Leeds University Business School

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Workplace Behaviour Research Centre

‘women leading higher education: challenging metaphors and images that perpetuate masculine models’

Women leading education conference, July 2019

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Plan for the session

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Focus on two studies which help tell stories familiar to many women in higher education (and beyond)…

1. **semi-structured interviews conducted with eighteen senior women professors at the top of UK HE institutions (vice-chancellor/principal/president).**
2. **an on-line survey to evaluate a leadership program for women conducted at a newer Australian university (which included qualitative comments).**

So, this international research analyses both qualitative interviews and a predominantly quantitative survey – thereby using different methods to examine the research problem (Cresswell and Plano-Clark, 2008).

How we are interpreting leadership and gender

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‘The meaning of leadership, just as the meaning of gender, is a socially and culturally situated construction, which is performed, negotiated and shifting‘

Peterson, 2018

‘a powerful ideological device…produced and reproduced in social situations as the interactional scaffolding of social structure and the social processes that sustain it‘

Karatas-Ozkan & Chell, 2015

Women's place

Women's leadership at board level and in executive roles continues to be under the spotlight across all segments of society and the economy. The topic is "critical for HEIs who create economic benefit through knowledge and innovation and educate future leaders. How they lead and perform on this issue matters, given the pivotal role they play"

(Jarboe, 2016 p5).

So how well are we doing?

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UK

Vice chancellors	29%
Executive teams	37%
Heads	31%
Professors	25%
Gender pay gap	14%

Australia

Vice chancellors	32%
Executive teams	31%
Professors	27%
Gender pay gap	15%

Summary of our findings

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- women's leadership is highly fluid and socially constructed partially through contemporary metaphors and images.
- observing leadership across the generations helps us to question how these metaphors and images can reinforce masculine models.
- older women often used metaphors and images that portrayed their leadership as conforming to male leadership models, as fitting in, as not challenging or unsettling their male colleagues – **'adapting'**
- younger women leaders or prospective leaders had very different metaphors to describe their leadership aspirations and observations of leadership – **'fixing'**.

Older women's stories…

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'*I will be bullying but a man can be saying the same thing and not. So, you can be forthright as a woman and be obstructive or bullying which probably as a man would be perceived differently*'.

'*I think leadership is defined by powerful leadership: it's if you look at the words you use to describe leaders, they tend to be male words and sometimes they put in the odd thing about nurturing and engaging people - that's a girly one. Things like that. They tend to be male in that sense. Actually, the way that the leadership club works tends to be like that, a club. Let's have a beer. Let's meet for breakfast. That's all the constructs about meetings. You go to meetings and you have to stand from the floor and orate. That's a very male thing, rather than sitting down and having a discussion*'.

'*If you've been brought up in that environment and if you've had to fit in to survive, which you probably have as a woman in a very male dominated environment, then actually some of those behaviours you learn them*'.

Younger women's stories…

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'In isolation, such a program changes nothing - I do not see any evidence of the leadership of the university doing anything to improve things for their women employees… I do not want more 'leaders' trained in ways that emulate the poor leadership I see throughout our university'

'…not just expecting women to change themselves to better fit the existing system. And there needs to be follow through - what comes next? What is the university leadership doing to fix the problem? What is the university community doing?'

'disappointing that women didn't feel more empowered… that there are some very unhappy women working here…I wonder why they stay if they are so unhappy…not coping with work life at the university'.

Metaphors and images: generational perspectives

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- Older women learnt negotiating, navigating and fitting in
- Older women experienced discrimination and invisibility
- Younger women unimpressed with leadership models

  'simply encouraging women to aim for leadership positions is not going to reform the university especially when many in those positions find themselves frustrated and unhappy' **(Acker, 2014 p83)**

  Tessiens' (2007) assertion that the underlying assumptions, values and approaches of women's only leadership programmes need to be examined

- Younger women resisting leadership ambition

'It made me question whether academia was the career path I want to pursue. I love what I do, but I see so many obstacles, and so many poor decisions that impact on staff satisfaction and staff development'.

Images of disappointment, unhappy women, not coping, nowhere else to go, being trapped, encountering obstacles, and poor decisions of managers reinforce the sense of women who on the one hand were blocked in their careers and on the other were not interested in emulating what they saw as poor decision making and ineffective leadership of their current managers.

The paper suggests that the prevailing culture in higher education leadership and the metaphors and images used to describe successful models narrows the options for women leaders. While older women were prepared to fit into current leadership models and work within the constraints they produced, younger women had contempt for the way these models marginalised them while at the same time encouraging them to lift their game.

Thank you

any questions please?

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https://www.mdpi.com/journal/socsci/special_issues/Women_and_Leadership_in_Higher_Education