Leadership

Learning from Leading Women's Experience: Towards a Sociological Understanding

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What is This?

Learning from Leading Women's Experience: Towards a Sociological Understanding

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Abstract *Conceptions of leadership draw largely on the leadership experiences of a limited population, and of those in a restricted range of organizational settings. This article begins to address some of these biases by examining the experiences of six leading women in differing sectors. In researching the 'how' of leadership there emerges a web of four inter-related factors that connects these leaders to their community and that plays a foundational role in their lives: upbringing, environment, focus and networks and alliances. The ways in which leadership is experienced and constructed by women, the article therefore argues, can be made more sense of through a sociological lens, and raises questions about how tendencies in research sites lead to gendered and individualistic understandings of leadership. In illuminating the need to make the distinction between representations of leadership and our experience of leadership, the article concludes that leadership is not just about leading people, but is often pioneering and can include the leadership of ideas, communities, and the representation of issues.*

Keywords *community; experience; gender; leadership; networks; sociology; women*

Introduction

For many readers and students of the leadership literature the range of leadership experiences and stories offered to inform conceptions and models of leadership draws on a limited sector of the population. A number of reasons are suggested for this, broadly centred on the argument that the predominantly American and UK-based leadership literature adopts masculinity as the norm (Calas & Smircich, 1996), specifically a white, western form of masculinity (James, 1998). With much of the leadership and managerial literature developed by men, and with many organizational theories based on observation of male managers, it is not surprising that this focus on male leaders' experiences promotes male values as the behavioural managerial norm (Lamsa & Sintonen, 2001).

Locations in which studies of leadership take place also contain a number of biases. Recently, large business organizations have tended to provide the majority of

research sites, with the great corporate leader becoming a dominant archetype (Sinclair, 2005). Political and military contexts have also traditionally been a rich source for leadership studies (e.g. Grint, 2000, 2005), and given the number of biographies and autobiographies of political, military and business leaders currently available, they continue to be a source of fascination in the media and in popular culture more broadly.

This article has two key objectives: first, to review critically the literature concerning women and leadership and thus highlight its inherent biases, contradictions and paradoxes, and second to contrast the findings from the literature review with the experiences of six leading women from a range of diverse contexts. This is important and timely because while there is topical interest in women and leadership, for example a recent major study by the Equal Opportunities Commission in the UK (2007) shows that UK women are still significantly underrepresented in senior and leadership roles across both public and private sector professions, there is a lack of empirical evidence detailing women's experiences and practice of leadership, particularly outside business and commercial environments (Olsson, 2002; Wilson, 1995).

The women informing our study work outside the business context, so the article is distinctive in making visible leadership experiences that are occurring in alternative settings. The women in our study are recognized by the public and in the media as leading women because they are known for their work in their specific field. In this study we also use the term *women leaders* to describe these women, because they are also taking on leadership roles. Tanni Grey Thompson, Rebecca Stevens, Fiona Stanley and Shami Chakrabarti all lead teams of people; Fiona Stanley and Shami Chakrabarti also lead organizations. Betty Boothroyd was leader of the House of Commons, and May Blood has moved through a number of leadership roles – representing workers in her role as union representative at a mill, leading a community project, leading a political party and is currently taking the lead in a number of projects, for example in promoting integrated education in Northern Ireland.

We recognise that this article may be interpreted as leader centric in that its methodological focus is on the accounts of six women leaders. Within this particular scope therefore, the article does not address the issue of leader–led relations, which may in turn highlight issues of class and hierarchy in relation to gender and leadership.

However, with a focus on women's experiences of leadership from a range of sectors this article hopes to contribute by offering new insights, and by encouraging a discussion that begins to shift the balance away from the predominance of business-focused conceptions of leadership as well as calling for a broader sociological understanding of leadership. This correspondingly draws attention to the societal structures within which the women come to understand their experiences of leadership.

In the first part of the article we aim to take a critical review of the women and leadership literature, and to highlight some of its inherent biases, contradictions and paradoxes. We begin this by presenting some key themes emerging from discussions and analyses about women and leadership. We then go on to examine and discuss these in closer detail through an exploration of how the literature portrays women leaders' ways of working and in particular representations of gender and femininity in leadership.

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This critical review leads us to problematize how more recent leadership models, while ostensibly promoting 'feminine' leadership approaches, nevertheless fail to address more structurally embedded organizational practices and procedures that continue to favour traditionally masculine ways of working. In the second part of the article, we describe our own study of six leading women. We do this by focusing on the 'how' of leadership and by exploring the leading women's experiences of becoming and being a leader within their particular area of activity. In studying the experiences of women leaders working outside business organizations, and by recognizing the relational nature of leadership practice, the article concludes by noting the significance and influence of multiple areas of practice, physical sites and individual experience to the formation of leadership theory and practice.

Literature review

The business of women and leadership: Contradictions and paradoxes

Despite the dominance of specific forms of male experience in leadership research, women and leadership has become a source of both media and academic interest over the last 20 years or so. But it also continues to offer a contradictory and confusing picture that illustrates a dissonance between theory and practice. For example, on the one hand, the media and literature illustrate women's success in leadership, and yet on the other hand, they highlight their inability to succeed. Theory offers leadership models that embrace the feminine and cites the advantage of 'female' characteristics, and yet practice illustrates that this has little capital or significance as leadership remains framed by male norms and values. A key objective of this article is to take a critical view and highlight biases, contradictions and paradoxes in the literature concerning women and leadership. We do so by illustrating how women are represented in leadership models, followed by a presentation of some exploratory research that aims to broaden and deepen our understanding of leadership through women's stories.

Media interest

Reports highlighting women's lower earnings in comparison to men (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2004), polls seeking young women's role models in women's magazines (e.g. *Good Housekeeping*, 2003), profiles of women entrepreneurs in newspaper broadsheets (*Observer*, 2003), and 'defining lists' in the business press detailing Britain's most powerful women (*Management Today*, 2004) all draw attention to both women's and society's attempts to understand what motivates, and hinders, women to succeed. This attention is in part symptomatic of the increasingly prominent role played by women in public life yet simultaneously indicative of the inequalities between women's and men's pay levels and the low number of women in leadership positions, as traditionally defined. For example, the low number of women in leading positions in organizations[1] might be difficult to believe when presented with lists that detail the UK's top 50 'most influential businesswomen' (*Management Today*, 2004). However, even ostensibly positive reports that wish to demonstrate that women are 'thriving in all sectors of UK business' (p. 45), remind

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us that women must still cope with gender stereotyping – that they 'must navigate glass cliffs'[2] – and that while making up 45 per cent of the workforce hold fewer than 1 in 10 of the most senior positions in UK business.

A question of difference?

However, although we know that men still outnumber women in senior roles, women do still occupy leading roles both within and outside the business context. Klenke (1999), for example notes that globally during the 1990s, 13 women became presidents and prime ministers of their countries. Yet women leaders' experiences and practice, particularly outside the business and commercial environments, are neither well documented nor analysed, nor are they reflected in current leadership theory (Olsson, 2002; Stanford et al., 1995; Wilson, 1995). A number of reasons are suggested for this, broadly centred on the argument that the largely American and UK leadership literature adopts masculinity as the norm (Calas & Smircich, 1996) with a focus on the white western male (James, 1988). With much of the leadership and managerial literature developed by men, and with many organizational theories based on observation of male managers, it is not surprising that male values are seen as the behavioural managerial norm (Lamsa & Sintonen, 2001). Dominant masculinities are therefore seen to characterize leadership and management dynamics. Martin's (1996) research, for example, illustrates this by highlighting that formal and informal decision-making processes are traditionally dominated by men and therefore reproduce qualities associated with masculinity. Wacjman (1998: 49) also notes that dominant masculinities are manifested in managerial competencies that favour what she calls action-man-type qualities: 'success means being lean, mean, aggressive and competitive'. In acknowledging the relevance of studies that seek to understand the unequal ratio of female:male managers and leaders to our research, we also note that attention to women leaders is framed in relationship to male leaders. Northouse (with Indvik, 2003: 267) recognizes this in an overview of research trends regarding the subject of women leaders and managers over the past 20 years, that summarizes researchers' key questions as they have emerged over time:

- Can women be leaders?
- Do male and female leaders differ in their behaviour and effectiveness in organizations?
- Why do so few women leaders reach the top?

In general however, these analyses do not discuss in-depth the stories of women leaders' experiences, particularly those who do not work in the business sector.

The feminine in leadership

The contradictions and paradoxes illuminated in the leadership literature may indeed encourage many women leaders to agree that we need different models of leadership that reflect women's experience and practice (for example, the connective leadership model advocated by Lipman-Blumen (2000), and the heuristic model of leadership by Stanford et al. (1995)). However, many might also question how these are to be practised within current male organizational frameworks.

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In literature that does address gender and leadership specifically there has been a tendency to label leadership as either masculine or feminine in style. More contemporary ideas about gender and leadership argue that feminine characteristics afford women an advantage in today's workplace where more participative and democratic organizational styles (Wilson, 1995) are favoured. These styles, it is claimed, are more common among women than men (Eagly & Johnson, 1990). Other so-called feminine characteristics now deemed significant to encourage organizational change include cooperation, receptivity and a caring orientation. These are qualities that have been associated with women (e.g. Vinnicombe, 1988), and in some cases are presented as offering superior ways of enacting leadership (e.g. Hegelsen, 1990; Rosener, 1995). Yet, there appears to be little empirical evidence to support this kind of analysis. For example, the connection made between women and participatory leadership (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001) has, as Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) point out, been challenged by other studies that suggest this can be complicated by the organizational context (Butterfield & Grinnell, 1999; Epstein, 1981; Hanson, 1996), perceptions and expectations of leaders (Carless, 1998; Staley, 1988), and ambivalence towards women as leaders (Eagly et al., 1991). Given these considerations gender cannot be regarded as an isolated feature of identity, but interacts with the broader structural, social, political, historical, cultural and institutional context (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004).

Interesting in this regard is Billing and Alvesson's (2000) summary of the developments in the leadership literature, which they argue extol qualities and characteristics associated with leadership that are *decreasingly* associated with masculinity. This however, is not necessarily a positive development in the search for increasing the numbers of women in senior positions. Rather than afford women an advantage 'the advantages of household and childcare experiences provides a mixed blessing in the reduction of gender equality as it draws upon, and in a sense celebrates, the placement of women in patriarchy, i.e. as primarily responsible for children and home' (Billing & Alvesson, 2000: 150). This leads to the normalization of women as care givers. We should be sceptical, Billing and Alvesson add 'to the idea that the same characteristics (feminine orientations) which earlier on could be used to disqualify women now should be the characteristics facilitating the entrance of women to, and functioning in, managerial jobs' (p. 154). Presented as an empirical phenomenon then, feminine leadership promotes the view that female leaders are in general seen as different from male leaders. This sets them in a comparative position to male leaders or assesses them against a frame of male leadership. This stands in direct contradiction to earlier debates in the feminist literature that claimed women were no different to men and should therefore become leaders. A conclusion to be drawn from this is a perception of women being caught in a gender trap and 'constructed and reconstructed in order to make them appear suitable candidates for managerial labour' (p. 155).

Gender and post-heroic leadership

The decreasingly masculine nature of leadership that Billing and Alvesson (2000) refer to has been particularly noted in new, 'post-heroic', concepts of leadership – even if the social processes associated with these new models are often presented as

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gender neutral (Fletcher, 2004). These models emphasize, Fletcher (2004: 648) argues, leadership as 'a collaborative and relational process, dependent on social networks of influence'. The practice of leadership is therefore shared and distributed throughout the organization creating an environment in which the positional leader is supported by 'a network of personal leadership practices distributed throughout the organization' (p. 648). The relational nature of leadership apparent in post-heroic models encourages a view of leadership as a social process that is less hierarchical than earlier models. Leadership is portrayed as 'an emergent process' and 'as something that occurs in and through relationships and networks of influence' (p. 649). This essentially challenges dualistic forms of analysis, proposing a more dialectic understanding of the leader–led relationship characterized by 'multi-directional social interactions and networks of influence' (Collinson, 2005: 1422).

Even if the processes apparent in post-heroic concepts of leadership are not generally considered in gender terms, the identification of post-heroic leadership *traits* suggests a reluctance to accept fully leadership as a social process. So while the traits associated with post-heroic leadership might be considered feminine – for example, 'empathy, community, vulnerability, and skills of inquiry and collaboration' – the pressure placed on women and men to '"do gender" by defining themselves in relation to these stereotypes' (Fletcher, 2004: 650), is less well examined. This, Fletcher argues, has implications for business practice. If a real shift towards post-heroic leadership is to occur then the 'belief system' that underlies business practice also needs to shift. Even though these new models emphasize the relational, distributed nature of leadership, organizational reward systems on the whole demand to see evidence of individual achievement and success. The heroic leader continues to attract attention, with both Beer (1999) and Khuruna (2003) noting that in leaders' stories of their success they tend to ignore the wider social networks and relational practices that helped them to achieve prominence.

Why this shift has seemingly not yet occurred might be explained by the power dynamics associated with post-heroic leadership models. The models' more egalitarian, relational and distributed notion of leadership suggests power is enacted 'with', not 'over', others (e.g. Helgesen, 1990). The skills and approaches needed to enact 'power with' leadership – 'such as fluid expertise, the willingness to show, and acknowledge interdependence' (Fletcher, 2004: 653) – are, rightly or otherwise, more commonly associated with powerlessness and femininity. They are not seen more positively as being more flexible and fluid leadership practices. This becomes especially problematic when women practise leadership in a way that enacts the skills and approaches advocated by post-heroic models. Their sharing of power, or contribution to the development of others, is likely to be interpreted as the behaviour of a 'selfless giver' who 'likes helping' – behaviour which 'is likely to be conflated not only with femininity but with selfless giving and motherhood' (Fletcher, 2004: 655). In not recognizing the power and gender dynamics inherent to post-heroic models women may be expected to practise leadership in this way, but without it being acknowledged as leadership behaviour that expects a degree of reciprocity and has leadership capital. In other words, failing to see that 'doing gender' is 'fundamentally interactional and institutional in character' (West & Zimmerman, 1987: 136), risks losing sight of how each individual might be held 'accountable' for their performance of an activity as either a man or a women.

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Yet, the continuing interpretation of personal attributes as either masculine or feminine would seem to be as prevalent in post-heroic models as it is in more traditional models, encouraging the view that these are natural and innate to individuals. This focus on leadership style then continues the tendency to depict 'women leaders as the kind of representatives of women that follow women's natural way of behaving', serving to reify power relations (Lamsa & Sintonen, 2001: 257). However, taking a view of gender as a 'master identity' with cultural meanings, which cuts across all situations, and 'has no specific site or organizational context' (West & Zimmerman, 1987: 128), encourages an analysis of how roles, such as leadership, are constituted through interaction. This discursive approach therefore requires us to ask how societal narratives of gender are appropriated by individuals in certain situations, and how 'these performances preserve and/or alter the veneer of a binary gender order' (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004: 9).

Our brief exploration of themes and trends in the leadership literature therefore portrays a picture of contradiction and paradox:

■ the numbers of women leaders are increasing, yet still women are struggling to gain equity of pay and standing within the workplace.

■ over recent years, the literature has ostensibly heralded female characteristics and ways of working as important, yet theory and practice continue to adopt masculine values that reify existing power relations as the norm;

■ policies and procedures within organizations offer a perception of fairness and objectivity while women's leadership experience remains marginalized and excluded by masculine oriented cultures and a preoccupation with traditional business organizations;

■ writing about women leaders and leadership models appears to sustain a picture of women enabling rather than enacting leadership, thus enabling maintenance of the status quo of leadership as a male, individualized, hierarchical activity.

In summary, we might therefore view women's leadership as confrontational both theoretically and empirically. While we have found that women's leadership is poorly analysed and documented, the few studies of women's experiences and leadership journeys confront the conception of gender as distinct from context and therefore the common view of leadership as located in the individual. Therefore, although recognizing that women's leadership may be different, the literature focuses rather on style and characteristics and continues to debate women and leadership separately from more detailed considerations of the broader socio-cultural structures within which women live and work. Women's leadership experiences while therefore challenging the norms and values reflected in theory are either excluded from models or their practice of 'feminine' leadership is taken for granted and not deemed worthy of organizational reward.

We argue that this limits our ability to understand the nature of women's leadership and in turn to learn how women either become successful, or alternatively, why they fail to achieve their ambitions. Furthermore, we believe that this illustrates a need to move debate and research beyond notions of difference in style and behaviour, which place women in the subjugated position of arguing their cause (Olsson,

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2000). Rather, it encourages critical studies that illuminate women's leadership experience and practice, and give it a theoretical standing that is not in deference to, or comparison with, masculine leadership. The recognition of contextual importance – the variety of places (e.g. geographic, socio-cultural) where individuals practise leadership – also promotes the need for a broader sociological understanding of leadership that seeks to make explicit the relationships and ties between leadership, context and culture.

Our research: context and introduction

The contradictory view of women and leadership in the literature, the positioning of women within a gendered perspective, the paucity of documented experiences of women leaders, particularly outside a business context encouraged us to conduct empirical research that explores the experiences and journeys of women leaders from their own perspective. In particular we were concerned to provide a voice for women who do not fit the traditional mould, that is, women who work in different settings, often outside traditional business or organizational contexts. Our aim was to highlight women's own stories of leadership and thereby increase our understanding of how women become leaders, how they experience leadership and what is important to them in their continued leadership. Our research was also keen to understand what leadership means for these women, for as the literature acknowledges, while in the abstract people might think about leadership in a certain way, this has little relevance for what they do in practice, which is 'difficult to predict' (Billing & Alvesson, 2000: 149).

We were concerned not only to illuminate women's experience and practice, but also to explore those experiences from a critical perspective, with a view to building a working model from which to develop further research.

Our study of six leading women which is the focus for this article originates from a separate survey study involving over 50 women. This initial study included conducting individual interviews and two focus groups, involving over 50 women, from a variety of backgrounds and whose ages ranged from 18 to 80. This survey began with a focus group of mature women students on a higher education management programme. We then employed a snowball sampling strategy as outlined by Bryman (2001), where we used the contacts from the original sampling group to make contact with others. The survey was interested in finding out who women considered to be inspirational female leadership role models and why they chose these particular women. The results of this survey were a list of women leadership role models, some of whom were known only to the woman concerned, for example a local headteacher, and some of whom were more public figures either through media attention or wider networks, what we call here 'well-known women'. We took an initial focus on the well-known women as we were interested in interviewing women whom a range of people might recognize from the media or public office. We then chose a sample according to four key criteria. We wanted a sample of leading women who were also women leaders, that is, leading women in their field who were also involved in some form of leadership, for example either through leading people, a movement, or a project. We sought a diverse sample representing a range of sectors that lay outside the traditional business/commercial sector to highlight the diversity

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of leadership. A further criterion was that the women should be currently, or very recently, involved in leadership so that their experiences would be current. We also needed to choose women who were accessible for interview within our research time frame. So while Aung San Suu Kyi, Burma's pro-democracy leader, was noted as an inspirational woman leader, she cannot be accessed for interview. In this way we ended up with a sample of well-known women, six of whom we have now interviewed and who make up the sample for this study.

We chose this sample in a deliberate attempt to counter the leadership literature's predominant focus on leadership within business contexts. By listening to the views of women who live and work in a variety of settings, which are not necessarily connected to recognizable work organizations, we offer an alternative focus to leaders within organized/business-based structures. In so doing we acknowledge the constructivist nature of the construction of leadership identity. That is, the identity of a leader 'is a consequence of various accounts and interpretations, all of which vie for domination' (Grint, 2000: 9). The naming of a 'great' or 'successful' leader is therefore viewed as a political process where the less powerful have little say as to who is deemed to be a popular leader, or how successful leadership is evaluated. It is therefore salient to note that in this first stage of the research the women who were identified operate in a variety of sectors. In the second stage of the research the focus on women leaders who have not followed a traditional organizational path offers a less narrow perspective to documented experiences of women who are bound within, and recruited through traditional, and predominantly business, organizations.

Whilst the majority of the participants referred to publicly recognized women, others referred to female friends, colleagues, or female family members as demonstrating leadership that they found inspirational. Well-known women who were cited included: Baroness Helena Kennedy, Oprah Winfrey, Tanni Grey-Thompson, Dame Margaret Thatcher, Fiona Stanley, Hilary Clinton, the late Jane Tomlinson, Baroness May Blood, Julie Walters, Aung San Suu Kyi, Shami Chakrabarti, Baroness Betty Boothroyd, the late Benazir Bhutto, Rebecca Stephens, Vivienne Westwood, Baroness Shirley Williams, and Madonna.

The second ongoing stage of the research has consisted of interviews with six of the women cited by the original research participants, as well as an examination of media profiles of leading women. We conducted interviews of up to three hours with Baroness May Blood (Northern Ireland community worker and peace activist), Shami Chakrabarti (Director of the human rights organization Liberty), Baroness Betty Boothroyd (first woman speaker, House of Commons), Dame Tanni Grey-Thompson (record-breaking paralympian, and six times London marathon winner), Rebecca Stephens (first British woman to climb Everest and the seven 8000-metre summits), and Fiona Stanley (Professor of Paediatrics and Founding Director, Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, Perth, Australia; Australian of the Year, 2003).

The experiences of these women are significant for leadership research for a number of reasons. First, they broaden its research base, which consists largely of studies of males who hold leadership positions in legally defined and recognized social structures. Also, in examining the experiences of women from a variety of backgrounds and occupational areas the research contributes to the development of a richer picture regarding how individuals become leaders in their field of activity.

Therefore, rather than focus on what women do differently, the 'what' of women's leadership, we explore the 'how' of women's leadership, how women work, achieve and attain their roles.

By taking an in-depth look at what has been, and what continues to be, important in the lives of women in leading positions, we hope to gain insight into how leadership is currently constructed by women and to explore the implications of this for leadership theory and practice.

Research methodology

Our research is necessarily constructionist and qualitative, in that we maintain that leadership is constructed by those experiencing it, and it is the essence of women leaders' experiences from their own perspective that we wish to understand (Bryman, 2001). This specific focus on the doing and therefore the process of leadership encourages a purposive sampling method, whereby individuals are sought where those processes being investigated are most likely to occur (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In order to get to the heart of women leaders' experiences, and what leadership means for them, we chose to work within a biographical frame and to take a narrative approach to data collection. This approach involved asking women leaders to reflect on their lives and to recount their experience in recognition that the events and experiences they narrate 'reflect leaders' self-concepts and their concept of leadership' (Shamir et al., 2005:17). The narrative approach, typically used in the context of biographical study (Creswell, 1998), necessarily assumes a subjective process, a 'storied construction of reality' (Shamir et al., 2005) where the narration offers an understanding of how the narrator makes sense of and learns from their experience. This notion of sensemaking is important to this research because we are working from a contextual view of the nature and learning of leadership. This view shows leadership as defined and understood by the context within which it operates and therefore requires a methodological approach that enables us to understand how women see themselves and make sense of and learn from their experiences in their particular situation.

Method and analysis

Within the broad frame of biographical research, which Creswell (1998) denotes as including written as well as oral histories, our study of women leaders included interviews with six notable women, and the use of additional written biographical material where available. Taking a narrative approach to the interviews with women leaders involved working with the guidance of a narrative-generating framework that was 'responsive to the structure and gestalt of how experiences are made' and enabled interviewees to 'unfold subjective viewpoints' (Flick, 2002: 102). The limited time that we had available for interviews (a maximum of three hours) and the particular emphasis of our research (leadership) encouraged us to lean towards a more structured interview format that seeks to reveal what Flick (2002: 105) labels as 'episodic-situative forms of experiential knowledge'. Our interview schedule therefore included general narrative questioning that enabled us to get the story of the

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women's experiences from their perspective, for example, 'We would like you to tell us about how you have come to be who you are and where you are now, in this particular position'. The schedule however, also included more detailed questioning in which we asked women leaders to recall and recount events and experiences that had relevance for them in relation to their public lives and leading roles. For example, 'Can you think of any incidents/problems or times when you've been at a low point and felt like throwing in the towel, and what has inspired you to keep going?' and 'What, for you, has been your most important achievement? How has this inspired you to continue in your career?'.

Interviews lasted from between two and three hours and were tape recorded, and then transcribed. The data were analysed using Ritchie and Lewis's (2003) qualitative analytic hierarchy as a guide, which broadly seeks to identify initial themes and concepts in line with the aim of the study, to assign data to those themes and then to refine the themes by developing more abstract concepts which in turn have data assigned to them. Using the framework with this study, and taking guidance from Easterby-Smith et al. (2002) concerning the analysis of in-depth transcripts, the analysis involved a systematic process of reading and re-reading the transcripts to first of all familiarize ourselves with the data, and then to reflect on what the data seem to be saying, for example do they support existing knowledge. We then highlighted particular themes in the data that had relevance to our concern of the 'how' of leadership, for example noting what seemed to be important to the interviewee about a particular experience, such as May Blood practising an incremental strategy to her role as shop steward in the mill. Noting what seemed to be important generated themes from the data, initially for each interview and then in looking at themes in common across all the interviews. This conceptualization of the data is 'important for understanding what is going on' (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002: 123). This then led us to refine and label broader concepts, for example 'finding a focus', 'professional networks' and to check back to the data to verify that what we had assigned as meaning was actually in the data. We then developed descriptive accounts by assigning meaning to the themes and concepts using excerpts from the data, for example, *Theme: parental role* – Betty Boothroyd wanting to work hard to ease her parents' lives; Shami Chakrabarti seeking understanding about issues from her father with armchair debates.

We then sought to refine and distil the data through the development of more abstract concepts which enabled us to make links and relationships between concepts and data. for example, *Concept: Upbringing* to include childhood/parental role/family role /young adulthood: May Blood's work as a young girl and subsequent role as a union rep exposed her to 'a microcosm of society' and was responsible for her realisation 'that women weren't asking for near enough'. This was pivotal in developing her abiding passion for education for women and children.

As part of this process we have used labels for the concepts and themes that the women used in their interviews, primarily because we wanted to relate their experience as far as possible in their words. Our following discussion draws on this analysis.

Women leaders' stories

Our interviews suggest there are typically four important dynamic inter-related factors that play a foundational role in the lives narrated by these leading women: upbringing, environment, focus, and networks and alliances. The breadth of these categories is purposeful, as we wish to recognize the wholeness of experience that women leaders draw upon in a way that is distinctly non-linear and occurs in multiple loops from one experience and event to another, for example recounting a childhood experience to describing a recent event that brings about further reflection of the childhood experience. In analysing the interviews we were therefore mindful of attempting to guard against objectifying and reifying the very subjective nature and social construction of those stories narrated to us (Boje, 2001).

The categories taken together and their inter-relationships constitute for us a broader conception that we name a web as together they typically connect the leaders to their community, and to their concerns and aspirations. At the same time we also view the web as connecting the community to the leaders through the representation of issues. This web and its constituent parts are constantly developing and shifting to reflect the leader's current position and the current context. Therefore, while the web of categories is seen to provide an understanding of the developing leader as shaped by her past, they also offer a picture of leadership that is connected with, and firmly rooted in, the here and now.

While recognizing that these factors are interconnected and often overlapping, for clarity we discuss below each one in turn, and include examples from the women leaders' stories.

Upbringing

Upbringing, both past and present, plays a significant role in the path to leadership and also in the continuing development of the women leaders we interviewed. This is a very broad theme, that includes the woman's childhood, how they were raised, their place within the family and their early experience as an adult both at home, in their community and their workplace.

For all of the women we talked to, childhood and being part of a particular family or community were vital in shaping their ambition and drive. Tanni Grey-Thompson, Paralympian team leader, for example, recalls her childhood years as important in developing what she calls 'sheer bloody-mindedness', to succeed in a competitive world. Tanni argues that the way in which her family encouraged her self-belief has been significant in how she now enacts her leadership:

> There is something in me that I think comes from my parents and probably a lot from my mother, that I am just driven to want to do things. And lots of people have said to me, 'do you think you would have been like that if you hadn't had spina bifida?', and yes I think I would have because my sister is similar but in a different way . . . So as a child I think I was fairly irritating because I had this thing – I want to do this and I want to do it now . . . – my parents were great because they channelled that and I think my Mum, because we were so similar in personality, recognized that what was in her was also in me and just let me go off and do things.

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Our interview with Baroness May Blood, a leading community activist and the first woman from Northern Ireland to be elevated to the House of Lords, enables us to illustrate the significance of upbringing in more depth. May recalls particular experiences and events in her early adulthood, working as a mill cutting supervisor and shop steward. This experience is, she asserts, fundamental to what she cares about and who she is today: 'you are a product of what you live through'.

Leaving school at the age of 14 to work in post-war Belfast at Blackstaff Mill, initially for a fortnight, May remained an employee for 38 years until the mill was shut down. She recalls a number of formative experiences as a young adult that were, she believes, significant in developing an understanding of leadership and how she might position herself in a leadership role:

> Inside the mill – everybody knew me and I knew everybody and as I began to get over my shyness and get confidence I went to the transport and general union – they afforded me any education I had, I have to say. And at times it was difficult. I found myself as the only women in a whole room full of men but I learned a lot from that experience . . . I remember being in a room full of men and they were arguing about the World Cup and that their firm would not allow them to watch the match live. The day before I was asking my employer for toilet rolls. And that taught me that women were not asking for nearly enough. We were just taking whatever was given . . . It was that whole attitude – the mill was predominantly women . . . pin money. Even in the room I worked in the two men pushed a truck but they had far more wages than anybody who was making and delivering the most beautiful production of stuff: table linen, bed linen for all the big companies . . . And so I began to use the union more or less as a platform.

May Blood believes that these kinds of incidents, and learning how to deal with them to effect change, have been instrumental in educating her as the leader she is today, both in inspiring her to continue to work for the welfare of women and children in Northern Ireland, and in teaching her how she might best build relationships and influence decision making in hierarchical institutions. The upbringing of these women therefore offers a picture of how women's leadership is embedded within a particular context, which in turn shapes their enactment of leadership.

Environment

This plays an important role in the women leaders' lives too. The events and experiences they recall illuminate a social, political, historical and cultural landscape that has significance for the women's leadership today. May Blood's years in Blackstaff Mill highlight this well. She describes the mill as a microcosm of Northern Ireland where she was exposed to issues of poverty, education and gender. She remembers the physical environment she worked in at the age of 14: ' women working with water lapping round their ankles, women running in and out to breast feed children and coming back and all that kind of thing, and domestic violence was a big thing you know'.

Her adult years at the heart of a tense political and violent environment have been critical in the development of her strategic ability of finding ways to transcend sectarian boundaries. She has found that in a society where women and children had little

status, this has positively enabled her to work with people she has issues in common with, other than religion or status. She cites her work with women and children across the religious divide. This work was considered dangerous as she had to cross the peace line, a wall built to separate Protestant and Roman Catholic communities, and yet she says her perceived lesser (female) status was a positive attribute; 'I wasn't considered orange (Protestant) or green (Roman Catholic) – I was only a woman'.

Similarly Baroness Betty Boothroyd, first woman speaker of the House of Commons, points to her roots as pivotal in her development as a leader and her continued determination to achieve her ambitions. Having grown up in an industrial northern British town, she makes the link between her ambition and her upbringing powerfully, when she says, 'I was just going to succeed. I felt that all the time. You could just say it was determination and I don't know what else – grit? North country attitude'.

Shami Chakrabarti, Director of Liberty (formerly, The National Council for Civil Liberties), recognizes the cultural significance of being the daughter of immigrant parents: 'one of the things you get from your sort of lower/middle class Asian parents who have both been to university is that you could theoretically do whatever you wanted to do. And there is no question that you could of course go to university'.

These stories illustrate the importance of the physical, social and cultural environment to the women's perceived development as leaders, in terms of encouraging particular characteristics such as determination and ambition, but also in revealing to them what is important for them in their community and context, such as education and women's rights. The events and experiences they recall are vivid and meaningful for them today and have become important context for why they continue to do what they do. We therefore see a layering of experience that provides depth and rationale to their current leadership and focus. For example, May Blood's work in campaigning for integrated education can be viewed as bound by her experiences during her upbringing as a mill worker and the particular social environment in which she lives.

Focus

Focus is cited by all of our women as being key to achievement, and for all of the women we interviewed was an abiding passion. Rebecca Stephens, mountaineer, expedition leader and adventurer believes that the first quality of leadership is 'clarity that one is doing what one wants to do'. Focus she says, has to be 'determination and tenacity for something that you love . . . determination and continued determination isn't so difficult if you find out what it is you want to do'. She asserts that this passion and focus brings authenticity that others respond to: 'no way can a leader inspire and lead others to contribute if it's (passion) not clear'.

There is recognition by the women we interviewed that it is passion borne of experience that enables focus to be sustained, particularly when reward or success is hard won. Betty Boothroyd, for example, realized during her years working as a secretary for prominent Labour MPs during the 1950s and 1960s that she could perform the role of MP as well as anyone could. Nevertheless, her route to a seat in the House of Commons was not a straightforward one. She stood, and lost, as a Labour candidate on four occasions before becoming the MP for West Bromwich in

a by-election in 1973 at the age of 43. She explains how the very clear focus of becoming a Labour MP was sustained by 'sheer determination and hard work. There is no easy route'.

Fiona Stanley's (Professor of Paediatrics and Founding Director, Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, Perth, Australia) early interest in human rights and determination to follow a medical career – despite parental opposition – have led her to be publicly acknowledged as a leading advocate for children's rights. The energy and focus required to establish and lead a Child Health Research Institute she attributes as emerging from a variety of experiences while a medical student. During a residency in a children's hospital she visited Aboriginal communities in the early 1970s and describes this experience as seminal:

> I went round to all of the aboriginal communities . . . and reserves and camps in north and east of Perth and it was amazing. A trip to Kalumburu and everywhere and saw the conditions in which the aboriginal children and families were living and it hit me then that if we were going to do anything in medicine we had to look at the cause of the disease and try to prevent them . . . that was a seminal moment of realizing that if you want to do anything in health the most humane and cost-effective way to do it is to prevent disease rather than treat it. And it was brought home when I admitted a child into hospital with a little aboriginal kid and he was brought in three times from Kamballie which is right out south of Kalgoorlie in the desert and this little kid had been in three times with severe gastroenteritis and dehydration and each time we had spent three months working a medical miracle on him and plonking him back in the community. And the last admission he came in and, I still have got a big photo of this guy – Lakeland Abbot his name was – and the most beautiful child and we had all fallen in love with him and, the last admission he came in with some kind of blood disorder and died and you just thought, what a bloody waste.

With Lakeland Abbot's photograph still in a prominent position, this experience has provided the focus for Fiona's medical ambition. She went on to pioneer work in public health in Australia leading to her founding the Telethon Institute in the 1980s. Despite key supporters thinking she 'had gone off her rocker' in locating the Institute in Perth and early opposition to its geographical location, her focus on children's health and rights was sustained by her enduring determination to understand why young people are facing increasing problems. Her focus on children's psychological and physical health continues through her recent establishment of the Australian Research Alliance for children, a national organization which aims to gather evidence about improving child and youth problems generally.

While all of our women found focus at different times in their lives, for each of them, like Fiona Stanley, the realization of what they want to do is grounded in a particular event or experience that clearly ties their continuing ambition to the context of their work community. Once found, maintaining this focus has not always been straightforward. All of the women we interviewed have been confronted with difficulty and challenge in their careers. Tanni Grey-Thompson found she had to overcome prejudice against her performing as a mother with a young child. Betty Boothroyd refused to give up until she won a by-election. Shami Chakrabarti had to deal with the complexities of 9/11 on her first days at Liberty. May Blood received

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hate mail on being awarded the MBE, and Rebecca Stephens had to make tough decisions to continue her assault on Everest when illness struck the team. For each of these women their determination to keep going was bolstered by clarity of focus and their absolute conviction that they were doing something that mattered. Their stories reveal leadership as relational because their focus is central to their relationship as a leader within their particular context or community, where the community supports and sustains them, and where they in turn support and sustain that community. Focus can therefore be seen as a constant throughout the women's lives, providing purpose, drive and context to their ambition.

Networks and alliances

These have been instrumental for all of the women we interviewed in supporting their continued work, and retaining a strong link between their upbringing, environment and focus. These networks and alliances are diverse and can be seen to represent the context and community in which they operate and are particularly salient during challenging times. Writing about her experiences Rebecca Stephens, the first British woman to climb Everest, asserts,

> when you take a leap of faith, and walk a path, aligned to your desires, other people recognize your authenticity and want to help. No longer battling with yourself, you are no longer battling with the world – and everything flows with considerably less resistance. (Heller & Stephens, 2005: 53)

As well as being representative of community and context, networks are significant in that they are developed and built upon throughout the woman's life, becoming more focused as the woman becomes more prominent in her role. Our research suggests that there are overlapping personal and professional networks of those close to home. For example, friends and family who have the woman's general interest at heart, provide personal networks that endure throughout a woman's career. Tanni Grey-Thompson sees her family as one of her most important networks, who are not just supportive of her as one of the family, but offer her the space to reflect critically on her actions:

> I can be a bit impulsive without making decisions and that is where my parents – my Dad is still alive – but they were great because my Dad is very measured, very considered – he is an architect, you know, very organized, you know, 'you don't just do that, you think ten steps ahead and work your way back' whereas I am just like, 'oh I am going to do that'. And that was very useful when I was growing up because he would say 'well what about . . .', 'do that a bit differently'. And Ian, my husband, is quite like that as well because he is an industrial scientist so he is very kind of ordered and thinks about consequences. So they have always been a bit of a calming influence on me I think.

Professional networks involve people well known in the woman's chosen field and are more fluid in nature, shifting to reflect the woman's current position. The research revealed interesting features. The women have multi-layered networks, that is, networks that assumed differing levels of professional importance at different times and that were important in different contexts. Rebecca Stephens, for example, has a

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range of professional networks that shift to incorporate sub-networks depending on her current expedition. Considering her Everest expedition these shifting networks included the close-knit British climbing team and the team of Sherpas who gave her support and inspiration, the British support team, the reporting media, the funding sponsors, other members of the wider climbing community.

Networks were not necessarily all-female, and nor did these networks remain bound within a particular setting. Rather, they appeared to transcend specific contexts to become independent entities connected to the *individual woman* rather than her position.

Shami Chakrabarti, Director of Liberty, recommends the importance of building networks for aspiring women leaders, and in particular the need to develop a range of alliances:

> Basically having broad networks makes it easier to avoid being ground down by people who have decided that you are not worth anything. Or that you are to be pigeonholed . . . A range of people that you go to for advice so that – and it is not because you need a fan club – . . . that is not what I am talking about because good friends and good mentors and good advisors would be critical as well as supportive.

Her parents, husband and young son are, she believes, pivotal to her career by providing enduring unconditional support and honest critical advice when needed. While the family network has remained a constant feature throughout her career and is important in keeping her passion alight, Shami's professional networks have shifted at different times in her career and perform different functions. These functions include provision of role models such as Lord Lester of Herne, mentors such as Dame Juliet Wheldon, former Treasury Solicitor, and advisers and gatekeepers such as John Wadham, previous Director of Liberty. The range of alliances portrays a network that is rooted in past roles and yet is dynamic and changing where different people take prominence at different times during Shami's working life.

Networks and alliances therefore can be seen on different levels, that is in multi-layered terms according to importance, prominence and function. Although an inherent element of the context, they are aligned to the woman rather than to the setting and are characterized by their stability and endurance. Professional networks become more complex and interwoven as the woman's career progresses. Networks provide the link to their (multi-faceted) experience and are important in keeping passion and focus alight.

What does this tell us about leadership?

Our key objectives were to critically review the women and leadership literature and to contrast the findings from the six leading women in our study with a view to informing leadership theory and practice. We have therefore found that a number of significant themes emerge from the interviews that differ from existing narratives of leaders' routes to success. Through the emphasis placed on support provided by local networks, and the impetus provided by the geographical and social places they originate from and currently inhabit, it encourages a shift from individualistic, human capital, conceptions of leadership towards community-oriented, social capital conceptions.

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Our findings suggest a contextual and relational understanding where leadership is a set of processes or dynamics moving between individuals, groups and organizations and works within a broader vision of leadership and its development as a collective concern (Day, 2001; Hartley & Hinksman, 2003). While revealing the significance of the wider community and socio-cultural environment within which the leader is placed, our research also highlights the individual and the personal within the context of networks and community. The findings therefore encourage us to seek a wider perspective and to recognize a relational and embedded view of leadership as one that can be pioneering and include leadership of ideas, communities and representation of issues. This requires a shift in thinking of leadership, and leadership development, less as the development of a single person and 'more as the unfolding of a system; less as a pattern strictly defined by following, and more as a mobilization of organizational or community resources to achieve collective ends' (Dym & Hutson, 2005: 10). Leadership may therefore be viewed as 'a complex interaction between the designated leader and the social and organisational environment' (Day, 2001: 583). It therefore assumes a continual redefining and renegotiating of focus through ongoing experience and developing networks. This in turn assumes a process of continual development where personal and social development are interconnected and where leadership is a collective concern. Our findings reveal this collective concern by depicting a reciprocal relationship between leader and community where the leader's ambition and focus is sustained by their representative context and the community in which they operate, and the community is supported and represented through the leadership of the individual.

Implications for leadership

Conceiving leadership as a dynamic, emergent, collective concern has a number of possible implications for leadership, and for women and leadership in particular. Given the privileging of heroic and masculine leadership performances (Sinclair, 2005) politically, how might this view of leadership address the needs of the individual and their aspirations within a collective frame? If we look beyond business-focused leadership research, we do find conceptualizations of leadership that appear to resonate with this understanding. The research literature that studies the experiences of African American women during the civil rights movement in the 1960s for example, describes how those without access to traditional forms of power rose to positions of leadership. Barnett (1998: 163) describes the 'invisibility' of southern black women leaders who 'were seldom recognised as leaders', but who nevertheless were the ones who often 'initiated protest, formulated strategies and tactics and mobilized other resources (especially money, personnel, and communication networks) necessary for successful social action . . .' (quoted in Dym, & Hutson, 2005: 75). Black women, Dym and Hutson (2005: 76) go on to observe, 'organized protests through networks, relationships and cooperation . . . not through hierarchical positioning'.

The understanding the women presented here have regarding their experiences of, and paths to, leadership similarly illustrate a recognition of their 'outsider' status. Even though they belong to different generations, May Blood's reading of the male-dominated power structures within her social and working environment and Shami

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Chakrabarti's belief in the need to build alliances so as 'to avoid being ground down by people who have decided that you are not worth anything. Or that you are to be pigeon-holed' demonstrate awareness of, and the need to negotiate, the social, cultural and political environments in which they live and work.

We might argue – paradoxically – that it is their position outside traditional power structures that provides them with insights to develop strategies to negotiate their way to their desired role. So, for example, a young Betty Boothroyd's secretarial position allowed her to observe MPs in action and led her to believe she could perform the role of MP as well as anyone else, and Fiona Stanley's combination of medical knowledge and interest in human rights eventually led to her founding a Health Research Institute whose purpose is to prevent children's psychological and physical ill health.

Nevertheless, we can discern differences in how the six women make sense of their leadership experience. From the way in which May Blood explains the perform-ance of her role as shop steward within a dominant masculine culture for example, we can infer an approach that recognizes the need, at some level, to play the men at their own game. Betty Boothroyd's articulation of her path to MP and then Speaker of the House of Commons suggests she believed she needed to perform the role better than male MPs. She needed to demonstrate her resilience and determination – her 'grit' and 'north country attitude' to follow her chosen path. Tanni Grey-Thompson and Shami Chakrabarti in contrast, attribute more explicitly the role of personal networks – family and friends – when articulating their path.

Conclusion

From initial research exploring women's inspirational role models we have found that women leaders who stand outside traditional organizational boundaries are often those who inspire others. Our research has also revealed that while there is much debate around leadership, current conceptions are largely gendered, hierarchical and individualistic. The experiences of women outside business settings also highlighted leadership as shifting, dynamic and emergent, and as a collective concern for the communities they work within. Our interviews with women leaders in less traditional settings challenges conventional understandings, and focuses on the individual's location and developing aspirations within, and emerging from, their social and community context. The unfolding of women's experiences therefore acknowledges that leadership in practice is contextual, relational and draws its inspiration from beyond traditional boundaries. While the women we talked to clearly possessed characteristics that may be seen as typical of leaders, these characteristics are anchored in a dynamic and contemporary interplay of upbringing, environment, focus and alliances and networks. In summary, our research examining women's leadership experiences suggests that the representation of leadership in both the academic and popular literatures indicates that certain leadership performances are deemed more worthy of admiration than others. This illuminates a need to question how particular tendencies in research sites contribute to the idea and concept of leadership, and a need to distinguish between representations of leadership and our experience of leadership.

This article is distinctive in that it makes visible leadership experiences that occur

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in alternative settings. Our research into leading women's experiences suggests that studying leadership beyond traditional settings may be better understood through a sociological lens and that there is room for an alternative model of leadership rooted in community with tangible social, cultural and political roots and anchors. Our research also challenges traditional understandings in that leadership may be conceived as deeper and more multi-dimensional than current conceptions. Leadership is therefore not just about leading people and teams as represented in mainstream organizational and business literature, but rather can be pioneering and may encompass leading ideas, communities and the representation of issues.

Our continuing research recognizes that there is still much work to be done in mapping, and making sense of, the leadership experiences of leading women. We continue to work towards the further development of a sustainable and workable model of leadership practice and development for those who don't fit the business-focused mould, and for those who don't necessarily want either to work and/or lead in traditional settings.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Women occupy only 114 of the 1400 seats on the board of FTSE 100 companies (*Guardian*, 28/08/04). The more recent Equal Opportunities Commission Report (2007) calculates women make up 10.4 per cent of directors in FTSE 100 companies.
2. 'Glass cliffs' is a term implying that women are 'appointed to risky or precarious leadership positions where the danger of falling is high' (*Management Today*, 2005).

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