managerial women's ability to access flexible work practices as a means of balancing their work and home responsibilities. This paper has outlined a research strategy that will fill this gap and investigate why after 20 years of the exposition of the business case arguments for DM it is hard for women to gain access to and use flexible work practices in managerial positions. Given that DM policies have been implemented in Australia for the last 20 years this research will provide a timely investigation. The outcomes of the research will contribute to practitioner knowledge through recommendations for management practice, in addition to contributing to debates in the area of HRM and DM.

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