**Women’s Way of Leading: Inappropriate essentialism or critical question?**

**Abstract**

For decades, researchers have attempted to understand whether women lead in a way that is different from men and, if so, the nature of women’s style. The chapter reviews the methodological limitations in the evidence base, such as over-dependence on self-report and Anglocentrism, and suggests that the contradictory and unreliable nature of the evidence means that there can be no confident conclusion as to whether women lead differently from men. The chapter also questions why the evidence is overwhelmingly from schools and higher education, largely ignoring the two sectors, early years and technical/further/community education, in which half or more women are leaders in both the United Kingdom and elsewhere. It argues that an individual’s leadership is shaped by many factors at societal, organizational and individual levels and that leadership style is a complex and diverse construction. Interdisciplinary, intersectional and culturally sensitive examination positions gender as just one factor that may influence how an individual woman leads. The chapter goes on to suggest that the body of research is double-edged: on the one hand, the positive qualities and successes associated with the feminine are highlighted; on the other hand, the research acts to entrench further the existing structures of domination and potentially to exert pressure on women towards a particular repertoire of leadership.

**Key words**

education administration, leadership style, early years leadership, school leadership, technical and further education leadership, gender, Anglocentrism, colonialism

**Biography**

Jacky Lumby is an emeritus professor of education at the University of Southampton, UK. She has researched and published extensively on the leadership of schools, colleges and universities in many parts of the world. She is concerned to understand how power works through leadership of education to privilege some and disadvantage others. She was an expert contributor and evaluator for the European Policy Network on School Leadership and co-edited international handbooks for the preparation and development of leaders on behalf of professional associations in the UK, the Commonwealth and the United States. Her most recent book, co-authored with Marianne Coleman, is '*Leading* *for Equality: Making Schools Fairer'*.

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**Setting out the chapter**

The question of whether women lead in a way that is different from men has been addressed for several decades (Eagly, Karau and Johnson 1992). The issue is not just one of fairness to women but has wider implications, situated in a context of ‘widespread concern for the quality of public education’ (Bjork 2000: 5). If male-dominated leadership is not meeting the needs of all children and young people, more women in leadership roles offers the potential to improve education, but only if they enact leadership differently and influence its development. Consequently, it matters to women themselves, to learners and consequently to society as a whole whether women’s leadership style is different from that of men (Pounder 1990; Normore and Gaetane 2008).

This chapter considers what has been learned about women’s leadership style. Style is taken to mean a set of values, attitudes and behaviours that persist reliably in an individual’s leadership repertoire. Some raise objections to such research (Reay and Ball 2000), arguing that the use of a category, ‘women’, risks essentialism in a manner that is questionable and that how any woman leads is a complex construction of which gender is only part, as leadership is influenced by global, national and organizational contexts and a host of individual factors such as ethnicity, religion, sexuality, dis(ability) and personal history (DeRue 2011; Moorosi *et al*. 2018). From this post-structuralist perspective, searching for women’s style of leadership raises questions about how the field of educational leadership itself is performing gender.

Others argue that there is a discernible difference between men and women and that understanding the difference is important (Eagly and Carli 2003; Krüger 2008). Women’s style of leading, as reported in some research, conforms to stereotypical characteristics associated with the feminine: caring, empathetic, collaborative and person-centred. Such a style is perceived by some as limited and so ineffective, particularly in light of the degree to which leadership is associated with stereotypically male characteristics (Tomas *et al*. 2010). Others assess it as more effective because it is more appropriate to the demands of leadership in the twenty-first century (Hallinger *et al*. 2016).

With these competing narratives in mind, the chapter sets out to explore how relevant research has been undertaken and to address the question of whether research on women’s way of leading is based on inappropriate essentialism or is a legitimate response to a critical issue. It considers methodology and methods; the evidence concerning the leadership style of women that has emerged; the influence of context and individual characteristics; and the implications of this approach to research for the field of gender and leadership. In doing so, it has made several assumptions, each open to challenge. The available data were *a priori* assumed to be patchy, reflecting some parts of the world and some sectors of the education system much more than others. Given the absence of extensive, global, in-depth data specific to education, the chapter considers research on women’s leadership in sectors other than education. It also assumes that even if a study’s primary focus is something other than women’s style of leadership, it may nevertheless reveal something of relevance if it refers to the key elements of style, as in the definition above: values; attitudes; and behaviours.

**The chapter’s approach**

Key terms were used to locate relevant studies using DelphiS, a cross-searching tool for printed and electronic resources and major subject databases and indexes. Advanced searches employing both single and combined key terms pinpointed material that might be of interest, including leadership style, gender and leadership, women and leadership, masculine style, feminine style, androgyny and stereotypes of leadership. Where particular approaches were claimed to be associated with women, for example ‘democratic leadership’ (Bjork 2000: 10), they were sought in relation to education and school and college leadership between 2000 and 2020. The bibliographies of articles and books were used to identify material that might not have appeared through key-term searches. The chapter does not aim to be a systematic literature review of research whose main focus is gender and leadership style; rather, it adopts a broader view to incorporate what may be pertinent in studies undertaken more widely, particularly outside Anglophone nations. The aim is primarily to stimulate readers to consider this a thumbnail of existing evidence, in part to reflect on whether men and women lead differently but also the implications of asking that question.

The chapter begins by considering the methodology in this area of research. It briefly reviews evidence on the difference between men and women’s leadership style, or the lack of difference, and considers the impact on style of context and history at the societal, organizational and individual levels. Next, it explores how this area of research is, in itself, performing gender.

**Issues in methodology and methods**

What we know about any area of activity is contingent on the research that supports it. Exploring gender and leadership in Cape Coast primary schools, Agezo and Hope (2011) categorize three approaches to research into women’s leadership: laboratory experiments; studies considering the behaviour preferences of men and women; and organizational studies that observe actual behaviour.

In the field of educational leadership, there are no laboratory experiments and organizational studies based on observation and ethnography recording actual behaviour are rare. For example, a search for the use of ‘ethnography’ and ‘observation’ either as key words or in the abstract, in combination with ‘gender’ anywhere in an article in either of the two leading international journals, *Educational Management Administration* *and Leadership* and *Education Administrational Quarterly* from 2000 to 2020, yielded no ethnographic studies of women leaders. It found four that referred to women’s leadership using observation as a secondary method, for example alongside interviews.

Most research falls into the second category, where women and sometimes men are asked questions on their values, attitudes and behaviour. As the answers are self-reported, they are arguably evidence of a behavioural predilection rather than behaviour itself. Respondents inevitably construct a self-identity by means of ‘socially desirable responses’ (Shaked *et al*. 2018: 304) that may differ from the triangulated picture that would emerge from the perspective of staff or learners or from observation (Scheurich 2014). Asking leaders to enter in a diary what they are doing goes some way towards recording actual actions; however, even diaries are constructed records and, in any case, their use is uncommon in gender research in educational leadership.

Overwhelmingly, the evidence comprises what women say that they think and do, sometimes but often not triangulated by other views. Until there are more observational and ethnographic studies, existing data continue to have debateable status. Certainly, the feminist project that insists that we pay serious attention to listening to women is important; yet, if the research is to be credible, listening should not be undertaken with uncritical acceptance of self-perception as unproblematic fact.

The research is limited in other ways. Lomotey (2019) reviewed studies conducted between 1993 and 2017 with black women principals in the United States. Most were dissertations and, in all but one, the sample size was small, a third having only three respondents. Since 2017, research into black and ethnic minority women’s leadership experiences has remained typically small-scale and qualitative (Wrushen and Sherman 2008; Moorosi *et al*. 2018), with some exceptions (Robinson *et al.* 2017). In larger, generally generic studies, the category ‘black women or women of color’ may serve to essentialize, thus homogenizing the experience of women who are from very different ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

The research is also limited in its balance of national and cultural locations. Most research is about women from Anglophone and European countries (Makura 2012). Since 2012, more studies on women’s leadership have emerged from African, Arab and Asian locations, but there are still relatively few. Hallinger and Kovačević’s (2019) bibliometric study on educational leadership from 1960 to 2018 found that 83% of the articles are from the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia. Only a fraction of the remaining 17% focus on gender issues. Consequently, general beliefs about women’s way of leading draw on a population heavily skewed towards Anglophone nations. Fitzgerald (2003a) points out that much research, while it challenges the masculinized nature of leadership theory, fails adequately to recognize its ‘raced’ (p. 4) nature: ‘distinctions between and among women have collapsed in the attempt to provide a meta-narrative that describes and defines women’s experiences and practices as educational leaders’ (p. 5). There is sufficient concern, such as Brown’s (2014) and Lomotey’s (2019) questioning the data’s extent and Fitzgerald’s (2003a) charge of the ‘Deafening Silence of Indigenous Women’s Voices’ (p. 4), to suggest that any overall conclusion about black, ethnic minority and indigenous women’s ways of leading rests on an unsatisfactory evidence base.

**What is the evidence of differences?**

*The variety of findings*

Despite caveats about the methods used, one might hope that the body of evidence gathered since the 1960s would enable a reasonably confident answer to the question of differences in how men and women lead. Numerous studies suggest that there are differences: Eagly, Karau and Johnson’s (1992) meta-analysis of fifty studies concludes that women are more democratic or participative and less autocratic and directive than men; Hallinger *et al.* (2016) consider differences in instructional leadership; and Gipson *et al.’s* (2017) generic study of women leaders focuses on conflict style. Here, then, is another issue: the various studies and meta-analyses adopt dissimilar frameworks and foci. Consequently, rather than a coherent body of evidence built over time, there is a patchwork of studies asking women different questions, reflecting varied theoretical frameworks. Bjork’s positive picture of women’s leadership, painted in 2000, continues to appear in much literature but with different factors stressed in particular studies.

However, even results reported by many, for example that women are more task-oriented (Eagly, Karau and Johnson 1992), are contradicted by findings of no difference between men and women (Dady and Bali 2014; Wirawan *et al*. 2019) or those who see task orientation as a particularly male characteristic (Sherman 2000). A ‘no difference’ finding has been widely reported. For example, in an overview of more than fifty studies, Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) report mixed findings: ‘100% of the qualitative studies versus 14% of the quantitative studies identified differences’ (p. 6). Agezo and Hope (2011) report minimal differences between men and women in decision-making, ethical, interpersonal and instructional practices. Coleman’s (2003) survey of all the women secondary headteachers and a third of the male headteachers in England and Wales, with high response rates (70% and 60% respectively), ‘shows that the perceptions of men and women headteachers about their own management and leadership style are similar and that their perception is of a style that is more likely to be “feminine” than “masculine”’ (p. 336). This does not evidence sameness or difference in the leadership style of men and women, or even how each lead, but rather a similarity in their self-perception and performance of leadership style. It appears that both are likely to avow a style that reflects stereotypically feminine characteristics, as determined by Bem (1974), highlighting the difficulty in reaching a trustworthy conclusion when the data are self-reported.

*Explaining the variation in findings*

If one follows Popper’s (1963) philosophy of science, then knowledge proceeds by refuting theories. Falsifiability is everything. On this basis, the hypothesis that women lead in a distinctive way that is different from how men lead has been falsified on many occasions; however, this ‘emphasis on direct replication as a sine qua non of science’ (Derksen 2019: 454) has been challenged as a simplistic view of knowledge production: ‘Research is messy, researchers are motivated by more than a desire for objective truth, and facts are not discovered but constructed in a process that involves many more actors than those allowed by traditional philosophers of science’ (op cit.: 450). Rather than an absolute of replicability, some argue that, provided it is accompanied by rigorous self-questioning and self-awareness on the part of the researcher (Gouldner 1968), partisanship is an ‘indispensable precondition’ for the advance of sociology (Carr 2000: 438). There may be some degree of partisanship in research on women’s style of leading, reflecting a desire to balance the historic masculinization of leadership. It may be that this, in part, accounts for the dissimilar findings. For example, relatively small differences – ‘mild shading, with considerable overlap’ (Eagly and Carli 2007: 127) or ‘on the whole, highly overlapping distributions between female and male leaders’ (Gipson *et al*. 2017: 48) – are reported by numerous studies as more definitive and polarizing than is justified.

There may be sampling issues. Reay and Ball (2000) suggest that, though there are statistically significant differences, in part these may be explained in studies that involve leaders at various levels by the preponderance of women in lower roles in the hierarchy, as they use the person-centred style more prevalent in junior leadership. Grogan and Shakeshaft’s (2011) explanation of why 100% of qualitative studies found differences while 86% of quantitative studies found no difference is that the survey instruments used are biased towards masculine constructions of leadership; it may be that qualitative methods such as self-report through interview use a research instrument that is equally biased towards a self-construction with a skew to the feminine. Though one might argue for this as a balance to masculinized leadership theory, it must nevertheless be recognized as the substitution of one bias for another. As Reay and Ball (2000: 47) point out, ‘in the rush to essentialize’ the assessment of the difference between men and women, the interpretation may be more bifurcated than is warranted by the evidence.

Adopting an historical perspective highlights the difficulty in using masculine or feminine stereotypes as variables. Social psychology research, over time, has pointed up the instability of notions of masculinity and femininity and so challenged the utility of measuring activity using putative male and female characteristics. In the early period of feminist research, when overt discrimination against women was ubiquitous, stereotypical characteristics may have served a useful function as variables. Since then, things have moved on; Keener, Mehter and Smirles(2017) suggest that ‘measuring and describing femininity and masculinity according to general traits may not be informative’ (p. 4). The second decade of the twenty-first century has seen ever-stronger challenges to the very notion of a binary male-female identity, for example in sociology (Moorosi 2019). The key point here is that a perspective that links ways of leading to wider research developments in other disciplines, particularly social psychology and sociology – challenging the very notion of gender patterns – is underdeveloped in the literature on educational leadership.

*Is there an answer to the question?*

The patchy and contradictory evidence is such that a positive affirmation of whether men and women lead differently is not possible. Findings of studies using mostly self-reported data and generally conducted in a single national or cultural context are contradicted by other findings. They have failed to build a coherent and sufficient body of research to justify statements about differences between men and women’s leadership. The most that can be concluded is that some women lead differently to some men in some contexts, a bathetic conclusion that, in itself, is of little interest. What matters more is the significance of context and the effectiveness of particular approaches in a specific context.

**The significance of context**

Many aspects of context may be influential in shaping how women and men lead: the culture; the positioning within the education system’s hierarchical structure; and the individual’s characteristics and background. Like an onion, leadership has layers, the outer comprising national, economic, political and cultural frames, the middle organizational structures and cultures and, at the centre, the person: an amalgam of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, religion and many other characteristics.

*Culture*

In the Anglophone world, research on how the culture of specific communities relates to gender and leadership is primarily found in literature concerned with minorities, for example Latino/Latina (Méndez-Morse *et al.* 2015), Native Americans (Ruff and Erickson 2008) and Maori (Santamaría *et al*. 2016). The white cultures of the United States, the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Australia tend to be taken as a given. The value set that is associated with women’s way of leading in Western feminist literature, being person-centred, empathetic, community minded, and so on, is exported or imported to literature on leadership in other nations, sometimes ignoring the potential influence of a different culture. In African states, a leadership style seemingly related to stereotypically Western feminine qualities may stem from African approaches to leadership which share similar values but which are not gender-based, such as Ubuntu (Elonga Mboyo 2019).

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Organizational culture may also override the influence of gender. Hansson and Andersen (2007) found no significant differences between the leadership of men and women in Swedish schools, arguing that this was due not to women’s adoption of a male style but, rather, to the predominant organizational culture:

For the last 10 years there have been more female principals than male principals. Therefore it does not seem appropriate to argue that women have adapted to a male culture or male leadership style.… It is also possible to argue that all teachers (and most of the principals are former teachers) have been influenced by the same school culture during many years and taken part in the same discourse of leadership. This would result in the same pattern of leadership style. (p. 9)

This interpretation, as any, is open to challenge, yet it does at least disrupt any over-simple linkage between gender and leadership that does not adequately consider the influence of culture at a variety of levels.

*Leadership role*

Agezo and Hope (2011) take a structural perspective to suggest that role has more impact on leadership than gender and that meeting the organization’s needs shapes leadership for both men and women. This cannot be an absolute, as individuals in the same organization may choose to lead in different ways; however, one hypothesis is that role relates to the degree of power and that the latter metamorphoses leadership into a range of forms. For many women, power is a difficult concept. Both Brunner (2012), researching US superintendents, and Lumby (2015a), researching UK higher education leaders, discovered amongst women a discomfort in discussing power and a disavowal of its use. Socialized into collaborative and supportive modes, women may attempt to distance themselves from, in Brunner’s phrase, ‘power over’ (p. 146), seen as masculine, instead advocating ‘power with’ as a feminist paradigm. Bjork (2000) asserts that ‘women adopted notions of power as shared and exhibited softer approaches to leadership’ (p. 11); however, particularly in senior roles, the inevitable need to adopt ‘power over’, in some circumstances, is accepted by many leaders (Lumby 2015a). The key point is that seniority is related to power in complex ways, and the nature of a leadership role may frame the use of power. If such is the case, then to assume that all, or even many, women do or could adopt a particular way of leading is to blind oneself to how power influences and often transforms behaviour.

*Phase of education*

How masculinities and femininities articulate is influenced by the sector of education. Most work on gender and educational leadership is undertaken in secondary/high schools and higher education. Waniganayake (2014) points out the absence of research that considers gender, sexuality and culture in early years leadership, despite it being a sector where gender stereotypes might be assumed to be very powerful. The leadership of provision for small children has been characterized as matching the stereotype of women’s primary role as mothers and child carers. The match is held to explain, at least in part, the predominance of women in teaching and leadership roles in the sector.

Some who research early years leadership push back against notions of a women’s way of leading. Rodd argues that, ‘Currently, early childhood is in the process of developing its own perspectives, models and language of leadership based on principles of connection, dialogue, and community…. Transformational leadership – the current standard of good leadership embraced by many early childhood educators – is androgynous, thereby liberating both men and women from inappropriate and outdated gender stereotypes’ (Rodd 2012: 35).

The relatively slight evidence base offered by the literature does not facilitate drawing conclusions on whether this view is justified. Other work has found a feminine style to be prevalent (Jónsdóttir and Coleman 2014); however, just as much of interest is why a significant sector of education dominated by women leaders has elicited from feminist researchers relatively little interest in the style of its overwhelmingly female leaders.

Research into gender and leadership is similarly sparse in the sector that provides vocational and lower-level tertiary education, known as further education in the United Kingdom, technical education in many parts of the world and community colleges in the United States. This sector is a kind of reverse image of early years, in that it might be assumed that masculine stereotypes are particularly prevalent here, given a key focus in many locations on training and development for industries dominated by men, and that consequently women’s representation at senior level would be low.

In fact, though it was widely criticized in the latter part of the twentieth and early part of the twenty-first century as a particularly masculinized environment, in the United Kingdom this sector has a representation of women principals that has steadily increased from 3% in 1990, to 23% in 2004, to equal representation in 2018 (Shain 2000; McTavish and Miller 2009; Savours and Keohane 2019). The proportion of women teaching staff in England ranged between 50% and 55% from 2016 to 2018, so the representation of women principals is in proportion both to the teaching staff in the sector and to the wider population (Economics Frontier 2019). Most relevant studies are concerned with representation rather than with styles of leadership related to gender, so there is scant evidence of the leadership styles adopted by women principals in this sector; however, there is evidence that assuming that it is primarily by adopting a masculine leadership style that women increased their representation is both simplistic and unwarranted (Braun and Armstrong 2016).

In the United Kingdom, the numbers of students in further education and higher education are comparable (Bolton 2019; Department of Education 2019), yet there is far more research on gender and leadership in higher education. The lack of interest in further education may reflect no more than that most researchers are from a schools and/or higher education background; or it may be that schools’ and universities’ higher status attracts researchers more than the lower status of early years and technical/further education. In the absence of a credible body of evidence, we have no answers.

While further/technical education, like higher education, has been criticised for a particularly masculine and market-oriented culture that acts to the detriment of women leaders (Morley 2018), there can be little learnt from its much greater success in terms of representation and the leadership style of principals because its far higher percentage of women and minority ethnic senior leaders has excited little interest. The evidence that we have on style is skewed towards those sectors in which there are proportionately fewer women leading.

*Religion*

Some women experience religion as the driving force behind their leadership. Particularly when intersected with gender, the effects of religion are rarely distinguished by research on leadership style. Khalil and DeCuir (2018) portray Islamic feminist school leadership as: ‘a) leading by modelling an equitable, and just ethic; (b) leading by nurturing a communal culture and, (c) leading for transformational resistance’ (p. 94). This seems difficult to distinguish from the style depicted in research on many other groups of minority ethnic women. For women, patriarchy and sexism may be a universal context, but it is from the detail of the response and how it is shaped by religious belief that the realities of style will emerge. Such detail is lacking, substituted by self-report that may present a seemingly idealized leader, fighting for justice and transformation.

*Sexuality*

The impact, if any, of lesbian, bisexual and transsexual sexuality on the leadership style of women also lacks much detailed study. Lugg (2003) points out that gender is a performance, which may be enacted differently by queers but also by many heterosexuals: ‘Gendered behaviours may have little to do with a given individual’s biological sex or sexual orientation’ (p. 101). She excoriates pressure to ‘pass’ as something other than what one is to gain access, to a job, to acceptance or approval. Feminist literature that essentializes women, depicting a woman’s way of leading, may exert its own pressure to pass as a bona fide woman who exhibits the caring, self-effacing and empathetic persona of the feminine.

*Ethnicity, intersectionality and the individual*

In the feminist literature, most women responding to questions about their leadership are from a specific group: white, middle class and heterosexual (Fitzgerald 2003b). Chin’s (2013) international study of the intersections of ethnicity, gender, culture and leadership reports clear differences in the leadership espoused by Asian, Native American, Latino/Latina, black and white groups. Minorities encountered expectations relating not only to gender but to their ethnicity and, in response, constructed a social identity that conforms, negates, challenges and code switches in ways unique to each individual and, in Chin’s assessment, different from white groups.

As an example, consider the role of a school leader as constructed by black women in schools in communities of deep poverty in South Africa (Lumby 2015b). Code switching is evident between sympathetic and harsher identities, between self-professed feminine and masculine modes (Lumby 2015b: 411). Their ambitions for their school and their learners are sometimes highly circumscribed and, in their view, are a realistic response to the minimal availability of both resources and a potential way out of poverty for all but rare exceptions. These women’s leadership style is very different from the super-charged, highly effective Western leader described by Bjork (2000). Male principals were not part of this study, so it cannot be known if, in schools in deep poverty, they would lead in a similar way. The point is that, in this context, where historically stigmatized ethnicity and deep poverty coincide, women principals lead differently from women principals in Anglophone contexts, the poorest of which are better resourced than some schools in rural South Africa.

**Doing gender**

Those groups that dominate do not typically do so consciously and deliberately; rather, the means of their continued control is embedded ubiquitously in attitudes, structures and systems (Millett 1971). Critical theory suggests that this is universal; if so, feminist research may not escape the paradox of inadvertently strengthening the very systems that it challenges.

Some of the ways in which gender research has performed in this way have been long known. Researching women, though intended to improve the lot of all, establishes a category that ‘allow(s) women from dominant (and white) groups to identify themselves as women, not as white women’ (Fitzgerald 2003b: 5). Essentialism expunges the distinctions between half the world’s population and enables research, as with so many other systems, to present as taken-for-granted the perspective of the white, of the heterosexual and, often, of those from socio-economically advantaged backgrounds.

The second form of domination embedded in such research is a kind of colonialism by means of promoting values, attitudes and goals that essentially emanate from the West. There is relatively little consideration of what the philosophies and faiths of Islamic, African, Asian, Indian and other indigenous groups suggest might constitute effective leadership by women (Rajan 2018). The traffic in values is one-way. Though this criticism can be levelled at the whole field of educational leadership, it is particularly pertinent to research relating to gender. The International Women’s Development Agency (2017) distinguishes between ‘gender-sensitive research (that) aims for gender balance and tries to capture the similarities and differences in the experiences of both men and women’ (p. 13) and ‘Feminist research (that) tries to capture the diversity of women’s experience, explore the gendered manifestation of power (both in the topic for research and the way in which the research is conducted), and interrogate the operation of gender norms’ (p. 13). This distinction suggests that research into women’s way of leading may be gender-sensitive yet not feminist, since the differing ways in which family, work, community and leadership are understood by particular groups are mostly absent. As Jenkins *et al.* point out (2019), it is not progress if the often-unconscious bias in research towards white Anglophone men is replaced by ‘Western European and US ideas about women and men, and gender roles and relations’ (p. 417). Pineda and Purdue (2019) suggest that ‘reflexivity is a core principle of feminist research’ (p. 453); however, research on women’s way of leading seldom includes more than cursory reflection on the researcher’s position and the study’s culturally shaped biases.

**The consequences**

There are political consequences of the focus on women’s way of leading. Reay and Ball (2000) argue that women’s leadership research tends to look inwards, concerned with celebrating and empowering individuals and communities at local level, rather than outwards to political activity aimed at changing the system at regional and national levels. This is not to argue that the latter is more feasible or important but, again, to point out the bias in educational leadership literature that often uncritically values women’s efforts without unravelling its potential negative outcomes, limitations or possibilities for alternative action. Reay and Ball’s (2000) judgement that ‘we are going to need something more than women in positions of power to change prevailing market orthodoxies’ (p. 156) contrasts with Grogan and Shakeshaft’s (2011): ‘women haven’t had to do anything to make change; they are the change’ (p. 86) and raises questions on the whole project of the transformative power of feminine approaches to leadership in an era of market competition.

**Inappropriate essentialism or critical question?**

There may be aspects of women’s lives that, if not universal, are the experience of the majority: unequal household responsibilities; unequal pay; the threat of violence; and pressures to conform to societal images of the feminine. However, women’s way of leading is not such a feature. Studies that explicitly or implicitly argue that there is a women’s way of leading are overstating a result where, generally, what is meant is that distribution curves of certain qualities or approaches may be somewhat, but not necessarily considerably, different for women and men in a specific context.

The chapter has suggested that the research may work against women in several ways, essentialism bleaching out the irrepressible diversity and creativity of women’s leadership, creating pressure to lead in a particular way and implicitly devaluing those who wish to lead by adopting more stereotypical male characteristics. It also sustains the hegemony of white, middle-class women from the Anglophone world (Blackmore and Sachs 2012). Certainly, let us continue the feminist project of understanding better how particular women or groups of women experience leadership: ‘Such nuances need recognition’ (Fuller 2014: 334). Let us listen to their perceptions with respect and compassion, celebrating all the positive qualities of leadership brought by women to education to the benefit of learners and wider society. Let us also analyse appropriately the majority of evidence that reflects a performed reality, examining the failures as well as the successes, broadening the research gaze to locate the way women lead more securely within wider political and social struggles.

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