

Understanding leadership experiences: the need for story sharing and feminist literature as a survival manual for leadership

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Paper type: Viewpoint

Word count: 4463

Word count including references: 5346

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Abstract

This paper uses an auto-ethnographic storytelling approach to connect an individual's experience in leadership with the literature on women in leadership as a way of further exposing and understanding gendered organisational practices. Whilst the paper details only one women's experience it was through the connection to the literature that most 'sense making' occurred and a realisation (on the part of one of the authors) that the experience was not unique or individualised but, rather, systematic of masculine, gendered, organisational cultures. The paper offers some 'strategies for survival' for other women who may find themselves in similar situations. It concludes with a call for programs and strategies to bring about fundamental change. Although the setting is the higher education sector in Australia the paper's findings and recommendations have much broader applicability.

Key words: academic women, universities, leadership, storytelling, sensemaking

Introduction

In April 2006 the Australian Vice Chancellors' Committee (now known as Universities Australia, the peak body representing the university sector in Australia) released *The Second AVCC Action Plan for Women Employed in Australian Universities 2006-2010*. Amongst other things the plan aimed to improve the monitoring of gender equity in the workforce, respond to barriers to entry and improve the representation of women in senior roles (Australian Vice-Chancellors'

Committee, 2006). Although there are no recent data on the Universities Australia web-site through which one might monitor the effectiveness of the plan (the latest statistics on women by level are for 2005) it would be surprising if the situation for women has significantly changed. In 2004 16 per cent of all professors (Level E) were women; by 2005 the share had grown to 17 per cent (*University Staff Profile 1996-2005*). Although the target is for 25 per cent by 2010 (Australian Vice Chancellors' Committee, 2006) if the gender equity trends within Australian Universities mirror those of corporate Australia it is likely that the share of women in senior positions has deteriorated since 2006 and not improved. In its recent census of women in leadership the Australian Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency (2008) found women's share of some leadership positions had declined to pre-2004 levels. Anna McPhee, the Agency's executive director attributes the lack of progress to "fewer opportunities, hostile cultures and outdated work practices ..." (Christiansen, 2008). Her comments confirm earlier observations by Sarah Maddison and Emma Partridge (2007, xiv) "Whereas Australia was once a leader in the global struggle for gender equality ... in recent years Australia has resiled from this commitment and many of the achievements of an earlier period have now been undone."

Given the chilly climate within which gender equality is currently pursued in Australia it is more important than ever that a commitment is made to understanding and improving women's leadership experiences in the academy. With this goal in mind this paper draws on the experience of one of the authors to reflect on the leadership experience and shed light on the process of 'survival'. In doing so the paper connects the experiences with the current literature, offers suggestions to other

women who find themselves in similar situations and comments on strategies to achieve gender equality in Australian universities.

The approach we have adopted combines an auto-ethnographic approach with storytelling as both an organisational practice and as a feminist approach to connect individual experiences in order to expose gendered practices (Kjeldal, Rindfleish, & Sheridan, 2005). As indicated it draws on the leadership experience of one of the authors and her sense making or conversations with the other (whose area of interest is equal employment opportunity and women in leadership). As Smith (2005) would observe, we talked our experience as a means of discovery.

We have discussed the risks of writing this paper and we've also discussed the risks of not writing the paper. The risks of writing the paper are that it potentially exposes vulnerability, exposes gendered practices, particular people may read themselves in the situation (whether or not they are the subject) and in a gendered environment this poses personal and professional risk. The risk of not writing the story is that the experiences remain individualised and potentially trivialised by others and the culture remains unexamined and unchallenged. We found Marshall's (1999, 157) work particularly helpful in encouraging us to share our story particularly when she notes that 'research is partly personal process . . . (and) I see doing so as good practice'. However as Ellis and Bochner, clearly point out it is not an easy process

The self-questioning autoethnography demands is extremely difficult ... there's the vulnerability of revealing yourself, not being able to take back what you've written or having control over how readers interpret it (in Bruni, 2002, 25).

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. First we provide some context material. Thereafter we describe our backgrounds before reflecting on the experience of leadership. A discussion follows with the paper concluding with some ideas for survival.

The Australian Context

In Australia particularly since the early 1990s there have been a number of initiatives, programs and action plans aimed at changing the masculine culture of universities and significantly increasing the representation of women in senior roles. Regulatory developments, such as the *Commonwealth Sex Discrimination Act 1984* and the *Affirmative Action (Equal Opportunities for Women) Act 1986* were the precursors for many of these developments, along with several pioneering women in the academy such as Di Yerbury, the first female vice chancellor appointed to an Australian university in 1988, and Fay Gale appointed as the first female vice chancellor at the University of Western Australia in 1989, a sandstone (traditional) university where 'loyalty and parochialism had reigned' (Eveline, 2005a, 646). Clare Burton's (1997) research on the different career paths of women in the academy was also influential in shaping the agenda and initiatives to improve gender equality in Australian universities (Grierson, 2006).

The first Australian Vice Chancellors Committee Action Plan for women was not released until the end of the 1990s and covered the period 1999-2003. Notwithstanding initiatives in the AVCC plans women remain significantly under-represented within senior university academic and administrative positions. By way of

example, in 2005 40 per cent of all academic full-time and fractional staff were women, however, only 23 per cent were Vice Chancellors, 17 per cent professors and 26 per cent Associate Professors. Amongst administrative staff (68 per cent of whom were women) only 38 per cent were in the top (> Level 10) administrative salary scale (*University Staff Profile 1996-2005*).

That the academy is not a supportive environment for women has been well documented (Bagilhole, 2002; Chesterman, Ross-Smith, & Peters, 2003; Currie, Thiele, & Harris, 2002; Eveline, 2005b; Annette Kolodny, 1998; Todd & Bird, 2000). It has been described as a chilly climate (Acker, 1998; Cohen et al., 1998) within which “the devaluing of women has become a normalised social relation in the academy”(Acker, 1998; Cohen et al., 1998; Morley, 2003). Perhaps even more worrying regarding women’s worth in the academy is that it has been described as “a territory ruled by men; where the vast majority of women if they count at all count for less” (Reay, 2000).

Within an Australian context issues relating to class and ethnicity have been less well explored. However, many of the challenges faced by women in academe intensify when considered through these additional lenses. Hey (2001: 68) for example notes that the nature of academic work is both a ‘*gendered* and *classed* division of labour’ (italics in original quote). Mirza (2006: 103) speaks of the “visibility / invisibility distinction that characterises black women’s presence in higher education” and that the “processes of exclusion in higher education are difficult to unpack as they are underscored by the complex dynamics of class, gender and race” (p 105). Mirza

comments how black women become invisible in the academy with respect to the “transforming difference” they bring (Mirza, 2006: 103).

Despite an understanding of gender and the theory of gendered organisations, the experience of moving into leadership roles and the exposure to the actual gendered nature of university operations can, as described in this paper, ‘take your breath away’.

The start of our journey

We began this journey together almost by accident. We had not been working in the same area for very long when one of the authors was appointed as a director of the major graduate program offered in the Faculty and as well as being appointed as deputy head of school. She was an experienced researcher whereas the other author was just beginning her academic career having spent the previous thirteen years working in the area of equal opportunity, including as director of a women in leadership program at another Australian university. We knew of each other but didn’t know each other well. There was a mutual interest in feminist research and an interest in leadership experience based on one of the authors research area and the others move into a leadership role.

This lead to the initial conversations regarding the experience of moving into and settling in a leadership role as well as intense conversations about the need to ‘survive’. These conversations have continued and they have been important and valuable for both of us. They have provided a lens through which to view a range of

experiences which appeared trivial when considered in isolation, were difficult to interpret and which were at times highly unsettling. It helped to confirm some of the inferences that were being drawn from research data about women's experiences in leadership roles. It also provided ongoing encouragement to us both regarding the importance of providing language and frameworks that enable the gendered nature of women's leadership experiences to be shared and understood when viewed through a gender lens.

Reflecting on the experience of leadership

As noted above one of the challenges in a paper such as this is what stories can be shared in the public arena and what must, for a range of reasons, remain private. It also highlights that experiences can, and often do, seem trivial when taken in isolation. The danger therefore is to dismiss such experiences as isolated incidents, a heightened sensitivity or just 'part and parcel' of the job of leadership. Indeed we explored these ideas and more in wanting to make sense of what was happening. We were aware of the literature that characterises women as too emotional (Barrett, Robin, Pietromonaco, Eyssell, & Kristen, 1998; Sachs & Blackmore, 1998), too communal or too agentic (Carli & Eagly, 2007) as well as the literature that spoke of the differences in women's leadership styles (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Rosener, 1990). Whilst this provided some light with respect to some of the attitudes that were encountered we felt a closer inspection, applying a gender lens was required (Ely & Meyerson, 1999).

As a result we are now much more aware of the need to highlight at least some of the experiences to illustrate the gendered nature of the academy. We are not making the

argument that these experiences are the exclusive domain of women. Rather it is our view that it is the combination of highly gendered practices and the impact of a range of so called normal practices that have the potential to have a differential impact when they are directed at women leaders (Sachs & Blackmore, 1998). The lack of female role models and peers and the expectations arising as a result of the pervasive nature gender stereotypes results in isolating experiences for many women leaders.

In making visible at least some of the experiences as a leader no claim is being made in relation to leadership effectiveness. Rather the driver is a strong desire to make a difference, to share what has been learnt about leadership and to change our own organisation. One claim we feel that can be confidently made is that as a leader 'the author' was certainly no worse than many of her male counterparts! However the experience of leadership certainly appeared to be different to her male counterparts regardless of their leadership skill or their length of tenure in the position.

'The author' had a high awareness of the nature of gendered organisational practices (Maddock & Parkin, 1994) but stepping into a management and leadership role showed that whilst not 'gender blind', the subtlety of many of the gendered experiences and their impact was surprising. Society has trained us well in accepted gender roles and notwithstanding best efforts to undo the training and lay bare the gendered nature of the organisation, it was a much more difficult process than anticipated. Indeed, more than anything else it was disappointing to realise how effective the socialisation processes had been and how difficult it can be to recognise that so many of the so-called 'normal' organisational practices are gendered.

In the remainder of this section we have highlighted some experiences that helped to shed light on the gendered culture within the academy. On their own the set of examples described below appear relatively minor, and it is precisely because of their seemingly trivial nature that it is these incidents on which we have chosen to focus. The major ‘transgressions’ are much more easily recognised and named. A key challenge remains naming and recognising ‘small’ gendered practices. Such practices are, however, indicative examples of the micro-political forces (Morley, 1999) that shape the culture we operate in. In many ways each incident on their own may be likened to a quick hiccup in a busy day. However, it is the cumulative effect of these everyday micro-political experiences that combine to create an exhausting, chilly climate; one where women do not always feel welcome and where, without the benefit of good networks and strong support circles, the process of attrition eventually wears women out.

Making sure you know your place

“Your job is small fry compared to mine.”

This comment was made by a more senior male academic and came at a time when ‘the author’ had been driving change at the school level, including significant academic and operational level changes. It had been an exhausting time and such a comment was a way of dismissing the efforts that had been made. It was a comment that also stopped us and caused us to reflect on why it would be made by someone who was in a leadership role that could be expected to provide mentoring or at least peer support. In isolation a comment such as this can easily be dismissed. It may be hurtful but surely one should expect that the world of leadership and management is a tough world. However as the further examples indicate it is the ongoing nature of

such comments that in the end result in a tipping point being reached where awareness of the gendered implications of comments and action is heightened and they can no longer be ignored.

Only visible sometimes

“Oh, there’s a woman in the room, we had better watch our language...”

This was the greeting proffered when ‘the author’ attended her first executive meeting as Acting Head of School. There was another woman already in the room at the time; the executive committee secretary. We reflected on the invisibility of her presence. Why was one female presence so obvious and the other not? Why was there a need to be polite on this occasion when ‘the author’ been in other meetings and situations with a number of the same participants and they had been anything but polite in those circumstances!

Having been highly visible in many situations because of her research and her role as a senior academic, ‘the author’ was somewhat surprised to find herself on another occasion as the one who was ‘invisible’. ‘The author’ attended a meeting at another Australian university, one headed by a female vice chancellor along with another male professor from her university. Two experiences at this institution were disappointing; there was nothing subtle about them.

The first experience happened when a head of school arrived late to one of the meetings. As he entered the room both her colleague and ‘the author’ stood up to greet him; he reached across the table, shook the male colleagues hand, sat down and left ‘the author’ standing! She ‘rolled’ her eyes at the one female head of school in the

room who had the same reading of the situation. This head of school loudly ‘named’ the behaviour at which point he half rose from his chair and gave ‘the author’ a less than enthusiastic shake of the hand.

Later there was a meeting with the vice chancellor. When she arrived the group politely rose from their chairs to greet her. Being closest to the door ‘the author’ was the obvious person for her to greet first. However, it was her male colleague at the other side of the room who was greeted with the first hand shake; she almost had to walk around ‘the author’ to get to him. So again there was this sense of invisibility and of not being as important as the men who were in the room.

Testing authority and playing with power ...

In one of many other experiences, ‘the author’ recalls being at a committee meeting as acting head of school, along with other heads of school. She had prepared well, the documentation was complete as was the rationale for the proposal being presented. However, ‘the author’ wasn’t ready for a relatively minor challenge to the proposal that was in effect a more serious challenge to her authority. Asked “are you sure this is what you want?” An affirming yes did not prevent further questioning finally leading to “Are you really sure?” “Is the Head of School OK with it?” By this time ‘the author’ had hesitated for a moment too long; long enough to cede authority regarding the decision and the proposal was set aside pending further consideration.

The shared stories – the value of the literature

We shared the above experiences not because they were ‘shocking’ examples of gendered behaviour. Rather it is their ordinariness that we think provides the real interest. None of the above would we claim as unique experiences for women;

however 'the author' had noted that she was much more likely to be challenged regarding her ideas, and her authority than her male counterparts (including those in acting roles or representing their head of school at a meeting).

We turned to the literature to help us not only make sense of such incidents but to also gain some insight about how to deal with them effectively. The gendered nature of organisations literature provided useful frameworks for understanding much of 'the author's' experience in a leadership role. At times it resonated strongly with research findings which suggested that her experiences weren't isolated and it wasn't related to the way leadership was being enacted but rather who was in that leadership role (Gale, 1999; A Kolodny, 1998).

Morley's explanation of the micropolitical activities was particularly helpful. She talks about a range of organisational practices that leave women feeling 'undermined, confused and disempowered' (1999:1). She suggests that the 'workplace has become a major site of gender politics' and goes on to describe the 'influence, networks, coalitions, political and personal strategies' that are used to effect or resist change. These micropolitical activities are part of everyday institutional life and cover everything from rumour to gossip, humour to sarcasm, networks to power bases and more (ibid, 4). For women the micropolitics that are played out in organisations act as a demonstration of how patriarchal power is practised not just possessed. Understanding the micropolitical processes exposes a range of organisational practices including sabotage, manipulation, bullying, harassment and spite, which can be seen as gendered power processes. Being able to name organisational practices

became an important sense making process for us both, a process that enabled us to progressively clarify the situation (Weick, 1995).

Of importance in relation to the examples detailed above is that micropolitics expose processes rather than structures. It can give name to previously unnamed practices and show them as collective rather than individualised experiences that are lost in dominant discourses (Morley 1999).

How behaviours and feelings are expressed, perceived and interpreted in organizations also continues to entrench gendered notions of 'appropriate' behaviour. This limits the range of emotional responses that are available to women so that for example being passionate about something can be seen as a positive attribute in male managers but a sign of over emotionality by women managers (Wajcman, 1999).

Reay (2000) notes that it is too simplistic to just hold white middle-class men responsible for women's treatment in the academy. She also notes the role elite women can play in advancing their own career at the expense of other women and men. Similarly Sharon Mavin has written about the lack of support offered to junior women from women in more senior positions (Mavin, 2006a, 2006b). Such analysis helped us to understand the lack of support from women in very senior roles; an experience that had in effect 'silenced' the author. The secretary's invisibility (explained earlier) is also more easily understood when viewed through a gender and a class lens (Hey, 2001) which positions administrative staff, the majority of whom are female, as marginalised workers (Reay, 2000). Reay also argues that the intersections of social class, education and race have particular implications for black

and white working class women. For these women, interactions with those identified as more powerful, is often experienced as humiliating and marginalising.

Foschi has shown that women have to outperform men in order to be considered equally competent. This is a combination of the lower standard to which men are held and the higher standard to which women hold themselves (in Carli, 1999). Research has also shown that female leaders are assessed more negatively than their male counterparts even when putting forward the same suggestions or arguments (Sadler, 1997). Thus it should come as no surprise that there are differences in the way women and men experience leadership but as 'the author' has noted 'the experience took my breath away'.

Discussion

Whilst 'the author' had many of the skills and competencies considered essential to enter senior roles she was very unprepared for the subtle and pervasive nature of the gendered culture of the organisation. On many occasions it literally took her breath away while she struggled to understand the experience. Perhaps because of her training as a researcher there was a real need to understand at a deeper level the context within which she was working and it was this that led to the sharing of her story.

'The author' was also driven by awareness that, as a professor, she occupied a senior position within academia, one where there are few women. As a committed feminist she felt an obligation to have a public voice and to challenge the established order. However, it was done without relish. She was consciously aware of the vulnerability

she was creating for herself and, in keeping with other women who find themselves in similar positions, she responded by investing huge effort into her job. There was a realisation of the need to be more than just good at the job if you wanted to also have a 'voice' about what was happening. It did result in the persist/desist dilemma (Marshall, 1999), that is knowing when to follow a particular course of action such as speaking up about issues and when to desist because of the potential damage to the individual.

Some ideas for survival

As a result of our discussions, our examination of some of the literature and our deep reflection of the gendered nature of the organisation we have identified some strategies that have helped 'the author' to survive and that may be useful for other women in leadership roles to consider. Of critical importance is ensuring a strong, supportive female network is in place so that puzzling experiences can be 'tested' or debriefed of more blatant gendered experiences can occur. 'Naming' (Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000; Meyerson & Scully, 1999) organisational practices and 'training' trusted males to recognise the gendered nature of the environment have also been important survival practices. Reading relevant literature (for example Sinclair's work (Sinclair, 1998) that has provided frameworks for understanding the experiences and has provided a connection to other women's stories. Finding ways to challenge the system, whilst remaining within it have also been important, making Meyerson's (2003) work particularly valuable. We have also come to appreciate the ongoing need for women in leadership programs in organisations and universities to provide a safe space to share and reflect on experiences as well as a place to develop collective strategies for change. [Perhaps there is also the need, through support networks and](#)

specific workshops, to provide safe spaces where women leaders can learn the art of the 'quick response' in relation to yet another put down. Too often in situations where women's authority is being tested the appropriate response comes too late to be effective in challenging or changing the situation. Regina Barreca (1991) provides a useful insight on the strategic use of humour that might present a valuable starting point in understanding not only how to respond but also when to respond.

Summary and Conclusion

This paper uses an auto-ethnographic storytelling approach to connect an individual's experience in leadership with the literature on women in leadership as a way of further exposing and understanding gendered organisational practices in Australian universities. Whilst the paper details only one women's experience it was through the connection to the literature that most 'sense making' occurred and a realisation (on the part of one of the authors) that the experience was not unique or individualised but, rather, systematic of masculine, gendered, organisational cultures.

Although we offer some 'ideas for survival' for other women who find themselves in similar contexts we conclude by agreeing with Kjeldal et al (2005) on the need for organisational cultural change if gender equity is to be achieved in universities and in corporate Australia generally. We also call for a greater commitment to gender equality in universities by Universities Australia, the peak body representing the university sector in Australia. As a minimum this would see the collation and regular release (through the peak body web-site) of vital statistical information critical to the monitoring of women's progress within the sector. At a deeper level it would see commitment and implementation of programs and strategies aimed at redressing the

highly masculine culture of most Australian universities. In the absence of the latter women will resort to the sorts of 'survival strategies' outlined above. Whilst this may arrest the decline of women from senior ranks it will do little to significantly change the staffing composition of the university sector.

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