It’s About the Leadership: The Importance of Women Leaders Doing Leadership for Women

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What do a group of female leadership aspirants think about female leadership? This question and the subsequent discussion broach a sensitive topic about how women respond to female leadership and whether this differs from that of male leadership. This article investigates female leadership through the experiences of a group of female leadership aspirants as they consider what makes an effective leader. An interpretive perspective drawn from interview data frames the analysis, particularly identifying agentic and communal leadership practices as representative of leadership behaviours and practices that female participants have acknowledged as effective. This article illustrates that particular leadership actions are preferred by women and that these can be evident in both male and female leaders. What emerges from the research is that the quality of leadership, specifically agentic practices that create efficacy and support, in addition to communal leadership that demonstrates emotional balance, are of greater importance to women than the gender of the leader.

INTRODUCTION

Researchers explaining the lack of women in leadership in higher education, especially in developed countries, have proposed that higher education leadership is a male-dominated and male-perpetuated construction (Blackmore, [2006](#_bookmark1); Haake, [2009](#_bookmark2)). Leadership, in this case, refers to academic leadership positions and to women in positional leadership roles (Oplatka, [2015](#_bookmark2)). For female academics, there is a sharp decline in the number of women holding leadership positions in the senior levels. As recently as 2006, women made up an average of 40% of academics, yet only 23% of women were in the senior levels of academia. From the period 2002–2006, there was only a 5% increase in the number of women occupying senior academic roles (DEST, 2006). The lack of women at the professoriate level sustains the perception that academic leadership in higher education is a male domain. The comparatively low number of women in leadership positions suggests that women as leaders continue to remain outside of higher education leadership culture. For some, women are labeled as “intruders” and outsiders (Chesterman et al, [2003](#_bookmark1), Morley, [1999](#_bookmark2),). Others (e.g., Chliwniak, [1997](#_bookmark1)) suggest that the dominance of males in leadership positions sustains notions of conventional leadership where masculine behaviors and practices continue to shape and sustain traditional notions of higher education leadership.

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The Women in Higher Education Management (WHEM) network (White, Bagilhole, & Riordan, [2012](#_bookmark3)) conducted research on gender and higher education management across eight countries. Their findings suggest that advancing women’s progress in senior academic manage- ment and leadership challenges the notion that, in the current context, academic leadership is more inclusive of women. This reflects the consistent criticism of Australian universities for the under-representation of women in senior levels of management (Chesterman & Smith, 2006; Chesterman, [2002](#_bookmark1)). White et al. (2012) showed that criticism extends to other developed nations including the UK, Ireland, Portugal, Sweden, Turkey, South Africa, and New Zealand.

Interventions that foster and accelerate women’s representation in leadership positions in higher education are sought. For example, the second Australian Vice Chancellors Committee (AVCC, [2006](#_bookmark1)) action plan was designed to increase women’s representation at the senior levels in Australian universities. Many similar programs and initiatives are evident internationally. For examples, the Higher Education Resource Service (HERS) in the United States and American Council on Education (ACE) Office of Women in Higher Education (OWHE) offer higher education leadership support and training for women. The provision of leadership programs for women is part of a broader suite of strategies to increase women’s seniority and leadership in academia. Such programs aim to develop women’s leadership learning so that they can learn effective leadership skills and knowledge that will enable them take on the role of managers and leaders.

The provision of women’s leadership programs is problematic (Vongalis-Macrow & Gallant, [2010](#_bookmark3)). While programs have been evaluated as beneficial to individual participants (Devos, [2000](#_bookmark1); Gardiner, Tiggemann, Kearns, & Marshall, [2007](#_bookmark2)), others (Devos, McLean, & O’Hara, [2003](#_bookmark1)) question whether these programs do enough to challenge stereotypical thinking about women and leadership and, more deeply, the cultural barriers that hamper women from achieving leadership. Building on the concerns expressed by Devos et al. ([2003](#_bookmark1)), this article raises an issue not often discussed about women in higher education leadership: whether having more women leaders and greater exposure to female types of leadership practices enhances the prospects of attracting more women into leadership. The article responds to this question by investigating whether women academics prefer a “female” style of leadership and see this as beneficial to fostering their aspirations for leadership.

WOMEN, HIGHER EDUCATION AND LEADERSHIP: RESISTING STEREOTYPING

The discourse around flexible and “malleable” (Probert & James, [2011](#_bookmark2)) leadership, leadership for uncertain times, and adaptive leadership for transforming organizations appears to dovetail with notions of women’s leadership. For example, the main qualities ascribed to women leaders such as “empathetic, supportive, relationship-building, power sharing and information sharing” (Ramsay, [2000](#_bookmark2) p. 3) are the very qualities identified as essential to leading adaptable and flexible organizations in rapidly changing contexts. It appears a nice fit that women are suited to higher education leadership and, therefore, should be more highly represented in leadership positions. However, discussions around gender and leadership need to resist notions of stereotyping women leaders. Such arguments suggest that males and females are unable to change their patterns of behavior and practices because these are scripted by sex roles and the norms around these. The aim of this article is to steer away from stereotyping by focusing on leadership actions and practices demonstrated by leaders of both genders. Differentiating between communal and agentic leadership provides a way to review gendered practices without resorting to stereotypes. Firstly, the notion of agency is connected to competency and action. Leaders are seen as having greater agency when performing and demonstrating their leadership (Tourish, Craig, & Amernic, [2010](#_bookmark2)). The second communal quality relates to emotional work, which different authors have described as virtue (DeWall, Altermatt, & Thompson, [2005](#_bookmark1)) or communion (Robertson, Brummel, & Salvaggio, 2011). I use the term commu- nion because the notion of virtue has a moral dimension that requires further examination.

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Communion refers to the capacity to garner support and cohesion. It presumes that a leader, who has an emotional influence, exhibits a sense of warmth (DeWall et al., [2005](#_bookmark1)) and connects with others. More recently, the term “tend and friend” has been coined to convey the communion type of leadership. If we consider agency and communion through a gendered perspective, it can be said that, generally, female leaders are considered more caring, collegial, and social (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, [2010](#_bookmark1)). Male leadership is considered more decisive, active, assertive, and less emotional (Robertson et al., [2011](#_bookmark2)). In general, a female style of leadership, usually ascribed to women, has less agency but greater communion, while the male style of leadership displays greater agency and less communion.

In differentiating between female and male styles of leadership, gender is defined not only as a category but also a set of behaviors. Therefore, this article refers to a male style and female style of leadership to differentiate between relative demonstrations of agency and communal leadership. The notion of gendered leadership makes reference to both male and female leadership styles. This is exemplified in Young’s ([2004](#_bookmark3)) case study of a higher education institution undergoing reform. Young revealed that men and women could both identify with leadership styles attributed to the other gender. Leadership styles are situational and not strictly demarcated along gender lines.

In order to better inform scholarship and research about women in higher education leadership, this article focuses on leadership actions that women have identified as more effective (Vinkenburg, Van Engen, Eagly, & Johannesen-Schmidt, [2011](#_bookmark3)). The argument is that if women identify effective leadership, then this type of leadership, whether it is demonstrated by their male or female leaders, can be helpful in supporting women’s career and leadership aspirations. The central question posed in the research is: What does a group of female leadership aspirants think about female leadership? The purpose of the question and subsequent discussion broach a sensitive topic about how women respond to female leadership and whether this differs from that of male leadership. While much research and literature has focused on organizational barriers that create obstacles for women navigating their careers towards leadership (Chesterman et al., [2003](#_bookmark1); Morley, [1999](#_bookmark2)), scarce research unpacks the leadership of women leaders from the perspective of the women they lead. Rather than constructing the analysis as a gender issue, this article focuses on leadership actions, demonstrated as agentic or communal, in order to suggest that the assessment of women’s leadership is not only about intra gender rivalry but also how leadership is experienced and demonstrated. The aim is to acknowledge that gendered leadership influences aspirational female academics and that how this influences their leadership prospects is a critical factor in the ongoing education of women leaders.

METHOD

The article contends that examining communal and agency factors in leadership steers clear of gender stereotyping because the emphasis is on how leaders perform leadership as a leadership

style not on reinforcing claims about male and female leadership. Using an interpretative lens specifically focuses on data-theory links (Arrivals & People, [2005](#_bookmark1)) so that interview statements made about male and female leadership can be specifically linked to theory about communal and agency in leadership styles. The intension is to gain further understanding about what type of leadership a group of mid-career female academics found more effective, why this may be so, and the implications this may have for women and leadership.

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The participants were recruited from attendees of the Academic Women Aspiring to Leadership (AWAL) program run by an Australian university designed to support women who aspire to leadership in higher education. The intensive five-day program outlines the basics of leadership, incorporates discussion and workshops around key themes, encourages networking, and builds a greater understanding of leading higher education in challenging and changing times. The program runs annually and is limited to a group of 15–20 general and academic female staff, mostly at the midcareer level. The participants are drawn from every discipline group in the university. Their common elements are that they at the midcareer level and have expressed an interest in attending the program. Participants had to provide an extended response about why they should be chosen for the program and what value they would gain. Approval to attend is given by the faculty and presumes that the participant is research active, has leadership potential, is committed to her career, and seeks future leadership in academia.

After the successful completion of a program in 2010, the group was contacted via email about participating in research about their understanding of leadership. Completion of the program suggested that the participants were highly tuned to notions of leadership and manage- ment and thus able to provide informed ideas about leadership. Eight participants out of the 17 in the program (55% of the group) attending the program agreed to participate in the research. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants. A series of 10 questions centered on how each woman understood leadership, their experiences of leadership, and their thoughts on gendered leadership practices within the university. The interviews were transcribed. Interviews were coded using Computer Assisted/Aided Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS). Codes identified phrases referencing male leadership and female leadership. In total, the inter- views produced 28 references to male leadership and 24 references to female leadership. The references for each code were grouped together to create supercodes or themes for male and female leadership.

The analysis of the themes is framed by a critical interpretive analysis of the 52 references. An interpretive analysis is concerned with creating significant meaning through making con- ceptual and thematic links (Prasad & Prasad, [2002](#_bookmark2)), in this case, links emerging from the male and female coded references. In examining how participants differentiated between male and female leadership, the analysis draws links between the identified gender differences and how these reflect on concepts of communal and agency. As the aim of the research is to understand the subjective perceptions of the participants in terms of what they consider effective leadership, the interpretive description of the results “acknowledges the contextual nature of human experience that at the same time allows for shared realities” (Thorne et al., p. 5). This suggests that interpretations can generate common understandings of effective leadership while also acknowledging the “complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it” (Schwandt, [1994](#_bookmark2), p. 118). The results are presented in narrative form to give voice to the subjective experience of the participants and how these experiences coalesce with notions of communal and agency leadership behaviors and practices.

The participants had particular perceptions and opinions about leadership, differentiating between different styles of leadership and what leadership style they found more effective. The interpretative description of their responses acknowledges their reality, experiences, and explanations, while seeking to generate linkages between perceptions of male and female leadership and notions of agency and communal behaviors.

RESULTS

Differentiating Leadership Styles

The participants were asked to consider whether women do leadership differently. All but one participant answered in the affirmative. This participant believed that leadership was gender neutral,

Every individual does leadership differently. I don’t see leadership in a gendered way where women do one thing and men another. It’s more complex than that. I’ve had male and female leaders. I’ve had male leaders who exhibit stereotypical female characteristics—more compassionate, collabora- tive and empathetic—and I’ve had female bosses who exhibit the worst of what people consider to be male characteristics, so it’s very individual. I don’t buy into the gendered nature of leadership argument. It’s too complex. (Participant 2)

For this participant, the gendered leadership question is complex because her experiences have affirmed that gender and leadership are not prescriptive categories; rather, she has experi- enced gender as sets of behaviors. As stated by Clarke ([2005](#_bookmark1)), “complexities are themselves heterogeneous, and we need improved means of representing them” (p. xxix). The participant suggests that leadership is a personal endeavor. However, contrary to this single opinion, other participants articulated differences between male and female leaders. In describing male leader- ship, it was suggested that male leaders were more “big picture and visionary.” One participant summed this up, saying, “I’ve had a few male leaders and I’ve noticed are more relaxed and less anxious and also more ‘big picture’ in the way they see their role” (Participant 3).

Another participant, in the health discipline, discerned that male leaders were more concerned with the function of the unit and ”big” corporate ideas in preference to concerns about daily patient care (Participant 6). In asking why men may be perceived as big idea leaders, one participant suggested that women are more risk averse and unsure in their leadership, so their leadership emphasis is on maintenance rather than big picture making and enacting, which is associated with greater risks. She stated,

The women leaders that I’ve had seem to be more about managing and controlling rather than taking the big risks. For me I think it’s so much of a struggle for women to get there that once they are there it’s best to just manage it and not to take any risks and risk losing it. (Participant 3)

The participant making this observation suggested that for the women in question, the achieve- ment of leadership is perhaps so difficult to achieve that when women reach leadership, their main quest is to remain in leadership. Certainly, this type of observation is closely aligned to the logic of the “cliff” leadership (Ryan, Haslam, & Kulich, [2010](#_bookmark2)), where women’s strengths, such as the ability to consolidate change, manage change, and be risk averse, are seen as an asset in times of organizational crisis. Participant 3 suggested that once in leadership, women leaders can be more controlling and managerial in their leadership because they tended to focus on maintaining their position rather than on broader leadership issues within the organization. Analyzing the comments from Participant 3 shows that in her experience, what is demonstrated by the female leaders is neither agentic nor communal leadership but rather a stasis, which aims to preserve and control.