

7

DIFFERENCE AND LEADERSHIP

Amanda Sinclair and Michelle Evans

Amanda Sinclair is an academic who is also a yoga and meditation teacher. She has been a long-term advocate for putting 'leadership' and 'difference' together and for 'doing leadership differently'.

Michelle Evans is an Aboriginal woman and a theatre-maker by background. She is interested in the intersection of cultural identity and leadership and the collective dimensions of identity and leadership.

What this chapter is all about ...

The main idea is that leadership and diversity are usually combined in ways that collapse the multiplicity of differences. However, these ideas need to be unpacked from a critical perspective that calls attention to the power dynamics behind the construction of difference.

The key questions this chapter answers are:

- What does it mean to take a critical perspective on difference and diversity?
- How are difference and diversity significant for leadership?
- How has the idea of diversity evolved in organizations, and what does this mean for notions of 'managing' diversity?
- What does leadership look like when it celebrates diversity?

Introduction

Amanda: So, Michelle, we've got this book chapter to write about leadership and difference. In the spirit of writing about this area, I suggest we do it differently: as a dialogue between two different voices on the question of difference, each with our own histories, experiences and interests.



STOP AND REFLECT 7.1

Before we go any further, we also want to invite you to pause and reflect on your own experiences of difference and leadership and reflect on the following questions:

- Under what circumstances have you felt 'different' and what was your experience?
- What kinds of pressures (if any) did you come under to 'fit in', to modify what you said or to conform to norms?
- Has it been important to you to speak up or stand out on a particular issue against the views of the majority and, if so, what happened?
- Have you had experiences of seeking to introduce new and different perspectives into group discussions and, if so, what unfolded? Were you heard? Did what you said change things?

Michelle: OK, Amanda, I'd like to give it a go. It's important to say at the outset that not only are we adopting a very 'different' style of writing about difference, we want to highlight that in this chapter we are not opting to assert one 'truth' about difference. Instead we are choosing to lay out the perspectives and tensions in constructing and experiencing difference, and how these experiences relate to leadership.

Amanda: Throughout this textbook, including in the editors' Introduction, are discussions of what it means to take a critical perspective. For us, taking a critical perspective means that we are interested in interrogating leadership as a set of ideas, rather than doing what leadership gurus tell us we need to do, to 'be' leaders. We will ask questions like:

- How have terms like 'difference' and 'diversity' come to be connected to leadership?
- How have they acquired particular meanings and imperatives such as the need to 'manage diversity'?

Michelle: So what might be some of the takeaways from reading this chapter on difference and leadership? We hope it provides you, the reader, with an example of a critical engagement with leadership literature and theories on difference; and that we provide a framework for you to consider your own experiences of difference and leadership; for example, how your own narratives and life experiences have shaped your understandings of leadership, and are a resource for you to draw upon as you study, and do, leadership.

Where are we speaking from about difference and leadership?

Amanda: Difference is not an objectively allocated marker, like skin colour, but an experience that results from many social interactions and socially mediated designations – in people's histories, their

lives and careers. There is no one 'truth' about difference and leadership, but many. Accordingly, for you as readers to interpret and assess what we say here about difference, you need to know about us and about where we are speaking from.

Michelle: I was born in Newcastle, Australia and raised in Cessnock in the Hunter Valley of New South Wales in a working-class family living in the housing commissions. My experiences about being 'different' began early as we moved from public school into the Catholic school system when I was seven. My early experiences of class difference and being poor had a major influence on me. My father is also a strong unionist and we discussed politics often at the dinner table (later fighting about politics as I grew into my own voice). I was 12 when Mum and Dad told my sisters and I that we were Aboriginal. I remember, far from being surprised, I felt like something was affirmed within me. Embraced by the Aboriginal community in the Newcastle region, I began to actively contribute to the community by becoming a community radio broadcaster, a student politician, and then moving into community based arts, management and now academia.

Amanda: I was born in Melbourne, Australia into a struggling but stable lower-middle-class family. As a young white woman I had little exposure to other cultures until my brother became good friends with an Indigenous boy who had arrived at our high school from the Torres Strait. He and I later had a 'bit of a thing' for each other, which my father was horrified about. I remember him standing in the kitchen and saying to my mother 'He's black!' as if this self-evidently determined the future of our relationship. My experiences of 'being different' as a woman didn't really kick in until later, when I started work and found myself in almost exclusively male environments in government and consulting. Those early experiences of starting to notice power dynamics and my own relative powerlessness and marginalization later became the fuel for a lot of my subsequent research of women's experiences in leadership.

Defining difference and diversity

Amanda: There is a whole history about the ideology and power of these terms, how their meanings have been employed in organization behaviour and leadership scholarship to achieve certain things. These terms of difference and especially 'diversity' are often used as if they are objectively measurable phenomena, not a complex product of language, power and ideology.

Michelle: Can I just unpack that last sentence, Amanda? Often, the way 'difference' is employed in the writing of leadership (and management) is as a divergence from general understandings about leadership. In journals, for example, there are articles about 'cross-cultural leadership' or 'African' leadership or 'women's' leadership. All of these are marked as divergent to the mainstream concepts and theories, comprehensible as 'special categories' of leadership and often grouped together under one abstract concept like 'diversity'.

Amanda: I'd probably put it more bluntly. It's inappropriate to create a category that corrals together experiences of, for example, race and gender, treating them as in some way equivalent, all just 'difference' or 'diversity'. My view is that this process often occurs for political or management reasons. It enables managers to design one programme that supposedly accommodates women, Indigenous people, gays, transsexuals, people with disabilities and everyone else, without recognizing the difference issues and forms of prejudice that members of each group are dealing with.



STOP AND REFLECT 7.2

Michelle: An example of allocating and grouping together non-equivalent differences is the UK government-funded leadership development programme for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Leaders (BAME). Although it looked like a promising initiative, those categorized brought a range of different and sometimes, irreconcilable, issues and obstacles they were confronting in leadership. A category like BAME is a construct with multiple and divergent histories and brings with it certain intents. Ask yourself:

- Who benefits from this allocation and categorization of differences like BAME?
- Why do such categorizations of difference occur?
- What might be some of the consequences, positive and negative?

So now let us highlight some key points and ask you to consider and reflect upon as you read this chapter:

- First, we need to be aware that there is a history behind the use of the terms diversity and difference that fall outside the literature of leadership and management, yet impact keenly on our shared thinking of these ideas.
- Second, we want to critically engage in understanding who is designating 'difference' and 'diversity', and we are asking to what ends are these categorizations put to use?
- Third, we are asking readers to consider the genealogy of privilege we see reinforced in contemporary society through social constructs like 'leadership'.

Ideologies and discourses of difference and diversity

Amanda: Part of taking a critical perspective is seeing the historical and political context around the emergence of terms, such as 'leadership' and 'difference'. French philosopher Michel Foucault reminds us that words do not benignly pop up into usage because they objectively capture a phenomenon. Rather, terms, bundles of words and ways talking (which some define as 'discourses') are a product of power and they reinforce particular interests and purposes (Foucault, 1972). For example, even the phrase 'managing diversity' contains the idea that diversity is something that needs to be managed (presumably by those who are somehow outside this designation of different). The phrase itself creates diversity as a problem, imposing a managerial solution.

Building on this perspective, it's possible to discern at least three major discourses of difference and diversity that have influenced management and leadership studies, including justifications for why difference and diversity are important for leadership and, if so, what should be done about them! We have called these: the business discourse on diversity; the social psychological discourse; and critical perspectives on difference.

Each of these discourses are situated within, and are reinforced by, broader social ideologies or philosophies. The first two discourses we discuss are located within a rational instrumental ideology which

assumes that the point of knowledge production is to use it as a means to advance economic and other ends. In contrast, a critical perspective is more likely to be informed by the idea that the revealing of social and political processes is of value because those revelations may reduce oppression and promote more equitable societies.

The business discourse on diversity

Amanda: In much of the business literature, difference and diversity are used interchangeably and are defined as dimensions of overt or less visible difference including cultural, racial, ability, sexual orientation and gender heterogeneity. Businesses are encouraged to take a proactive approach to diversity and advocates for diversity are advised to develop a strong 'business case for diversity', that is to spell out all the rational economic and instrumental reasons why diversity will advance 'the bottom line'.

Cross-cultural differences

Michelle: The best known of the studies into the impact of culture and geography on leadership has been the work of Geert Hofstede (1980, 1991) and the subsequent international GLOBE (Global Leadership and Organizational Behaviour Effectiveness) project founded by Robert House in 1993. These two researchers (and House's significant research team) employed psychometric measures and surveys to understand and assess the role cultural/geographic difference makes to leadership. Hofstede used anthropological, historical, psychological and sociological sources to develop a theoretical model from a 're-analysis of an existing database of employee attitude scores assembled by one single multinational: the IBM corporation, from its subsidiaries in 72 countries, between 1967 and 1973' (Hofstede, 2006, p. 883). House and his team (2004) built upon Hofstede's five dimensions (which include high and low power distance; individualism vs. collectivism; masculinity vs. femininity; uncertainty avoidance; and long-term orientation), adding a further four dimensions that show the cultural practices and values of 62 societies from around the globe (humane orientation; performance orientation; institutional collectivism vs. in-group collectivism; and assertiveness vs. gender egalitarianism).

These two studies aim to demonstrate the impact cultural diversity has on the work of leadership. The GLOBE study explicitly asks if there are 'cultural universals' when it comes to leadership and answers this question with their nine dimensions. It analysed '17,370 middle managers from 951 organizations in three industries' (House et al., 2004, p. 96).



STOP AND REFLECT 7.3

Taking a critical perspective on this highly influential area of research into difference and leadership we need to ask some questions, such as:

- To what ends was the research conducted? Why was a comparison of cultures being sought?
- Who is this research useful for? Who stands to benefit from the measurement and codification of cultural differences?
- What contextual considerations might influence both the intent and results of the research?
- At a more specific level, what are the relationships between the researcher and the field site companies and how does this influence the study?

Hofstede (2001) has subsequently addressed some of the criticisms made of his research, such as whether surveys are the best way to measure cultural difference or if using 'nation' as a unit of analysis is a valid approach. What's useful for our purposes about the debate between cultural difference theorists such as Hofstede, House et al. and their critics is its highlighting of how research allows for knowledge claims to be made and how theorists can then construct systems of cultural classification as a truth.

Amanda: Michelle you seem to be concerned here about the relationship between researchers to this research? Are you suggesting that in the very construction of research, with variables and hypotheses, already assumptions have been made about difference, who is different and who is the norm?

Michelle: Yes, researchers are meant to be transparent about their assumptions and these are supposed to be stated as limitations to what knowledge they produce. The reality is that when this research data gets translated into leadership training programmes, those assumptions get lost and material gets presented as if it is truth.

The social psychological discourse on diversity

Amanda: Well said, and what you've argued there also applies to the social psychological discourse on diversity. This research focuses on difference and diversity as a measurable feature of individuals and teams. The research typically also attributes the problems and the remedies for dysfunctional diversity outcomes at the individual and team level. In their critique of this kind of diversity research, Ahonen et al. (2013) argue that the very research technologies and taxonomies 'commodifies', obscures and neutralizes the fluidity and multiplicity of diversity. Researchers that create and measure diversity as a category negate the specificity of experiences of difference, rather supplanting a 'representation of bodies', 'an optimal mix of talent' that serves positive organizational outcomes.

Tackling the obstacles to women in leadership

The 'women in leadership' field provides many examples of individualized remedies for what is more likely to be a system-wide or structurally based problem. Predominantly, many of the solutions have focused on helping women change themselves so they don't 'look' so different, for example, getting the right experience, dressing inconspicuously, negotiating in not too aggressive ways. As more research has revealed that overcoming the obstacles to women requires a change in the mindset of men, new solutions have focused on helping men recognize their 'unconscious bias' and using strategies to avoid such stereotypes in their selection and hiring decisions. More about this later ...

The critical discourse of difference and diversity

Amanda: Third, we introduce the critical discourse on difference and diversity. But the first thing to note is that it is not one view! There are many writers who engage critically with notions of difference and diversity. They come from divergent fields such as cultural studies, anthropology and international relations, and there are many areas of disagreement. In some respects, this whole chapter draws on and exemplifies a critical discourse on difference. But by way of introduction ...

Through the mid- to late twentieth century, philosophers and linguists such as Jacques Derrida and Luce Irigaray explored the semiotic roots and construction of meaning in terms 'difference'. Focusing on how power and language intersect, they show that it is power-holders with privilege who designate certain individuals and groups as 'other' or 'different'. The designation is a political act using language. Building on these and other insights, post-colonial theorizing emerged through the later twentieth century from writers concerned about the lasting impacts of colonization in many parts of the world, but also the new forms of colonization that occur in globalized environments. Post-colonialism brought with it a

focus on the impact of the colonizer in the construction of who and what was deemed different, and these perspectives made their way into critical analysis of diversity and diversity management.

Prefacing leadership with a different classification

Michelle: When 'different' leadership is studied it inevitably evokes use of a prefix like 'Indigenous' leadership or 'Queer' leadership. This grammatical alteration signals difference but it also alerts us to a standard with which this different leadership is being compared. My own work also falls into this problematized space through my use of the prefix 'Indigenous'. I choose to use the word Indigenous because it speaks to the breadth of Indigenous peoples across the world who share the experience of colonization and the struggle to reclaim land, language and culture. Yet, despite my intentional use of this word 'Indigenous', it can create tension for me as a researcher. This tension is not necessarily a bad thing; it signals the importance of language to participants, critics and readers and the way I, and more broadly, we use the word Indigenous and what we might mean and hope to engage through its use.

Using a prefix both claims space for difference and implies that there are perceived norms in leadership. In the English language when words like 'white' are spoken it invisibly also implies black; male evokes female; insider also speaks to outsider. These bounded pairs are examples of the operationalization of durable inequality (Tilly, 1998).

Summarizing some key points, we have suggested that the dominance of the business discourse can lead to oversimplified and impoverished notions of leadership and difference. In contrast, a critical perspective insists on making visible:

- 1 the power relations occurring when one group manages the 'diversity' that has been designated and labelled on 'others', with the privilege, biases and interests of the dominant group usually remaining out of sight;
- 2 the purposes and dangers of bundling together a range of organizational 'minorities' (even though they may be numerical majorities) under a common category of 'diversity' when they have different experiences and needs;
- 3 the causes and remedies of discrimination as underlying and group-based structural inequities and power differentials in society, rather than individual weaknesses;
- 4 that valuing difference is important ethically to the health of society, organizations and individuals, not just because or when it delivers benefits for the 'bottom line'.

And how can leadership scholars emphasize difference in a positive but also critical way? We will say more about this as the chapter unfolds but as a starting point Nkomo (2011) suggests that working towards a decolonizing or anticolonial agenda we:

- 1 avoid binary language;
- 2 challenge cultural essentializing, both within conventional and non-conventional writings about leadership;
- 3 consider the impacts of globalisation on leaders.

Leadership and difference

Amanda: We've spent a lot of time focusing on difference, but since this is a book primarily about leadership, we should introduce leadership and its connection to difference, shouldn't we?

Much of what we have suggested above about difference can also be applied to leadership. In taking a critical perspective, we are endeavouring to see how 'leadership' has come to be constructed as an 'answer' to problems – in societies and organizations – and it typically brings with it a set of culture-centric frameworks that are products of, not outside, broader societal relations of power and ideology.

Scholars have long drawn our attention to some of the biases and self-serving perspectives that are widespread in leadership literature. For example, early American sociologists such as Alvin Gouldner (in the 1950s) and Loren Baritz (in 1960) provided warnings about the consequences of an American-dominated leadership industry, an elite conglomeration of business, the military and academics who looked to narratives about leadership to retrieve political and economic dominance. Contemporary leadership scholar Barbara Kellerman observes: 'The contemporary leadership field is an American product, planted in American soil and harvested by American scholars, educators and consultants' (2004, p. 10).

Michelle: From my experience, studying leadership with groups and individuals who have experienced historical inequality brings up very different responses to leadership – what is generally framed as a positive phenomenon. When I ask Indigenous participants to tell me about leadership, there is a fundamental push back on the idea. Very frequently the responses I hear are that leadership is about power; it's about individuals asserting themselves over others, it's coercive. These personal theories of leadership that we carry around are important but they can get in the way of understanding leadership as a phenomenon that occurs in all communities and groups. Understanding how leadership is enacted in community-based settings may also give us other ideas about leadership, especially when we listen to how leadership is understood from the perspective of those who experience persistent social inequality.

Amanda: What this means, in the study of leadership and difference, is that there is a 'hegemonic' or dominant view of what leadership looks like and how leadership should be understood and studied. When alternative views on or different experiences of, leadership begin to be expressed they get relegated, as we have discussed above, under the headings of 'different': categories like 'women's leadership'; 'cross-cultural leadership'; 'Asian', 'minority' and 'indigenous leadership'.

Michelle: Hence, the onus is placed on the reader of leadership texts to critically engage with what is presented as assumed and reinforcing norms of leadership. We need to remind ourselves that concepts like leadership and difference are constructed through social and group relations; that is, the leader and follower constitute each other through a relational process (Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012). Durable social inequities are thus reproduced in leadership, while we argue that leadership interested in difference should be aiming to remedy these inequities, or at the very least question them.

Approaches to doing leadership in ways that honour and sponsor difference

Our conclusion is that leadership that aims to work respectfully with difference needs to avoid some of the traps we have discussed. Initiatives that operationalize difference as an individual attribute and that fail to properly acknowledge the diversity in difference will, we have argued, fail to deliver leadership. In this section we describe some leadership work that, in contrast, recognizes and works explicitly with issues of power and context. In these examples we are also interested in justifications for honouring difference that go beyond 'good business', invoking ethical arguments to treat people without discrimination and enable them to enjoy opportunities to fulfil their potential.

Cultural identity work and leadership

Our approach is one which argues that context, individual biographies and idioms of the self... cannot be ignored as leadership, indeed work in general, involves interpersonal relationships. We bring our selves, our psyches, our histories, our idiosyncrasies, our ways of talking and thinking and acting, to these workplace relationships. (Ford et al., 2008, p. 175)

Michelle: I have come to studying leadership sometime into my career after working in theatre, community-based cultural development, community radio, Indigenous arts and teaching in higher education. These diverse and rich experiences are a blessing when it comes to applying my experiential knowledge to the area of leadership studies. I also come to leadership studies with a specific political agenda – to study leadership in spaces that are not conventionally selected as sites to learn about leadership, like my recent study of Indigenous artists and arts managers in both Australia and the USA. The editors suggest in the Introduction to this book that leadership is ‘a process, involving people and therefore fundamentally social, subject to change over time and according to where it’s happening’, while I consider the phenomenon of leadership is something open and exciting to investigate.

Leadership involves dynamic processes of navigating who we are and what we bring to leadership, which may involve performing or conforming to expected ideas and narratives of who we are as well as resistance to and disruption of stereotyped ideas of who we are. Some of the richest and most interesting accounts of leadership come from critical research of leaders working against gender, racial and cultural stereotypes (see, for example, Ford and Harding, 2007; Ospina and Foldy, 2009; Nkomo, 2011; Kirton and Healy, 2012). Because leadership has historically been ‘a white male idea’ (Sinclair, 2007), leaders who are neither white nor male encounter challenges such as being rated less ‘leader-like’ (Eagly, 2011).

The work individuals do within themselves to perform ‘leadership’ is of great interest in the leadership field. What aspects of their thoughts, emotions and embodied experiences do they actively work to contain within themselves when doing the work of leadership? And what aspects of themselves do they bring forward, making available to others around them new ways of seeing and understanding? In my work into Indigenous leadership I investigated this internalized and embodied work individuals do, in order to provide leadership on behalf of themselves, others and sometimes communities. What I found was that individuals have these territories inside of their bodies; these spaces of tension that they need to navigate in order to do the work of leadership (Evans, 2012).

One territory that Indigenous leaders navigate is around authorization and voice. As an Indigenous person speaking out:

- Do I need cultural authorization to say and do the work of leadership?
- Do I need the community or group’s authorization to do the work of leadership?
- Or do I find it within my own self this authorization of voice to speak and act out in ways that may be framed as the work of leadership?

These three considerations – personal, communal and cultural authorization – speak strongly beyond the experience of Indigenous leaders.

Amanda: Hang on, Michelle, I think there are many questions that you are posing here. You talk about how Indigenous cultures and groups mandate, affirm and attribute leadership differently to say a Western idea of self-selected leadership. And further, that these leaders then need to navigate the work of leadership differently from a more individualized approach to leadership.

Michelle: Thanks, Amanda, yes, exploring this way of thinking about leadership raises a few key ideas. First, that leadership is a process that happens both within individuals and between individuals and both of these processes are important to the work of leadership; that is, that individuals can find within themselves a voice and purpose to engage as much as they need to find that voice and purpose in group relationships. Second, that if the individual and social environments are important, then context to is important to the work of leadership. Taking a systemic rather than purely individual perspective to thinking about leadership is important. And third, the responsibility rests upon us to be cognizant to the operationalization of difference when engaged in the work of leadership.

Gender, women and leadership

Amanda: I'd like now to explore the category of difference focused on gender (which includes both men and women) and provide a critical reading of how research on gender and leadership has unfolded.

Leadership as a concept has been consistently construed in highly masculine terms. Yet much of mainstream leadership research has ignored that leadership is already gendered, that is it assumes and reinforces a set of masculine norms. Starting around the 1990s researchers started to explore the way in which leadership cultures were often dominated by masculine norms, such as valuing heroism and stoicism, rejecting weakness and vulnerability. Yet the vast bulk of leadership research continues to treat leadership as an unproblematized norm, towards which men and women alike should aspire. Within the literature on women and leadership, three roughly chronological approaches can be identified, which I'll briefly summarize.

'Add women and stir'

Women managers and the challenges they faced entering the 'foreign country' of male management constituted the focus of early studies. In this approach, women were advised on how to perform against pre-existing criteria of leadership: for example, they needed to gain line-management experience. Once these hurdles had been surmounted and women were 'in the pipeline' in sufficient numbers, they would bubble up into management and leadership positions, or so the argument went.

Also through this time, individual, psychological perspectives became dominant, with a focus on measurement of individual abilities for management and leadership that perpetuate assumptions that women just need to be the right 'fit' in order to be considered for leadership. Research, such as the 'sex differences' approach explored the qualities women needed in management and whether there were enduring sex differences that meant that women and men led and managed differently. While meta studies concluded that there was little difference due to sex in achievement, motivation, risk taking, task persistence and other managerial skills, the legacy of this research is an enduring focus on understanding the 'problem' of women's absence from leadership in terms of women's individual qualities and skills for leadership, or a lack of them.

'Women's ways of leading'

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, a new interest specifically focused on women and leadership was emerging, and, again, much of the early work came from American business-oriented researchers. Judy Rosener, writing in *Harvard Business Review* in 1990, argued that there was now a 'second wave' of women leaders who no longer had to mimic the 'command and control' male model of organizational leadership. Further, they were 'succeeding because of – not in spite of – certain characteristics generally

considered to be “feminine” and inappropriate in leaders, such as encouraging participation, sharing power and information, enhancing other people’s self-worth, and getting others excited about their work’.

The argument that women lead differently from men has continued, and continued to elicit controversy. Researchers have explored some of the consequences of identifying a female style of leading, such as creating new stereotypes such as women as more naturally nurturing and relational and holding all women to higher standards. Scholar of women’s leadership Alice Eagly notes the tensions in research on women leaders. They are identified as having a ‘female advantage’: showing up as consistently demonstrating dimensions of transformational leadership such as ‘individualized consideration’, ‘inspirational motivation’ and ‘intellectual stimulation’. However, women leaders are simultaneously disadvantaged by stereotypes of leadership that generally resemble stereotypes of men, that is agentic, confident, aggressive and self-determined. Eagly concludes: ‘men can seem usual or natural in most leadership roles ... people more easily credit men with leadership ability and more readily accept them as leaders’ (2011, p. 257).

Equally importantly, the two approaches described above keep the focus on the individual and the individual woman, rather than looking at analyses of systemic power and how it is distributed, to explain what Australian scholar Joan Eveline (1994) described as ‘the politics of men’s advantage’ in leadership.

Critical perspectives on women and leadership

Simultaneously from the late 1970s saw the emergence of pioneering work by gender scholars and feminists deconstructing organizational and leadership life. Instead of focusing on women as the ‘other’ who needed to learn how to do leadership, researchers began documenting how organizations and leadership were set up to maintain a gender order where masculinities were privileged. Administrative logic and ‘merit-based’ principles and practices are not neutral but designed, in the words of Australian scholar Clare Burton (1989), to ‘mobilize masculine bias’. In *The Feminist Case Against Bureaucracy* (1984), Ferguson notes the power of supposedly neutral ‘bureaucratic discourse’ to ‘manipulate, twist, and damage human possibility’ in pursuit of capitalist goals (p. xii). Similarly, Acker (1990) argues that gender assumptions that devalue women are deeply embedded in organizational processes, language and metaphors.

Efforts to re-insert women’s experiences into leadership and to re-make leadership from a critical and feminist perspective come from several places. For example, feminist standpoint theory has advanced the idea that the perspectives of the marginalized and disempowered are a source of leadership.

Indigenous and post-colonial scholars have offered powerful critiques of the dominance of elites and institutions such as the World Bank and the mechanisms by which oppression is perpetuated through neo-colonial structures. These scholars have consistently shown that leadership is often done in resistance and refusal from the bottom or the margins of society, rather than from formal positions at the top.

Other authors and activists have been interested in organizations created along feminist lines. Guided by values of devolution and inclusivity, some of these organizational forms reject leadership, preferring instead to enact rotated, consultative forms of governing.

Although the theories and perspectives described above share many differences (!), they can be understood to provide critical perspectives on leadership in the following ways:

- 1 They argue for a focus on underlying assumptions and distributions of power in systems, to understand how the status quo gets perpetuated and to understand the exclusion (not just absence) of women from senior roles. There is a recognition that power structures and institutions are gendered in both overt and more deeply embedded ways.
- 2 An interest in how leadership is exercised from below and within, as well as against, appointed leadership, which may be oppressive and hierarchical, gendered and racist.

- 3 An acknowledgement of diversity in women's experiences and voices. Following second-wave feminism and a critique of many white women's tendency to act as if they spoke for all women, there is now wide acknowledgement that it is important to avoid universalizing and essentializing women.
- 4 A rejection of what is seen to be individualistic, heroic, out-front notions of leadership in favour of more distributed and context-determined leadership exemplified in processes of consultation, devolved decision-making, development and empowerment of other women.
- 5 Promotion and integration into leadership and organizations of what are understood as feminine or women's values and ethics, such as putting a value on care and nurturance, especially of the weak, on maternal strength and resilience, and on community and relationships.
- 6 An emphasis on practice and seeing that 'the personal' is political and also often provides leadership. Reflective practice and consciousness raising are important tools, personal experience is valued.

'Making a difference' in leadership and difference

In the preceding section, we've provided overviews of two areas of research where critical perspectives have been incorporated in the way the leadership and difference have been conceptualized and theorized. From here on, we'd like to focus more on practices of leadership that actively engage with, and validate, difference.



STOP AND REFLECT 7.4

- Have you come across individual leaders or acts of leadership that seemed open and inviting of difference? What occurred and what were the consequences?
- How would you characterize or describe leadership that is open and sensitive to exploring issues of difference?
- What are the institutional, political or social supports that enable that kind of leadership and what kinds of obstacles are likely to block or undermine it?

Amanda: Below we will describe some examples of leadership practices that we suggest impact positively on understandings about difference. We suggest that each of these processes can be framed and viewed as examples of leadership; that is, they:

- shape or have the potential to shape public discourse on difference and diversity;
- address underlying assumptions and power-arrangements;
- create space for different experiences to be valued (Sinclair and Wilson, 2002).

Outsiders learn and adapt to dominant culture

This category of leadership practice occurs where people who have strong experiences of being 'outside' the dominant culture use these experiences to create a new place within the dominant culture. Far from being about assimilation, this leadership practice demonstrates the adaptive nature of 'outsiders', and how their success and work resonates with and ultimately changes the mainstream.



Case study: Noel Tovey, author/director/ performer/choreographer

Michelle: I interviewed Noel Tovey, one of the fathers of Indigenous performing arts in Australia, for my study on Indigenous artists and leadership. Noel's career spans over 60 years in Australia, Europe and the USA where he has worked as a performer, dancer, choreographer, director, writer and teacher. Noel describes how, during the fifties at the beginning of his career, he was designated as the other, as not belonging or fitting in:

I was really persona non grata when I was in *Paint Your Wagon*. I'll tell you why. Eight of the boys, the chorus boys, went up to the English choreographer and told him that I was notorious, that I'd been in gaol, that I was Aboriginal, that they didn't want to work with me.

Noel, having had already experienced much violence and neglect throughout his childhood, did not let the jibes and games of these chorus boys hurt his ambition to realize his dreams of dancing, directing and acting on main stages across the world. Noel led in the main-stage performance sector for Aboriginal people, treading the boards without (m)any other Aboriginal performers around him. Noel went on to explore these early experiences of being the outsider and how he constructed a strong inner narrative as a way to deal with this rejection within himself. I suggested, 'You have a really strong sense of self it seems to me.'

It wasn't a strong sense of self. How can I put it? In a way it was but you see I was always, I had this terrible inferiority complex as well ... I'd walk on stage and I'd judge myself. Before I'd go on I'd say you're no good. That came from being Aboriginal and a good little black bastard and being taken away from my family and being in gaol at 17 and trying to commit suicide and you know all of those things all impinged on my ... but at the same time there was a determination to succeed ... It didn't stop me no. You see I could have fallen by the wayside but I didn't ... No, no and I never really became negative in front of other people. In fact I sometimes used to become the opposite and people used to think I was too grand but that covered up really huge negative ... You know, I'd walk in to a room and I'd be nine feet tall. That was only because I was nervous. Instead of going in bent over ...

Noel's determination to succeed meant that he became the best dancer, actor, singer, choreographer and director. Noel describes inverting his fear and projecting a 'nine feet tall' persona. That internal drive coupled with a suppression of his Aboriginal cultural identity drove Tovey to London and great critical success as an actor and choreographer. Adapting to the dominant culture ensured commercial success for Tovey; however, on his return to Australia in the 1990s Tovey invested in his own cultural identity, strengthening as well as setting up spaces for Indigenous young people to learn about theatre in a cultural safe space.



Reflect on Tovey's 'containment' of his Aboriginal cultural identity.

1. How does this sit with you? Why was it important in this story?
2. How did being 'outside' impact Tovey's leadership?
3. Have you ever experienced the need to suppress an identity? If so, how did it feel?

Speaking out about one's own difference

This category of leadership practice occurs where people with influence own up to their own difference, not denying it or going into camouflage in order to look like one of the dominant majority.



Case study: Christine Nixon, former Police Chief Commissioner, Victoria

Amanda: A central part of how Christine Nixon went about her leadership roles, as a senior and rare female officer in the New South Wales police force, then from 2001 to 2009 as Chief Commissioner of Victoria Police, and from 2009 to 2011 as head of the Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority, was about bringing herself to the job, including her values of treating people decently and with dignity. She also emphasized and practised care and the value of mothering, which she argued the leadership literature 'resisted recognising' (Nixon and Chandler, 2011, p. 222). As an example, one of her early actions in the Victoria police was to properly recognize those police who had died on duty and to support their families.

In her swearing-in speech as Police Commissioner, she began 'First, I am a woman' and then went on to outline the role of caring and compassionate values in good policing (p. 126). She also warned the audience not to confuse these values with 'softness' – which inevitably some stakeholders did. Nixon came under great pressure to play the 'hard cop' and she admitted her life would be much easier if she did. However, she continued to 'work hard to be authentic'. By this, she meant to speak truthfully and of her feelings and to uphold values that others might regard narrowly as too feminine (and therefore 'too soft'). Eventually in her later years in policing she observes that she had 'invested so many years in authentic behaviour', she wasn't frightened of risks to her reputation.

In reflecting on women and leadership and the extra scrutiny that they get she writes:

I know I can do the job, and that I can do it as a woman should – not as a bloke might, and not as someone else might, just as me. I know some women adopt the model of looking like the blokes, but I don't think that's the way for women to progress and so, as a role model, I try to just be me – unashamedly, honestly me. (p. 221)

Christine Nixon's approach is quite different to Noel Tovey's above. In this story, Nixon emphasizes her 'authentic behaviour' and doesn't shy away from her point of difference.



1. What do you think of Nixon's explicit recognition that she would do the leadership job as a woman?
2. What was gained from this leadership approach in contrast to Tovey's? And what's at stake in both of these examples?
3. What were the risks in claiming her difference?

Working bi-culturally: Moving across, within and outside boundaries

In this practice we are interested in people who navigate the boundaries between cultures and cultural identities. Individuals who use their bi-cultural and multi-cultural identities to operate across borders

without exclusively residing in one or the other, but influencing in both spaces and using both spaces as a source of inspiration and tension in their work.



Case study: Stephen Page, Artistic Director of Bangarra Dance Theatre

Michelle: For 20 years, Stephen Page has been the Artistic Director of Bangarra Dance Theatre, Australia's pre-eminent Indigenous performing arts company. In this position he spans traditional/contemporary Indigenous cultural spaces as well as operating as one of the most successful Indigenous arts companies in Australia playing to audiences across the world each year. Moving between cultural spaces is integral to the work Stephen produces. In the following excerpt Stephen describes the complexity of working between Aboriginal and Western systems:

I look at all my brothers and sisters that are in all their different cults of expertise and I think we spend a lot of time trying to work out the Western system which really I think exhausts a lot of the true cultural power within one. And I think we've got to stop getting in that road of wanting to understand the [Western] system – there's not too much to understand. I think we have to accept our own complexities and the more that we're black on black and the more that we can confront and find new ways to communicate in our leadership and the sharing of stories in our leadership way without having that Western barrier.

Stephen demonstrates how Indigenous people battle with the fatigue and inevitability of having to navigate the Western system. Having to negotiate these different worldviews and make decisions and choices daily about what to prioritize in any given moment is the work of those of us that span bi/multi-cultural worlds. Exerting influence, working with persuasion and doing leadership work despite and/or because of these challenging realities hones bi-cultural mastery. Stephen describes how he deals with these pressures in his work:

Look there's no way we can escape the Western system but I think we've got to not be afraid of it and I think we've got to try not to let our egos get absorbed in it, I think it needs to be enriched in a different way and that will probably help our focus a lot better.

Developing a multi-worldview fluency is important to the work of leadership. Being different brings strength to leadership because individuals develop a quality of observation and innovation in their worldviews and enact this through their work. Yet the individual also has to navigate and contain a lot of the pressures and tensions they encounter in the work of moving between cultural worldviews. This embodied work is discussed further in the following section.



Stephen Page's story illustrates how different worldviews can bring into focus things that are otherwise unseen. How might bringing different worldviews impact on leadership? A key purpose in leadership is often said to be about bringing unity (e.g. of purpose and as a group). How does the idea of unity sit with the 'pressures and tensions' in Page's story?

Leadership that places emphasis back on the dominant system/ context but also preserves individual agency

In this practice we are interested in people who use their leadership and authority to name discriminatory conditions, to go to the root of how those who are labelled different in some way or another are not treated equally.



Case study: Julia Gillard's speech to the Australian parliament

Amanda: On 10 October 2012, Australia's then Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, addressed the Australian parliament, in response to a motion put by the opposition leader, Tony Abbott. While the motion concerned the future of the Speaker, Gillard's speech was an impassioned and galvanizing effort to draw attention to a concerted campaign of misogynistic, sexist attacks from the opposition and some of their associates, not just towards herself but towards Australian women in general.

The speech came after concerns expressed by prominent feminists about the escalating sexism in public commentary about the Prime Minister. For example, Ann Summers argued that a new and contagious level of misogyny has been given voice via social media sites, evidencing a level of discrimination and bullying that would be treated as illegal were it to occur in a company.

What is notable about this speech that drew international support is Gillard's insistence on facing squarely several things. First, it demanded we pay attention to the sustained, yet routinized way in which women are demeaned, discriminated against and subordinated because of their sex. Second, it showed why the special category of women with power (leaders) may attract particularly vicious and brutal efforts to drive women into silence or submission. Third, Gillard's speech invited listeners to notice the insidious ways sexism continues to work against women, and to see how public platforms of leadership are often used, consciously and unconsciously, to advance this agenda. Women's efforts towards leadership take place against the backdrop of women's subordination. For example, women's bodies are scrutinized and routinely measured against sex stereotypes, making them viewed as less leader-like. Though some may argue that instances of outright discrimination have reduced, there is plenty of evidence of emerging forms of media where women are routinely derogated or treated as sex objects. This backdrop shapes how women are seen, and their experiences in public life, in turn affecting their appetite for leadership.

The reasons why this leadership speech was particularly remarkable and influential have been widely discussed, and we have already seen a glimpse of these in Chapter 2. For our purposes here, the example shows how a leader can use their formal authority to name systemic experiences that have been rendered – by language or convention – unnameable. There was a determination not to lose the point and the power in careful phrases or policy obfuscation.



Julia Gillard was in a rare situation in terms of positional authority, from which she was able to draw attention to systemic discrimination. Why do you think it happens so rarely that high-profile leaders take a stand on a difference issue? How might you lead in drawing attention to discrimination without being in a similar position? This story shows how discrimination and domination can be systemic and yet remain unnamed and unnoticed. What other forms of discrimination or domination have you seen or experienced in today's organizations and communities?

The section above with its four categories of leadership practice was aimed at giving you, the student, a sense of the diversity of practices in leadership and difference that are possible. We've provided these examples that we have encountered and observed because we think they are inspiring and courageous. It also seems, though, that more modest, 'micro' practices of leadership often 'make a difference' to how difference is felt and experienced by others.



STOP AND REFLECT 7.5

Can you identify other examples – from your own context or the public arena – of leadership practices with significant positive impacts on appreciation of difference?

Making a difference to difference: Our own practices in leadership and difference

Amanda: At the start of this chapter, Michelle and I introduced ourselves, partially to help you understand where our interests in leadership and difference come from and how to 'read' what we say, given these interests. As we approach the end of the chapter we thought it might be helpful for you to know a bit more about how we've sought to 'make a difference' in the leadership and difference work we do. Our experiences and our advice to you are different. But they are both aimed at encouraging you to ask:

- How have my history and the narratives I've absorbed about who I am influenced my understanding and readiness to appreciate difference? How might this experience base be expanded?
- How has, and can, my leadership support the expression and celebration of difference?
- How might small leadership acts on my part, make a difference to the difference others experience?

Michelle: I'll begin. I wonder whether leadership and difference are irreconcilable paradigms, unable to sit comfortably together because of the different histories, assumptions and power contestations dwelling within each 'idea'. Conceptually, leadership is mostly an iconic, aspirational and positive identity many people strive to become, to own and to be. So what is the 'leadership and difference' space?

How do we conceive truly different ideas about leadership and how can we operate with difference without automatically being labelled as relevant only to those 'different' people we research? My own research has often been labelled culturally relativist. My work is generally of curious interest, yet colleagues can't readily work out ways to make the links between what they know, understand and think about as leadership from the literature and the way that I am presenting Indigenous narratives about how leadership is perceived and works in a variety of contexts, most importantly in a community framework. I approach leadership as primarily a process of building community, building spaces for community to gather, focusing more on the relational and social aspects of what individuals can do when they come together. I am also interested in creating platforms for community members and individuals to have a voice.

Amanda: Certainly I spent the first half of my career with a very ambivalent attitude to leadership. I had spent my professional and academic life in male-dominated organizations feeling like the 'odd one out', the one who did things differently, argued for different values and looked different. It was often a pretty debilitating and disempowering place to be – both placing myself and being routinely placed by others on the margin. Yet as I found my voice and started to speak up, initially about issues for women and the problems with executive culture that they encountered, it became clear that I was providing leadership. I was drawing attention to important discriminatory dynamics and I was working to change norms and practices.

Far from difference taking me away from leadership, I have found that in being different and voicing those experiences, I have sometimes provided leadership. For me then, difference and leadership go hand in hand. Rather than suppress my interests and experiences to 'look like a leader', leadership depends on me being attuned to difference – in myself and others.¹ A lot of my leadership work in the classroom with students and managers is about supporting individuals to understand how their different histories and narratives have shaped them. Part of this process is supporting people to value and voice their own experiences as leadership: to free them up from unhelpful narratives about themselves, and about how they should conform to be leaders. For me, the greatest satisfaction comes from seeing people allow their different experiences to feature in their leadership.

Conclusions

In this chapter we have highlighted that difference, diversity and leadership are all historically constructed concepts. They cannot be just studied as phenomena without appreciating their context: how they have arisen as ideas and gained momentum, and whose interests they have served. We have concluded that often those who are deemed different are not necessarily empowered by traditional processes of managing and leading difference and diversity, even those initiatives ostensibly aimed at 'inclusion'.

However, we believe that leadership can be an agent for the expression of the value and multiplicity of differences. The examples given show the range of ways that leaders can advocate for difference with or without formal authority. The chapter has echoed Ospina and Foldy's (2009) call for further study of difference as a particularly productive space for leadership research because we need to have a fuller understanding of the complexity and limitations of current formulations of leadership.

The key points in this chapter were ...

- Difference is tightly interwoven with dynamics of power. Even though things like 'managing diversity' appear to be working towards inclusion, they can reinforce privilege.
- Leadership is by no means exempt from this critique. It has a long history of being constructed in ways which privilege and empower some people over others. For example, it is often imbued with ideals of masculinity and Western individualism.
- Critical perspectives on leadership and diversity seek to engage more reflexively with power and privilege. Sometimes enacting diverse identities that challenge hegemonic or stereotypical ideas of difference can itself be a form of leadership.

1 For those who may be interested, the work of feminist Luce Irigaray similarly argues that acknowledging and working with difference, not 'merit' or 'equality' as defined by patriarchy, is a central philosophical challenge.



Further thinking

Ospina, S and Su, C. (2009). Weaving color lines: Race, ethnicity, and the work of leadership in social change organizations. *Leadership*, 5(2): 131–170.

- Describe some of the different relationships between race-ethnicity and leadership explored in Ospina and Su's article. How did the article extend your understanding of leadership?
- Ospina and Su propose that race-ethnicity is a building block that social change activists draw upon to mobilize leadership – can you describe an example 'on screen' of this way of doing leadership?

Warner, L.S. and Grint, K. (2006). American Indian ways of leading and knowing. *Leadership*, 2(2): 225–244.

- What do Warner and Grint believe are the benefits of deeply studying difference and leadership, in this case American Indian leadership?
- Why is understanding context important to the study of leadership?
- What are the benefits and the risks of presenting a model of American Indian leadership?



Leadership and difference on screen

Many films and especially Hollywood blockbusters like *Master and Commander* provide stereotypical views of leaders. We suggest screen alternatives here that challenge conventional notions of what leadership is, of who and how it is exercised. One first example is the film *Rabbit Proof Fence* (2002), based on a book by Doris Pilkington Garimara about the story of her mother being taken away from her Indigenous community and home as a three-year-old and taken to Moore River Mission. The film portrays the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Australian government practice of seizing Aboriginal children from their families and communities and placing them away from Indigenous influence. As well as being a very moving portrayal of the impact of these policies, the film is also about leadership. Those in conventional positions of authority in the film do not demonstrate leadership, but instead are agents of brutal and misguided government policy. Leadership, rather, is shown by the Aboriginal children, and particularly Molly, the oldest girl, who escape the Mission, and then for nine weeks and 1500 miles, evade the authorities to return to their homelands, following the rabbit-proof fence that ran north through Western Australia.

While *Rabbit Proof Fence* is a film based on real historical events, the TV series *Redfern Now* (2012, 2013: Blackfella Films) also provides examples of Indigenous leadership being done in community and family-centred ways. Largely written by, directed and starring Indigenous people, the series challenges stereotypes of Aboriginal people and their families, forcing viewers to get out of their comfort zone and bring new understanding of the obstacles that those seeking to exercise leadership in different ways encounter. For example, in the first episode of the first season 'Family', the main protagonist Grace demonstrates the tensions inherent in Indigenous leadership as she chooses to look after her niece and nephew when their mother is taken to hospital, rather than go on a planned family holiday with her immediate family. This episode surfaces tensions between Grace's own middle-class family and her sister's family who continue to struggle all sorts of disadvantage. Grace is a leader in the wider family, forced to make constant trade-offs while keeping a sense of the bigger picture of what's at stake. The two sets of children in this episode enact class differences and the episode highlights through the character of Grace, differences in cultural values and understandings of what family leadership often entails.

Our third example is the Danish TV series *Borgen* (2010, 2011, 2013). It portrays the coming to power of Birgitte Nyborg, a woman prime minister, who is initially head of a relatively minor moderate party. In contrast to many

other TV series such as *Suits*, women in leadership in *Borgen* are portrayed in complex but embodied ways. They are not sexualized, or treated as supports to the main action, but are given agency to challenge traditional conventions of politics and leading. It is argued that *Borgen* is a case of life imitating art. Not long after the series aired in Denmark a woman prime minister was elected and some argued that the TV series increased public openness to, and sympathy for, having a woman in a top political leadership role.



STOP AND REFLECT 7.6

Think about the films you've seen and been influenced by, from *Star Wars* on. How have leaders been portrayed? Leadership scholars sometimes talk about 'distributed leadership'. By that they mean that the leadership work is distributed across different members of a group or team, who offer particular capabilities and strengths to suit changing circumstances. In the films you've seen, is there a pattern to the way leadership roles are distributed? Is the hero often a white male with supporting or 'side kick' roles played by black Americans, Asians or women? Even if the lead character is, as in *Hunger Games*, a young woman, is she portrayed as offering a different kind of leadership? More broadly, how influential do you think popular culture, such as films and TV series, are on our appetite for people doing leadership differently? Do they make it more possible for non-stereotypical leaders to disrupt conventional expectations?