

Treading in treacle

1 October 2004, by Clay Harris / Mudlark

Dr Curly Moloney, a headhunter specialising in the recruitment of high-flying women, takes us back to the glass cliff, the contentious theory that women are more likely to be appointed to executive positions of companies in trouble than ones where things are going well. (See Mudlark, September 24).

Moloney has long been interested in the progress of women executives. Her firm, Moloney Search, aided the government-commissioned report on boardroom diversity by Laura D'Andrea Tyson, dean of the London Business School.

Moloney was annoyed by the glass cliff paper presented at the recent British Association festival.

Her initial response was: "We did a quick poll of some of the high-flying women we track and found that most thought the research coming out of Exeter University was more indicative of the slippery slope of research standards falling in UK universities rather than a real glass cliff for women."

She added: "Over 80% said they were often picked for tasks that needed wading up a treacle mountain rather than seeing any cliffs on the horizon."

Accepting that perhaps Professor Alex Haslam's findings had been distorted by media coverage, Moloney read - with his permission - the underlying paper. She remains unpersuaded, in large part because of her doubts about social science methodology; she earned three medical degrees at Oxford and Cambridge but never practised as a doctor.

Moloney argues: "Depending on how you select the cohort of individuals interviewed, you can get any answer you want." She wonders why such studies, published without peer review or replication of results, seem to be taken as fact.

Even after years of close observation of executive selection, Moloney says she's not confident in drawing any firm conclusions about why women are chosen at some times and not at others. The reduction of the issue to sex, ignoring other factors such as management styles, seems to her simplistic.

What might help is live case studies of selection - properly structured and funded research that reflects, and carries authority in, the real world. Let the discussion continue.