Is Higher Education Leadership an Identity Cage for Women?

The Leaderist Turn

Leadership has replaced management in post neo-liberal higher education (HE) change discourse. The cultural ideology of leaderism suggests that certain subjectivities, values, behaviour, dispositions and characteristics can strategically overcome institutional inertia, outflank resistance and recalcitrance and provide direction for new university futures (O'Reilly and Reed, 2010, 2011). Potent cultural templates or 'scripts' circulate for how leaders should be - often based on larger cultural and historical formations (Alvesson *et al.*, 2008). Leaders are expected to demonstrate authority, affective agency and possess excellent interpersonal and communication skills. However, leaders also have to negotiate intersections with other simultaneously held identities, and this is where some dissonance may occur, with cultural scripts for leaders coalescing or colliding with normative gender performances. This paper interrogates the global literature on women's under-representation in HE leadership and discusses the affective dimensions of crafting and managing leadership identities. It raises questions about who self-identifies, and is identified by existing power elites, as having leadership legitimacy.

Missing Women

Women's under-representation in senior leadership positions is a theme in studies from the Global North (e.g. Bagilhole & White, 2011). It is also visible in studies from the Global South *e.g.* from Ghana (Ohene, 2010); Kenya (Onsongo, 2004); Nigeria (Odejide, 2003) and Pakistan (Rab, 2010). Diverse theoretical frameworks and vocabularies are marshalled to examine the factors that may drive or depress women's aspirations, career orientations and success. The global literature can be classified into at least five analytical frameworks: gendered divisions of labour; gender bias and misrecognition; management and masculinity; greedy organisations, and missing agency (Morley, 2012).

Leadership is often perceived to be at odds with the demands of motherhood, domestic responsibilities, and work/life balance. Lynch (2010) suggested that the academy is constructed as a 'carefree zone' which assumes that academics and their leaders are zero load workers, devoid of familial and care responsibilities (Grummell *et al.*, 2009). While these arguments are important, it does not account for why some women who are 'carefree' are also absent from senior leadership (Currie *et al.*, 2002). Explanations invoking care as a barrier fail to challenge essentialist and heteronormative assumptions that all women live in nuclear families and that, within those families, women do and will continue to take majority responsibility for domestic arrangements. Such assumptions overlook changing relations between women and men, and how modern forms of gender identity are more fluid, multifaceted and varied than previously (Billing, 2011).

Misrecognition is the way in which wider society offers demeaning, confining or inaccurate readings of the value of particular groups or individuals. Gender bias has been theorised in terms of the dominant group 'cloning' themselves- appointing in

their own image to minimise risk (Gronn & Lacey, 2006). How leadership roles are constructed determines the selection process in so far as particular qualities are normalised, prioritised or misrecognised (Grummel *et al.*, 2009). The male preference that results is both unconscious and unintentional (Hey, 2011), with bias more likely to occur if assessments are based on obscure criteria with confidential evaluation processes (Husu, 2000). Hence the emphasis on transparency in appointment processes (Rees, 2010).

It is hypothesised that a good leader is defined according to normative masculinity (Binns & Kerfoot, 2011). The skills, competencies and dispositions deemed essential to leadership including assertiveness, competitiveness, autonomy and authority are embedded in socially constructed definitions of masculinity (Knights & Kerfoot, 2004). A contentious theme in some literature is that women and men have innately different and essentialised leadership dispositions. Binns & Kerfoot (2011) discussed the 'female advantage' literature (Rosener, 1990), which claimed the existence of superior female leadership traits *e.g.* empathy and relationality. Billing (2011) recommended that we need more sophisticated, less binaried analytical frames.

Leadership has been classified as an all-consuming activity, generating an uncontrollable commotion of workplace demands. Devine *et al.* (2011) claimed that there is an assumption of 24/7 availability of leaders. Fitzgerald (2011) noted how leadership is exhausting, with unrelenting bureaucratic demands and institutional pressures. Women HE leaders in Woodward's UK study (2007:11) reported 'unmanageably large workloads'. These observations have led to leadership being described as 'greedy work' (Currie *et al.*, 2002; Gronn & Lacey, 2006). Devine *et al.* (2011:632) discussed leaders requiring 'an elastic self', and 'a relentless pursuit of working goals without boundaries in time, space, energy or emotion'.

Women's under-representation in leadership has focussed on three areas - fix the women, fix the organisation and fix the knowledge (Schiebinger, 1999). The concept of women's missing agency and lack of self-efficacy, self-esteem and leadership aspirations has prompted a range of mentoring and development programmes to build capacity and empower women to be more competitive, assertive and risk-taking. Gender and organisation scholars have argued that rather than seeing the women as requiring remedial support, it is the organisations that require transformational change. For example, Cockburn (1991:12) contrasted the 'short agenda' *e.g.* individual women's achievement, with the 'longer agenda' *e.g.* an engagement with gender and power.

Why Bother?

A dominant view in the global literature is that increasing women's representation in HE leadership is an unquestionable good. Many women desire entry to the influence and change agency of leadership positions, but many do not. There is scant discussion of whether the emotional and temporal investments deliver a healthy return. HE leadership can be rotational and fixed term, involving multiple and conflicting affiliations and unstable engagements with hierarchy and power. It can also include working with resistance and recalcitrance in order to colonise colleagues' subjectivities and guide them towards the goals of managerially inspired discourses including post neo-liberal austerity cultures. Leadership involves an affective load

that incorporates identity work to manage self-doubt, conflict, anxiety, disappointment and occupational stress. Furthermore, the corporate approved identities and narratives for what constitutes an effective leader can be a form of identity cage which restricts, rather than builds capacity and creativity. A key question is how leadership narratives, technologies and practices for universities of the future can be more generative, generous and gender-free.

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