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Examining leadership through critical feminist readings

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper seeks to explore a critique of the limitations of mainstream leadership research and publications and offers a critical management analysis through drawing on a feminist reading of leadership in organizations.

Design/methodology/approach – There has recently been witnessed a growing interest in the promotion of effective leadership within both organizational studies literature and organisational policy as the route to ensuring employee commitment and enhanced organisational performance and the achievement of ever demanding goals and targets. This turn to leadership is represented in both an upsurge of research studies and a proliferation in the promotion of leadership as the organisational panacea. An analysis of the literature on leadership was undertaken, giving due consideration to mainstream and more critical accounts in relation to illustrations drawn from the UK National Health Service (NHS).

Findings – This paper explores mainstream literature on leadership and finds it wanting, in terms of its failure to deliver a common understanding of the concept, in its generally uncritical accounts, and its inability to expose the androcentric nature of the core assumptions within hegemonic discourses of leadership. Drawing on critical feminist readings in relation to the UK NHS, a more critical account of leadership is presented.

Practical implications – Greater awareness is required for the adoption of culturally sensitive and locally-based approaches that take account of individuals' experiences, identities and power relations and that allows for the presence of a range of masculine and feminine workplace behaviours.

Originality/value – This paper provides an overview of the dominant themes within the literature on leadership as they relate to the UK NHS, and presents a feminist critique of the more subtle ways in which notions of leadership in organisations fail to consider their potential for bias.

Keywords Leadership, National Health Service, Research work, Feminism

Paper type Literature review

Introduction

In recent years, both mainstream management literature and organisational policy show evidence of a marked turn to leadership rather than management as the means to enhance organisational performance in contemporary organisations. This is matched by a growing trend in the UK to attribute ever-greater significance to leadership as a way of solving organisational problems not only within the private sector, but also within the public sector more generally, across education (in schools and in universities) as well as in health and local government organisations. The current government's focus on the "modernisation" of our services calls for better management and better leadership across the public sector services and has resulted in the establishment of numerous units dedicated to develop leadership initiatives. As part of this process, the Council for Excellence in Management and Leadership was founded in April 2000 with the remit of developing a strategy "to ensure that the UK has the managers and leaders of the future to match the best in the world" (Council for Excellence, 2002, p. 1).



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This turn to leadership in the UK National Health Service (NHS) has been reflected in the creation, in 2001, of a Leadership Centre within the Department of Health's Modernisation Agency. More recently a common set of NHS leadership qualities has been developed, so as to "set the standards for outstanding leadership in the NHS ... which can be used to assess both individual and organisational leadership capacity and capability" (Department of Health, 2002a, p. 1). This set of standards presents 15 qualities to which leaders in the NHS should aspire, arranged within three clusters – Personal Qualities, which includes such virtues as self belief, self awareness and personal integrity; Setting Direction, which incorporates political astuteness, drive and intellectual flexibility; and Delivering the Service, which comprises leading change and empowerment, holding to account and effective and strategic influencing.

This turn to leadership has generated a proliferation of leadership research and publications, yet despite this explosion in volume, three fundamental deficiencies are striking: the lack of clarity as to a common understanding of the concept; in its generally uncritical accounts, and its inability to expose the androcentric nature of the core assumptions within hegemonic discourses of leadership. This paper analyses the foregoing limitations and provides a critical management analysis, through drawing on a feminist reading of leadership in organisations, drawing particularly on illustrations within the UK National Health Service.

Defining leadership

Analyses and critiques of the development in leadership thinking abound (see, for example Alimo-Metcalfe, 1998; Bass, 1990; Grint, 1997; 2000; Yukl, 1994). Indeed, as many writers have remarked, it is ironic that despite attempts to trace the development in leadership thought, a clear definition of the concept continues to evade us. As has been written almost *ad nauseam*, there are as many (if not more) definitions of leadership as there are people who have attempted to define it. As Bennis (1959, p. 259) noted in his survey of the literature:

Always it seems, the concept of leadership eludes us or turns up in another form to taunt us again with its slipperiness and complexity. So, we have invented an endless proliferation of terms to deal with it ... and still the concept is not sufficiently defined.

Writing in the field continues to multiply, but an acceptable universal definition of what leadership is continues to be problematic for both practitioners and academics. Having reviewed in excess of 5,000 published works on leadership neither Stogdill (1974) in the 1970s nor Bass in the 1980s succeeded in identifying a commonly agreed definition. As Bennis and Nanus (1985, p. 4) concluded:

Decades of academic analysis have given us more than 350 definitions of leadership. Literally thousands of empirical investigations of leaders have been conducted in the last 75 years alone, but no clear and unequivocal understanding exists as to what distinguishes leaders from non-leaders and, perhaps more importantly, what distinguishes effective leaders from ineffective leaders.

Some quarter of a century later, the position seems remarkably unchanged. Indeed, Grint (2000) refers to the increasing abundance of literature in the last two decades, articulating that in the 1980s, some five articles a day were being published on leadership in the English language and by the 1990s this had doubled to ten a day. Yukl (1994) acknowledges that different theories of leadership have evolved as a result

of the different perspectives of the researchers and the aspect of the phenomenon of most interest to them. Thus differences amongst researchers in how they conceive leadership will lead to variations not only on the selection of phenomena to investigate, but also into how these phenomena will be interpreted.

Rather than adding to the profusion of leadership definitions, this paper aims to present a critique of the concept of leadership based on a feminist analysis. The following section explores the dominant discourses of leadership and proffers a discussion of the limitations to these accounts.

Dominant discourses of leadership

Dominant approaches to the study of leadership within the mainstream body of literature adopt a positivist perspective, which espouses that the truth is out there and through objective data collection and analysis the one true definition of leadership will be realised (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 1991). Such approaches tend to assume that the study of organisations can be undertaken in a similar way to studies within the natural sciences, and would see leadership as existing as a social reality which can be studied in a similar way to the natural world (Boje *et al.*, 2001). Thus positivist researchers undertake research in order to collect facts, to search for the truth and to explain and predict the organisational world.

Based on an analysis of mainstream leadership literature, the range of studies appears to be governed by at least six clear approaches. (Bass, 1990; Bryman, 1992; Chemers and Ayman, 1993; Fulop and Linstead, 1999; Northouse, 2001; Wright, 1996; Yukl, 1994). The discourses that dominate the mainstream literature can be identified as leadership traits; leadership behaviours; leadership situations; transformational and charismatic leadership; guru theory discourses of leadership; and more recently, notion of post-heroic leadership.

One of the earliest, and perhaps most basic approaches to the study of leadership focussed on the notion of traits, on the assumption that there were certain innate personal attributes of leaders that they were born with and that these could not be learned by those who did not possess these genetic qualities. This approach has been responsible for the body of literature referred to as the "great man" approaches, characterised by such heroic historical figures as Churchill, Gandhi and Wellington. The trait studies, particularly prevalent in the 1930s and 1940s, sought to discover a universal set of traits that could be identified as those constituting effective leadership. However, despite extensive research studies, no compelling evidence could be found of traits that held universal success in all leadership situations and contexts (Yukl, 1994; Fulop and Linstead, 1999; Grint, 1997, 2000).

The inability of researchers to define a universally applicable set of traits led to researchers paying closer attention to how leaders act, rather than what they are, in some innate sense. Thus much of the research evidence switched attention to a focus on styles of leadership, ranging from early studies seeking answers to questions such as whether autocratic or democratic styles lead to the most effective leadership outcomes (on which scientific management theories for the former and human relations theories for the latter predominate). Later studies became more concerned with leadership style and motivation theories (such as McGregor's theories that built on Maslow's work), and led to further studies considering task accomplishment and concern for subordinates studies, such as those reflected in the Ohio State and Michigan studies

(Northouse, 2001). Participative leadership is also firmly rooted within the tradition of behavioural research, and is primarily concerned with power sharing and empowerment of followers. Yet again, this approach has fallen to criticism owing to its failure to consider the situation or context within which the leader is functioning.

This led to both researchers and practitioners refocusing their efforts away from the behavioural approaches and towards situational or contingency approaches, which stress the significance of contextual factors such as the nature of the environment, the nature of the work performed and the characteristics of followers. This research is frequently classified into two sub-categories. One line of research thinking treats managerial behaviour as a dependent variable, and researchers seek to discover ways in which this behaviour is influenced by aspects of the situation, such as type of organisation or managerial position.

The other sub-category of situational research seeks to pinpoint aspects of the situation that moderate the relationship of leader behaviours to leadership effectiveness. The assumption here is that for a given situation, there will be one best style of leadership. Thus, it differs from the universal approach that suggests that there is one optimal pattern of behaviour irrespective of the situation.

Whilst this approach has been suggested as having intuitive appeal, in that it may be considered as somewhat self-evident that different situations lend themselves to different styles of leadership behaviour, there is a danger that assumptions about power and organisational politics are not given due consideration. Furthermore, the choice of variables considered as part of the contingency factors has little consistency between one study and another, and indeed the variables themselves are frequently poorly justified in the research (Fulop *et al.*, 1999). Finally, other factors or dimensions, such as organisational context, size, structure etc are not taken sufficiently into account. It also, perhaps somewhat implicitly, assumes the importance of the style of the leader in organisational contexts.

This emphasis on the style of leader led to a research focus that emphasised a turn to transformational leadership approaches. Most theories of transformational or charismatic leadership advocated by writers such as Burns and Bass identify the types of behaviour used by the leader and the traits that facilitate the leader's effectiveness. In contrast to other approaches in leadership research, the perceptions and attributions of followers are deemed to be significant in understanding leadership effectiveness. Thus, the effectiveness of a leader is explained in terms of his or her influence on the way followers view themselves and interpret events.

Criticisms of this approach have focussed on issues such as the excessive, almost evangelical role accorded to the transformational leader, who virtually unaided has the vision to guide the organisation through turbulent changes and crises. Transformational theorists have also promulgated or at least given further credence to the view that leadership and management are separate activities, which indirectly reaffirms the trait theory of leadership. Thus to earn the office of the transformational leader is to be equivalent to the "great man" model depicted by earlier trait theorists (Fulop *et al.*, 1999; Tourish and Pinnington, 2002).

At a similar time to the emergence of transformational approaches, "guru" theories of leadership really came to the fore in the 1980s and proliferated in the 1990s. Since that time, they have become a dominant concept within management writing. Huczynski (1993) contends that the term "guru" when applied to managers, is used to

denote an elite, albeit diverse category, who provide comment on management at the same time as shaping and reshaping the forms and practices of management. He identifies three category of guru, namely the academic, the consultant and the hero-manager. He argues (Huczynski, 1993, p. 38) that the label "guru" "encompasses a rag-bag of prescriptions which include the importance of innovation, more teamwork, more empowerment of the individual, more employee participation, fewer levels of hierarchy and less bureaucratization".

Thus, guru theory involves elaborate claims of being able to transform an organisation, its people and structures, to move it to a different (higher) level of achievement and success through an almost supernatural transformation of the factors that comprise the organisation. Guru ideas have had an enormous impact on the leadership of organisations. Indeed, it has been argued that gurus have provided senior executives with a sense of certainty and direction, by defining the managerial role in terms of the executive's responsibility for managing meaning for their employees, "for creating employees' moral universe" (Clark and Salaman, 1998, p. 153). Thus, the gurus' role and their appeal to organisational leaders, is the central, heroic status that their writings and prescriptions celebrate: the focus is very much on the manager as corporate leader, as organisational redeemer. The model is one of organisational hero, endowing management with a high-status leadership role in transforming the organisation. The connotations with biblical imagery and prophet-like behaviours are not lost on critiques of this guru industry (see, for example, Clark and Salaman, 1998; Collins, 2000; Jackson, 1999; Tourish and Pinnington, 2002).

More recent approaches have moved these heroic perspectives onto a different dimension. So-called post-heroic leadership became popular in the literature during the 1990s as a consequence of three noted trends, notably: increasingly tumultuous changes in the corporate environment; rising dissatisfaction with the image of managers/leaders (noted especially in the UK in the public sector); and the recognition of the need to manage diversity in the workplace. This model of leadership, advocated by Bradford and Cohen; Heifetz and Laurie; and Kelley (cited in Fulop *et al.*, 1999), purports that instead of focusing on styles and contingencies of leadership and the heroic qualities of leaders, writers argue that leadership is the work of many people in an organisation. The focus thus shifts from leaders to followers, in terms of giving voice to all people in an organisation, to harness the collective intelligence of the workforce as part of a process of building new relationships within, across and outside the organisation.

Despite the rhetoric of this post-heroic model of an inclusive and adaptive leadership approach, research evidence would suggest that within our present-day organisations, "heroic behaviours, images and virtual cult followings seem still to be very much in evidence" (Fulop *et al.*, 1999, p. 191). The post-heroic discourse appears therefore more as an ideology than a reality, and this claim is further supported by Fletcher's more recent writings (Fletcher and Käufer, 2003; Fletcher, 2004). Furthermore, it is suggested that many leaders are suffering from narcissism, which has been defined as the most common behavioural condition of the late twentieth century (Downs, 1997; Fineman, 1993; Lasch, 1979). Thus, rather than leaders seeking some form of subservient, follower-driven approach to their role in organisations, they are more likely to be driven by a desire to remake their world in their own image.

A critique of positivist discourses of leadership

Many of the shortcomings of these approaches to leadership have been highlighted above, but by way of illustration: a focus on leadership traits, contingency approaches or transformational leadership requires consideration of the individual leader with almost complete disregard to the context within which s/he is situated. Consideration of situational, transformational and guru theory approaches present seemingly neutral and unproblematic accounts that ignore issues associated with gender inequalities in organisational life, and power differentials and organisational politics, which are explored further below.

One danger of much of this mainstream research is that there is an attempt to create generalisable findings from complex data. Ontologically and epistemologically, positivist researchers are searching for a reality and for true findings that validate a predetermined set of hypotheses. This approach to the study of leadership dominates the literature, whereby each set of studies is seen to build on the findings of earlier studies. Furthermore, many studies of leadership have focussed on quantitative empirical research and whilst there is some evidence of a move towards methodological diversity (Bryman, 2004) there is a dearth of qualitative studies, whether of hypothesis driven or of an interpretive nature. The favoured approaches adopted within the literature are laboratory-based experiments or questionnaires, to the exclusion of contextually specific, qualitative studies. Butterfield and Grinnell (1999) caution against this approach, suggesting that researchers should evaluate critically the limitations of past research as they develop their own studies. Greater attention needs therefore to be paid to scrutinising contextual variables within studies of leadership, gender and managerial behaviour (Alvesson, 2002; Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003; Fletcher, 2004).

Another danger of this research is that, much of the literature on leadership, and most leadership theories (whilst failing to state this explicitly) are domestic theories disguised as universal theories (Adler, 1999). Most commonly, these leadership theories describe US-based models and behaviours of leaders that seem to favour an ideology of celebrating individualistic (perhaps even iconoclastic), strong, masculine characters who can lead. The dominance of US perspectives has been further analysed by other writers who note that the characteristics and behaviours uncovered by the research reinforce Americans' extreme individualism combined with their highly participative managerial climate. These factors "may render US management practices (including leadership) unique; that is, differentiated from approaches in most areas of the world" (Adler, 1999, p. 242). More recent research undertaken in the UK suggests that the distant heroic model of leadership so favoured in contemporary US writing, does not fit the cultural contexts of the UK (Alimo-Metcalfe, 1998; Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban-Metcalfe, 2001). Major criticisms of these dominant discourses are that individual difference is denied, context ignored and little or no consideration is given to the influence of diverse settings within which managers, leaders and subordinates operate. Furthermore, there is a broad tendency both in leadership research and among practitioners to focus exclusively on the top director/chief executive role, to portray the manager (leader?) as a superior being, uni-directionally interacting with subordinates. These studies fail to recognise that almost all managers are also subordinates and thus have a hierarchy above themselves as well as below (Alvesson, 2002; Fournier and Grey, 2000; Watson, 1994, 2001).

As depicted earlier, there remains a dearth of critical management study within this field of research and practice. Of the few studies published within the critical management literature, the following appear to be significant contributions.

Critical discourses of leadership

Contemporary critical management research on organisation and management provides opportunities to reconsider the dominant discourses of leadership as an aid to our understanding of the research field. It enables us to challenge basic assumptions in use in mainstream management research (Alvesson, 1996, 2002; Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003; Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Knights and Wilmott, 1992).

Rather than the disinterested (objective?) pursuit of the truth, the researcher is recast in an active role "constructing the very reality s/he is attempting to investigate" (Chia, 1996, p. 42). As academics in our research, we make leaders and create leadership as much as we study them. That is, we make visible something called leadership and we develop subject positions into which those who are designated organisational leaders will step. However, we cannot assume a straightforward translation of theory into the constitution of subject positions or identities. We need to look at the social and cultural context into which we assume theories are inserted. Accepting someone as leader or recognising leadership characteristics is as much about what we call the social and cultural context and also what we call the "characteristics" of those labelled "the followers". As Alvesson (2002) has noted, a cultural understanding of leadership requires an understanding of local meaning. He argues that leadership can be defined as "about influencing the construction of reality – the ideas, beliefs and interpretations of what and how things can and should be done" (Alvesson, 2002, p. 114). A social and contextually specific (local) definition of leadership allows us to be receptive to the meanings ascribed to leadership by the community employed within the organisation under study. We must therefore explore how the academic theories are translated within organisations and transformed into local understanding of leadership.

More critical approaches to the study of leadership pay attention to situations, events, institutions, ideas, social practices and processes that may be seen as creating additional repression or discursive disclosure, and some of these will be considered within this section of the paper. There is a plea within some of these more critical writings for a strong ingredient of management of meaning (Alvesson, 2002; Smircich and Morgan, 1982), in which greater attention to the above factors is given. Burrell (1992) suggests that the rise of management to corridors of power has allowed some talk of managers as if they were heroic figures. He describes the semantic inflation that has set in, whereby many senior executives refuse to call themselves "managers", and instead refer to themselves as "directors". Indeed, I would argue that in many UK public sector organisations (the major focus of my research studies), this semantic inflation has displaced managers and management in favour of leaders and leadership.

A challenge to the very existence of leadership is pursued by writers including Alvesson and Svenningsson (2003) and Gemmill and Oakley (1992), who suggest that mainstream management writers approach the study of leadership from the unquestioned presupposition that leaders are essential for the effective functioning of an organisation. Locked within such a positivist epistemology, much of the leadership research reflects functionalist roots in theorising on leaders and leadership, and assumes that leadership is an indispensable component of all organisations. The

reification of leadership has created this assumed indispensability and the concomitant dependence that it creates in followers. Through this process of reification, the concept of leadership takes on an objective existence, which seems to make it beyond challenge. Notwithstanding the slippery nature of the concept and the definitional problems highlighted earlier, researchers and practitioners assume that because there is a word "leader" (or "leadership") there must be an independent objective reality it describes or denotes. Gemmill and Oakley (1992, p. 114) argue that whilst mainstream writers proclaim a positive subtext for leadership, they suggest it is "a serious sign of social pathology, that it is a special case of an iatrogenic social myth that induces massive learned helplessness among members of a social system". This learned helplessness can be seen in an inability of the followers or other members of an organisation to imagine or perceive viable options, along with accompanying feelings of despair and a resistance to initiating any form of action. Thus as social hopelessness and helplessness deepen, the pursuit for a saviour (leader) or miraculous rescue (leadership) also begins to accelerate.

This childlike dependency basis of the leader myth is supported in Smircich and Morgan's (1982) writing, in which leadership is perceived as a process whereby followers give up their mindfulness to a leader or to leadership. As they state (Smircich and Morgan, 1982, p. 257), "leadership is realized in the process whereby one or more individuals succeeds in attempting to frame and define the reality of others".

This forms the basis of a quest for a shift in focus away from the myth of leadership that advocates alienation, deskilling and reification of organisational forms and towards the dynamics of "leadership" as a social process. This approach encourages individuals and organisational members to interrelate in ways that encompass new forms of intellectual and emotional meaning, for the experimenting with new paradigms and behaviours to discover more meaningful and constructive ways of relating and working together.

Leadership is not about a leader decreeing what should occur and followers responding in a mechanical way, but is a performative process in which the use of the very word "leader" brings into being socially constructed positions whereby some must aspire to a complex identity which others follow (Butler, 1993). To define and describe leadership is to recognise its slippery nature, its meaning shaped by both the individuals' own experiences, personal background and reflexive thoughts and by those of all the other people involved within the local context (Alvesson, 2002; Campbell, 2000; Smircich and Morgan, 1982). Nevertheless, a recognition of the social context and the socially constructed nature of leadership may still overlook a fundamental dimension in the study of organisational life, notably that this performative process of leadership is achieved through a range of exclusionary practices that aim to offer a homogeneous definition of what a leader in an organisation is expected to be. One such exclusionary practice is the failure to consider the androcentric nature of organisational life and the lack of recognition of this concept in many organizational studies.

A feminist critique of leadership

Feminist critics (Acker, 1990, 1998; Calas and Smircich, 1992; Martin, 1990, 1994) point out how the existing body of organisation and management theory assumes implicitly that managers and workers are male, with male stereotypic powers, attitudes and

obligations. Organisational structures, cultures and everyday practices have all been shown to constitute the "ideal employee" and especially the ideal manager as a disembodied and rational figure, one which fits more closely to the cultural images of masculinity rather than femininity. Femininity on the other hand, has tended to be associated with embodiment, emotions and sexuality; as such it is constituted as subordinate to "male" rationality and possibly out of place in rational organisations (Fournier and Kelemen, 2001).

The type of behaviour deemed appropriate for managers in contemporary organisations coincides with images of masculinity and centres on rationality, measurement, objectivity, control and competitiveness. While men are portrayed as fitting organisational behaviour, women are associated with the "feminine" characteristics of caring, nurturing, and sharing that are allegedly more appropriate for the domestic sphere and the reproduction of the home and the family. So, the cultural construction of femininity around body and emotions, and of masculinity around disembodiment and rationality, has made men the "natural" inhabitants of organisational life, whilst positioning women as out of place in organisations (Gerhardi, 1995). Furthermore, Gerhardi argues that the presence of women in organisations calls for "remedial" work that seeks to address the ambiguity that their position as "female occupants in a male world" creates. Remedial work refers to individual and collective strategies that may be used by both women and men to restore the (gender) order when such order has been disturbed by women stepping out of their feminine position. Fournier and Kelemen (2001) identify many studies that show the effort that women have to invest in presenting what Judy Marshall (cited in Fournier and Kelemen) calls "viable public images", images that make them acceptable in the organisational world (see also Gerhardi, 1995; Brewis, 1999). For example, women may make themselves acceptable in employment by being discrete and invisible; by requesting permission to speak in meetings or other behaviours demonstrating a lack of assertiveness, so as to repair the damage done by "infringement of the symbolic order of gender" (Gerhardi, 1995, p. 141).

Alternatively, women may downplay their gender identity and try to blend in as one of the boys, or as an honorary man (Collinson and Hearn, 1996), or a female man (Marshall, 1995). Several studies have shown how women try to fit in by adopting "masculine" styles, by being tough and aggressive or by adopting a cold professional approach (Calas and Smircich, 1996; Collinson and Collinson, 1996; Fletcher, 2004; Marshall, 1995).

In a similar way, leadership theories that have formed the dominant ways of seeing and understanding leaders and leadership in organisations, suggest leaders have become both sacred and institutionalised, divorced from their gendered value-laden foundation, to the extent that we assume that they are beyond critique, deconstruction and reformulation. Such theories, in the language of Berger and Luckmann (1995, cited in Yancy, 2002) assume an ontological status through a process of reification. Their masculine roots are then rendered incognito, and assumptions are made that these theories of leadership are gender neutral (Oseen, 1997; Yancy, 2002).

Within the field of management and organisation generally, the feminist voice has been slow to be heard, in no small part as a consequence of the domination by men and by discourses that continue to privilege the trappings of masculinity (Calas and Smircich, 1991; Hearn *et al.*, 1989; Martin, 1990). Theories of leadership still require the

existence of heroes in order to make sense; notions of heroines do not tally (Oseen, 1997). As Fletcher (2004) observes, dominant traits associated with traditional models of transformational (heroic) leadership are masculine and are socially ascribed to men in our culture. These include such traits as individualism, control, assertiveness and dominance.

Calas and Smircich (1991) present a Derridean-informed deconstruction of four management texts celebrating leadership so as to demonstrate how theories of leadership privilege masculinity. Their paper seeks to show the multiple meanings that can be derived from the same text when read in a different way. Through this process, they demonstrate that the term "leadership" is not simply ambiguous (as I have suggested elsewhere in this paper) but can be read as necessarily masculine in origin and effect. This gendered nature of organisational life generally, and of leadership in particular, has been addressed by other critical writers in the field. Discourses on leadership (as well as corporate strategy, culture and other features of organisational life) are understood to involve core elements of masculinity that reinforce male identities and thereby sustain asymmetrical gender relations in organisational life (Alvesson and Wilmott, 1996; Collinson and Hearn, 1996; Hearn *et al.*, 1989).

Implicit in many of these masculine-based models of leadership is the continual search for what has been described as the "holy grail" of the idealised business model of organisational life, so well depicted in early (classical) studies of management by Taylor, Fayol and other writers and practitioners of a rational and logical approach to managing in organisations. Kets de Vries (1994) refers to the endurance of the myth of logic and rationality (the masculine) and by implication, the absence of emotionality or irrationality (the feminine). This favouring of masculinity and the pervasive associations between men, power and authority in organisations appears to have been taken for granted. Thus the literature and the practice of management have consistently failed to question its gendered nature. A crucial issue at the heart of organisations is what Irigaray (1985) has depicted as phallogocentrism, which is used to describe the strong Western tradition which relegates the feminine to the position of matter, material or object against which the masculine defines itself. It is the masculine voice that governs discourse and exchange, the worlds of communication and economy (Burrell, 1992; Harding, 2003).

The rest of this paper calls this failure to account, by drawing on feminist writings to support the imperative of seeking ways to reconstruct a new way of theorising leadership in organisations, so as to find a voice for the feminine. In adopting a critical approach informed by feminist theories, (Calas and Smircich, 1992, 1996; Irigaray, 1993; Martin, 1990, 1994; Oseen, 1997; Whitford, 1991), this allows for the consideration of an alternative perspective, one that permits the presence of woman other than as imitation men or excavated woman (Oseen, 1997), as well as recognising the presence of men who do not conform to the masculine traits and behaviours as depicted by the rational, objective, competitive model described earlier. It is evident from these studies that (perceived) charismatic and masculine models of leadership are still featuring heavily in our organisational analyses whereby the macho, individualistic, assertive and dominant behaviours continue to take precedence over the more feminine qualities such as empathy, capacity for listening, relational skills etc. The narcissistic leader hiding behind this charismatic notion still reigns supreme with a focus on individual and meritocratic notions of leadership and organisational success (Fletcher, 2004).

Where the rhetoric of a more feminine set of approaches is suggested, such as within post heroic discourse, these have yet to be translated into practice as can be witnessed by the target-driven, financially-motivated performance measurements that continue to dominate current assessment arrangements in UK healthcare organisations.

As Smircich and Morgan (1982, p. 258) have noted, "leadership is realized in the process whereby one or more individuals succeed in attempting to frame and define the reality of others". The Leadership Qualities Framework is an attempt at offering a "holy grail" solution to the definitional difficulties associated with leadership, and becomes, for NHS managers and professional leaders, the assumed identity that they need to adopt if there are to become successful leaders in the NHS. The leadership formula offered by this framework provides a list of behaviours that need to be practised, learned and finally acquired by managers in the UK NHS. Indeed the *Code of Conduct for NHS Managers* (Department of Health, 2002b) defines the behaviours expected of everyone involved in management in the NHS. Mangham and Pye (1991) cited in Watson (2001, p. 221) characterise this mechanistic type of competency approach as akin to an assembly process to management development – "so much financial ability added to a bit of marketing and some strategic leadership together with some interpersonal skills and a hint of ..."

These endeavours to define leadership can be seen as means of exerting control or seeking to regulate individuals' identity within the organisation, to seek conformity to specific traits, competencies and behaviours. The NHS Code of Practice and the Leadership Practices Framework provide managers with a means of self-regulation and self-monitoring, in which managers are "cultivated" to become "autonomous, self-regulating, proactive individuals" (du Gay, 1996, p. 60; see also Rose, 1998). Managers' very identities and senses of self are thus crafted by their experiences in workplace settings. NHS organisations, through defining the leadership practices and behaviours expected of NHS workers, provide a vocabulary and way of behaving that constrains, influences and manipulates managers into how their very identity is constructed. The powerful voices of the organisational leaders seek to persuade the rest of the workforce to conform to organisational norms and behaviours (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Knights and Willmott, 1992). In response, managers and other professional within the NHS may (or may not) collaborate in this discursive production of themselves by adopting the very behaviours and skills that are being promulgated. Once having taken up a particular position as one's own, a person inevitably sees the world from the vantage point of that position and in terms of the particular images, metaphors, beliefs and concepts that this perspective offers. Management consultants and indeed academics, trainers and educators seek to define and fix the concept of leadership on the organisation's behalf and thereby collude in the presentation of a core identity for leaders within organisations. This view presumes a central, unitary identity, a coherent view of the self against which it is possible to gauge whether an individual's actions are true or false, genuine or spurious, good or bad. Furthermore, it embeds an assumed homogeneity of approach to leadership, and serves to continue to mask the masculine dominance of the model.

Thus specific inventories such as the Leadership Qualities Framework and the associated 360 degree assessment tool may provide the portfolio of evidence that supports the production of this identity, an identity that the individual can "manufacture" or "adopt" to fit the profile created by the dominant discourse of

leadership in the NHS. Individuals thereby are categorised, and are required to adopt this identity created through the leadership framework and into their workplace.

The continuing use of such psychometric and other personality profile inventories as part of the diagnostic and developmental processes associated with the introduction and maintenance of leadership in organisations, has the effect of defining the narrow band or range of types of behaviours that people exhibit, as part of the psycho-discourses of our time (Rose, 1998). These dominant discourses and psychometric profiles become the learned profiles that people then attempt to continue to absorb into their identities. Only a narrow range of identities are permitted within which people are allowed to perform at work. Here we have not the iron cage of bureaucracy but the iron cage of personality profiles.

Adopting a critical approach to leadership exposes this practice as accepting what has become the dominant discourse within the field of leadership research – notably in the case of public sector organisations, the current discourses of the transformational and post-heroic discourses as depicted earlier in this paper. A more critical approach permits not only a social and contextually specific meaning to leadership, but also calls for more locally based and culturally sensitive research into how the concept of leadership is being enacted at local level, and how the (masculine) discourses that dominate inform the (feminine) subordinated discourses and practices in the organisation.

Concluding thoughts

Becoming aware of the various discourses and subject positions that constitute our subjectivity enables us to see multiple constraints that inhibit our thoughts and actions and those oppressive discourses and subject positions that we should seek to eradicate (Best and Kellner, 1991). This paper has considered the dominance of mainstream positivist approaches to the concept of leadership, and has suggested that the perpetuation of such research and organisational practice has reified the very concept of leadership into an objective reality. These dominant conceptions of leadership are then taken up and adapted at organizational level and they continue to perpetuate the hidden masculinist assumptions of the attributes of the model of leadership that is required to be adopted by the organisation. The turn to leadership continues to be promoted within organisations generally, and within UK public sector organisations specifically, as a means to address the increasing pace of change and development. However, much of the research and exploration to date within leadership studies has failed to challenge the systematic privileging of masculine behaviours and norms as the basis for defining effective leadership within these organisations. Where models have suggested a more feminine-informed range of behaviours, their presence seems confined to organisational rhetoric or statements of espoused practice rather than organisational reality.

Understanding leadership calls not only for the consideration of social processes and cultural context (Alvesson, 2002, p. 104). The perpetuation of a single model of univocal and patriarchal leadership behaviours and the ever-continuing drive within the NHS to create leaders, perpetuates a model that is exclusionary, and which forces those ever-increasing numbers of people called leaders into this iron cage of the personality inventory. I proffer a plea for a research agenda that aims not only to adopt a culturally sensitive and locally-based approach, that takes account of individuals'

experiences, identities, power relations and intersubjectivities; but also one that allows for the presence of a range of masculine and feminine workplace behaviours.

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