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Failure to Thrive: Mid-Career Women in Higher Education

By Andrea Gallant
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Abstract
Gender underrepresentation in higher education (HE) is a persistent global phenomenon. The purpose of this research was to re-examine it through symbolic interactionism (SI). Eight women aspiring to leadership were invited to participate in semi structured interviews after attending a leadership programme specifically designed to enhance their prospects. Analysis indicated ambiguities and contradictions surround notions of leadership, as well as opportunities for leadership. This was evidenced by their appraisal of the existing leadership, speculations regarding their leadership capacity, how the participants position themselves and are positioned in their workplace. Actively “paying it forward” was seen as facilitating promotion, and line managers’ familiarity with the work undertaken by aspirants. Formal leadership training was advocated rather than experiential processes.

1. Objectives or purpose
A number of countries at the end of the 20th Century started to recognise the gender underrepresentation in both higher education and further education sectors and policies were developed to address this in leadership (Ledwith & Manfedi, 2000; Davidson & Burke, 2004; McTavish & Miller, 2009; Collings, Conner, McPherson, Midson & Wilson, 2011). As Ledwith &Manfedi (2000) highlight, “The universal absence of women in senior posts in higher education is well known, as shown by studies covering Europe, the UK, the USA, Norway, Greece, Germany and New Zealand” (p.9).

Gender under-representation in higher education (HE) and further education (FE) continues in the 21st Century. Explanations have included similarity attraction (ref) and gendered work places (ref). Despite the legitimacy of both these research frameworks little seems to have changed in workplace equality for women. The purpose of this research was to re-examine this persistent social phenomenon through a different framework: symbolic interactionism. As Christman and McClellan (2008) identified “leadership…is not only a question of gender but also a question of interaction with context” (p.7).

Our purpose was to investigate how women in a higher education setting, across faculties perceived:

a) the symbolism of leadership;
b) how this influences their social constructed meaning of leadership in their workplace; and,

c) how the social constructed symbolic interactions hinder or advance women’s vertical promotions.

Our objective was to determine if there are other mitigating factors that need to be considered if women are to become equally represented in leadership.

2. Perspective(s) or theoretical framework

Using symbolic interactionism we set out to look for the complexities that surface in the perspectives of eight women who aspire to leadership in higher education to gain a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon. We adopted a micro sociological approach (Calhoun, Gerteis, Moody, Pfaff, & Indermohan, 2007, p.25). This approach focused on persons and interpersonal relations. It seems appropriate to take such an approach when investigating other possible mitigating factors limiting the vertical promotion of women. What “micro-sociologists … emphasise is the other side of the social existence” (Calhoun, Gerteis, Moody, Pfaff, & Indermohan, 2007, p.26). We acknowledge, as Calhoun et al (2007) do, that “humans are shaped by the social systems in which they act, and those systems are a human creation” (p.26).

Symbolic interactionism (SI) assists in identifying how women aspiring to leadership and those in leadership interact and interpret events and each other, while also interpreting and defining their actions. Importantly symbolic interactionism recognises, that “humans do not simply react to one another’s actions; rather, they interpret or define those actions” (Stryker, 2002, p.90).

An SI perspective requires that “self as structure and self as process are conceptually integrated; this means viewing people as – active, constructivist, problem-solving, intentional actors capable of recognising and communicating with other persons. Symbolic interactionist theoretical accounts are developed on the pivotal principle that there are reciprocal effects between self and social interaction” (Stryker, 2002, p.119). We argue that it is the impact of reciprocal effects that need to be investigated. This needs to occur in order to identify if there are mitigating issues not yet considered in the continuing under representation of women in leadership. The relevancy and appropriateness of this approach stems from Blumer’s conception that “the complex inter linkages of acts that comprise organisation, institutions, divisions of labour, and networks of interdependency are moving and not static affairs” (2009, p.69).

Investigating individuals’ experiences can assist in identifying symbolic notions of leadership and what it means to lead. This insight has the potential to be interrogated for possible reciprocal inhibitors for women and/or promoters of women aspiring to leadership: “how people are constrained by the constructions they build on and inherit from the past” (Denzin, 1992, p.23). Women in higher education sectors are facing workplace relationships that have
been institutionally inherited and they are building on these (or not) as they aspire to leadership. As a framework symbolic interactionism acknowledge individuals, in this case women as active agents in constructing meaning. Prawat (1996) for example suggested that “the process of personal meaning takes a backseat to socially agreed upon ways of carving up reality . . . symbolic interactionism sees meaning as a social product that arises in the process of interaction between people” (p. 220).

3. Methods, techniques or modes of inquiry

Participants
After attending a programme for women aspiring to leadership at a Victorian University, 15 participants were formally invited to share their standpoints. Eight agreed to be interviewed. All of the women were within the middle leadership band (Level B & C) and they came from different Faculties/Schools within the institution.

Methods
A premise of SI is how individuals’ perceive symbols and their meanings influences the nature of their social interactions. Semi structured interviews were conducted with each woman lasting approximately 45 minutes. The aim of these interviews was to capture mid career women’s perspectives about how they perceived:

i) the symbolism of leadership, and

ii) how this influences their socially constructed meaning of leadership in their workplace

We examined the participants’ responses to identify how the social constructed symbolic interactions might hinder or advance women’s vertical promotions.

The women were asked the following 12 questions:

1. What is leadership in your view?
2. In general, what do leaders do?
3. What is appealing about leaders’ work?
4. Do women do leadership differently?
5. How would you describe this?
6. What do you aspire to do?
7. What support and help do you get?
8. How would describe the leadership you experience in your job right now?
9. How would you like your own future leadership to be different?

10. What sort of professional learning do you need to be a leader?

11. There are traditional model of leadership associated with autocratic, hierarchical models of leading and others which are more distributed and consultative, where do you see your own leadership style fitting?

12. What does your workplace do well in leadership and what do they need to improve?

Mode of inquiry: Interpretive Analysis

An interpretive method of analysis was selected as it is compatible with the SI research framework. This method acknowledges individuals’ unique perspectives, and thus focuses the research interpretation on:

1. participants’ symbolic understanding of leadership (meaning making),
2. how this understanding of leadership influences their behaviour in the workplace
3. how this understanding of leadership influences their thinking about themselves as leaders and being or becoming part of leadership.

Initially transcripts were read to code emergent symbolic interactions within each transcript. Then the empirical data was considered and interpreted for shared or collective symbolic interactions regarding leadership. The researchers’ interpretations’ was premised on Blumer’s (2009) notion that we had to see the objects (people and things) as they saw them (p.69). The underpinning of the analysis coding was based on Stryker’s (2002) advice to look at the formation of action to determine what symbolic interactions emerge. This was done by attempting to interpret,

the situation as it is seen by the actor, observing what the actor takes into account and how [s]he interprets what is taken, noting alternative acts that are mapped out, and trying to follow the interpretation that leads to the selection of one of these acts.  
(Stryker, 2002, p.97)

4. Data sources, evidence, objects or materials

What emerged from this process was that the symbolic interactions (SI) are best understood by examining them through three constructs: Environment; Speculations; and, Aspirations.

The following table outlines the coded categories that arose from the empirical data set
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbolic interactions</th>
<th>Interactions</th>
<th>Appraising</th>
<th>Speculating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(The meaning given to leadership influences interactions)</td>
<td>(Negotiated meaning)</td>
<td>(Thinking: interpreting objects e.g. people and things)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question Groupings</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How they experience leadership</td>
<td>Theorising about leadership and what leaders do</td>
<td>Their evaluation of their own practice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiences of women in leadership</td>
<td>Theorising about women as leaders</td>
<td>Gendered notions of leadership</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workplace experiences</td>
<td>Aspirations</td>
<td>Professional learning to support aspirations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is appealing about leadership</td>
<td>Good leadership</td>
<td>Support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This enabled us to present the complexity within the symbolic interactions that emerged and the interconnectedness between them.

5. Results and/or substantiated conclusions or warrants for arguments/points of view

Results

The transcripts indicated ambiguities and contradictions underpin these eight perceptions of leadership, and their opportunities for leadership. This was evidenced by participants’ appraisal of the existing leadership, speculations regarding their leadership capacity, how the participants position themselves and are positioned in their workplace. Actively “paying it forward” was seen as facilitating promotion, and line managers’ familiarity with the work undertaken by aspirants. Formal leadership training was advocated rather than experiential processes.

However, the argument arising is that there needs to be greater investigation and interpretation of women’s sense of leadership efficacy and agency and how these can be fostered among women, for women thus promoting a 21st Century, socially constructed notion of leadership and leaders. As Blumer (2009) suggested “The human individual pieces together and guides his actions by taking account of different things and interpreting their significance for his [sic] prospective action (p.72)…. Consequently the logical argument is
(as Blumer outlined) one’s “behaviour, accordingly, is not a result of such things as environmental pressures, stimuli, motives, attitudes, and ideas but arise instead from how he [sic] interprets and handles these things in the action which he [sic] is constructing (p.72).

6. Scientific or scholarly significance of the study or work scholarly significance

This study investigated eight women’s perceptions of leadership across five different faculties within one higher education institution. We found that micro decisions, albeit small “in themselves that can also be aggregated to have huge effects” (Calhoun, et al. 2007, p. 25). Leadership programmes for women that do not take into account symbolic interactionism run the risk of cloning: creating apes or mavericks; neither will advance equality for women in workplace leadership. Leadership programmes for women might be more beneficial if they pay greater attention to “… social organisations and institution’s functioning because people at different points do something as the result of defining the situation in which they are called to act” (Stryker, 2002, p.93). We challenge leadership program designers to take this up as a matter of urgency.

Even without attention to their large scale effects, micro sociological phenomena matter to each of us because we can see their effects on the people involved” (Calhoun, et al. 2007, p. 25). The trustworthiness of the research relies on interpreting the distinctive meanings these women attribute to leadership in practice and theory that allows recognition by other women.

Presently there is a proactive trend occurring in higher education; formalised leadership programmes especially for women. These leadership programmes are no doubt a response to creating equal opportunities in the workplace, and an attempt to foster a gender balance in leadership. Although one-off short courses suggest that the onus still relies on the women to individually find a way to succeed, inadvertently keeping the status quo. Women’s perspective vary; there are possibly as many similarities as there are differences depending on how individual women are making meaning of the symbolic interactions that occur in the workplace. Leadership presents as a paradox for women and there are competing tensions for each individual.

REFERENCES


