Northumbria Research Link

Navigating the labyrinth: senior women managing emotion

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Abstract: The paper is based on a presentation at a British Academy of Management sponsored research seminar on Gender and Emotions, May 2008. The paper draws upon agentic and communal leadership (Eagly and Carli, 2007) to explore the gendered nature of senior leadership for women and identifies contradictions between the emotion 'advantages' to women leaders, current theorised in the literature and the disadvantages (Ross-Smith et al, 2007) of women becoming 'emotion specialists'. By 'seeing' repertoires of emotion management and emotion work of senior women, we can recognise the different gendered expectations of women leader's emotionality, emotion management and emotion work in organisation.

Keywords: senior women; emotion; gender; boardroom; labyrinth; agentic; communal leadership.

Biographical notes: Sharon Mavin is Associate Dean, Research and Consultancy and Professor of Organisation and HRM, leading the Centre of Professional Excellence at Newcastle Business School. Her research interests include the gendering of organisations and in particular the gendered experiences of senior women learning and leading, the Queen Bee construction, female misogyny and senior women's gendering through media. Current research includes exploring women's experiences as contestant on the TV series, 'The Apprentice.' Her work has been published in a number of journals including *The British Journal of Management, Management Learning, Women in Management Review and the International Small Business Journal.*

This paper is based on a talk given at a British Academy of Management sponsored research seminar on Gender and Emotions in May 2008.

1 Introduction

In this paper, I am looking at senior women in work. To give you a context to my presentation, it is based on a recent lecture I gave to a vice chancellor, deputy vice chancellors, deans and associates deans of business schools. The lecture was entitled

"Babes, Bitches and the Boardroom: The dilemmas of senior women" and was given in the context of the lack of women in senior positions in higher education. For example, out of the 106 business schools in the UK, there are approximately 15 women deans and this lack of senior women is replicated across higher education at vice chancellor and deputy vice chancellor levels.

Today, I am drawing upon experiences of senior women, women above middle management in organisations who have director level or equivalent positions. I have been researching women in management over a number of years and drawing upon auto-ethnography. I have reflected on my own experiences to consider the emotion dimension to the dualisms that already exist for women in senior leadership positions. In this respect, I want to look at the complexity of emotion management for senior women in their journey by drawing on the work by Eagly and Carli (2007) on the leadership 'labyrinth'.

Looking at my personal journey, I am associate dean and member of the executive team in a business school and, for the past six years, I have often been the only woman in a team situation, and internally and externally at meetings and discussions. My experiences are highlighted through the leadership perspective I want to talk about. In this respect, I want to identify some of the contradictions between the emotion 'advantages' to women that are currently being theorised in the literature on leadership, and the disadvantages, as discussed by Ross-Smith et al. (2007), of women becoming 'emotion specialists'.

So, in conveying my message to this management audience, I explained what I understood by gender: that sex is something that I was born with but that gender was something that I was 'given' and I look at this as a subconscious process. In other words, I worked with that 'given' until I became conscious of how I was gendered. I also tried to persuade my audience that notions of masculinity and femininity are fluid concepts and not fixed to sex, so that men are not just masculine and women are not just feminine. I gave the example at the beginning of my presentation that my leadership style was often perceived as masculine and this was how I was often constructed within the larger construct of masculine leadership. My argument was that regardless of our awareness of gender, each of us in the room continues to evaluate men and women's behaviours against gender stereotypes and that if I were to ask them to recall being managed or led by a woman – descriptions or conversations or discussions they may have had – then we may raise awareness of some of the sexual stereotyping and expectations we have as we 'gender' leaders in organisations. In other words, you have to get yourself into the dualisms to be able to get yourself out of them.

2   The glass ceiling and the labyrinth

In reality, we are perpetuating gender sexual stereotypes either consciously or subconsciously in our everyday lives. There is something very uncomfortable about a woman leader who has a masculine leadership style and this stereotyping also plays out in studies of gender and emotion. I am going to start with the metaphor of the glass ceiling – a metaphor we have used that has included the glass lift and the glass elevator as well as a range of barriers (cultural, structural, material barriers) to the boardroom for women in management. We have fought to move them out the way but the concept of the glass ceiling simply perpetuates the theme of female disadvantage. So, while we may

have achieved that push into middle management, the glass ceiling, or however we describe it, has now moved to penthouse level. And because some women have broken through to that level, we need a new conceptualisation that does not perpetuate the theme of impossibility and disadvantage. So, I had been looking for a different frame to explore women in management that helps us to move forward.

Eagly and Carli (2007) offer that frame in terms of the metaphor of a labyrinth. Rather than the idea of a ladder going straight through the glass ceiling, the labyrinth captures the complex journey that is not a direct passage for women in management. A labyrinth requires our ingenuity, persistence and very skilled analysis of puzzles. We hit a number of expected and unexpected twists and turns but there is a viable route to the centre. If we stand above a labyrinth, instead of below a glass ceiling, we can see the starting place much more clearly. I can actually see the goals that women tell me about and those goals might be about finding a comfortable place in what is known as management, or it may be finding a place at the table in the boardroom. But, it also gives me the concept of the maze of walls and enables me to see how the gendered assumptions that make up those walls, change the closer you get to the centre of the labyrinth. The labyrinth gives me the opportunity to see different pictures of women's perceived behaviours and women's experiences in management – particularly as they hit the walls of the maze, have to regroup and think, where do I go from here? Do I follow my way back round or do I keep going and take a different route? And, from this place, I now want to turn to the complexity of women's emotion management by using the labyrinth as a frame.

3 Emotions, gender and leadership

Here, I am using Bolton and Boyd's (2003) concept of the self-management of emotion, i.e., a process that requires conscious effort and hard work as people try and shape and suppress their feelings to fit the rules of the situation. In a leadership capacity, I am looking at emotion work in terms of the regulations and struggles to display the appropriate emotion, but also looking at the contradictions within the literature around the advances of emotion in leadership. For Turnbull James and Arroba (2005), mainstream leadership literature is still perpetuating the notion that the rational controls the emotional and that a leader is someone who denies the challenges that responsibility and risk can give in terms of, for example, emotional turmoil. To pretend that this is an emotionless process is absurd to those with responsibility for any kind of staff management or investigatory process and any type of decision-making around people and budgets. These processes involve different stages of emotion work – the issue is what emotion or emotion work is valued, recognised or material in organisations.

Areas of contemporary leadership literature are now asking us to provide and develop as business and management skills, good leadership in our students – good leadership that enables our leaders to inspire, to engage in emotional intelligence, to lead, to coach, to mentor and to develop others. In fact, management learning literature is now looking at authentic leadership as a way to combat the ills of organisations. And, leaders face a paradox of needing to be emotional in a 'good way', to develop 'followship' in others, whilst at the same time personally engaging in emotion work to neutralise and suppress their own individual emotions, often perceived as inappropriate. Leaders, therefore, often struggle with internal dialogues and regulation of emotion work to perform appropriately.

What is often overlooked, both in mainstream discourses and in terms of practice and experience, is that this emotion work is gendered. Looking at the female leadership advantage or disadvantage, Eagly and Carli (2007) argue that contemporary leadership constructions are becoming more consonant with female gender roles and that these are associated with self-awareness, empathy and emotional intelligence: namely the ability to recognise and manage one's own and other's emotions. On this basis, senior women are now often categorising themselves and being categorised by others as 'emotion specialists'. As Ross-Smith et al. (2007) argue, this labelling of emotion specialist reproduces the system of gender bias in that displays of traditional gendered emotion behaviours lead to a female leadership disadvantage. These traditional gendered emotion behaviours include mothering, nurturing and caring roles. Ross-Smith et al. (2007) separate this emotion work into developmental emotion work (supporting and developing others) and maintenance emotion work (mothering, nurturing, resolving conflict). Whereas developmental emotion work may be associated with good leadership, maintenance emotion work is unlikely to be attached to success in this respect.

4   Agentic and communal leadership emotions

Looking at senior managers, there is a huge gap between our theorising of emotion work in leadership and the experience and practice of leaders. I want to highlight this, as well as the gendered emotional contradictions I referred to earlier, by drawing on a set of shared conscious and unconscious mental associations about what we understand by men, women, leadership and management. The two leadership associations are agentic behaviours and communal behaviours (Eagly and Carli, 2007) and whether we like them or not we evaluate people's performance every day around these sets of behaviours. Examples of agentic behaviours are assertive, controlled, ambitious, determined, instrumental, self-reliant, independent and individualistic. Communal behaviour examples are helpful, affectionate, sympathetic, empathetic and compassionate treatment of others. Agentic behaviours are almost automatically perceived as 'effective leadership' and communal behaviours as 'non-leadership'. Effective leadership is associated with masculine behaviours because of the male domination of management and leadership historically – therefore we find it very difficult to detach the sexual stereotype from this set of behaviours. Non-leadership is associated with feminine behaviour; agentic behaviour equals men and communal behaviour equals women. What happens when a woman behaves as agentic leader? We experience a 'jolt' of our assumptions. There is just something not quite right.

Hilary Clinton for example is often perceived as a woman leader in the spotlight whose modus operandi is agentic. This 'agentic' style can be very disconcerting – people are not always comfortable with her leadership style. In January 2008, Hilary allegedly 'cried' while being filmed and Newsweek (7 January 2008) ran a headline "Hilary Tears Up: A touch of the real Hilary". As soon as Hilary Clinton demonstrates a 'chink' of emotion (stereotypical feminine behaviour), the media pounces to reinforce the message, as Newsweek did, that someone holding a Kleenex will not gain entry into the White House. There was almost a sense of relief in the media messages that Hilary had finally displayed some feminine behaviour, some emotion. Rather than the hour of detailed policy discussion that she engaged in up to the point of her 'emotional display', she was presented as a woman, crying.

To highlight the gendered stereotyping of leaders, I want to give some examples of the everyday descriptions used for leaders. They are 'competitive', 'political', 'ambitious', 'driven', 'social', 'tough', 'task focused', 'instrumental', 'passionate' and 'committed;' all positive perceptions for men – but negative descriptions for women. He is ambitious – but there is something quite 'dirty' about an ambitious woman; just something not quite right. He is political but she is manipulative. He is tough, focused, but she is a control freak. He is committed, but she is an obsessed workaholic. He is passionate but she is very emotional. These are some of the different ways that we describe men and women leaders on a daily basis. Communal, emotional, feminine behaviour will not get you into the boardroom. It is not strategically valued; it is not rewarded in women; it is not yet there in our consciousness as a positive leadership style. At the same time, agentic women with masculine behaviour do not conform to men or women's expectations of a woman leader.

What happens in this framework when emotion is introduced? Men gain from dominant, aggressive, independent leadership traits but are also rewarded for demonstrating communal leadership behaviours. The result is that men have the leadership advantage because they have a much broader range of leadership behaviours and displays at their disposal. Men are given recognition for social and emotional skills, whereas women are simply behaving as women (Kelan, 2007). This is what we expect. Men, therefore, are more likely than women to have a positive sense of self-affirmed in performing emotional labour (Lewis and Simpson, 2007) whereas when women leaders express emotion they are deemed irrational, excitable and unstable (Knights and Surman, 2008). Men gain from dominant, assertive behaviour and are rewarded (not penalised) for 'communal' behaviour, they therefore enjoy easier access to range of leader behaviours to fit demands of situation (Eagly and Carli, 2003).

So, the dualisms are there in practice: both men and women expect women leaders to be more nurturing, more giving, more forgiving than men. Agentic women leaders are then insufficiently feminine to satisfy the gender role stereotyping and can often be rejected.

Agentic gendered emotion behaviour is oriented around developmental emotion work – the building and maintaining of relationships, positively associated with leadership. Communal behaviour is undertaken by 'emotion specialists': mothering, care giving and peace-making, which are associated with non-leadership emotion (but still advantageous for men). So, where does this leave agentic women leaders? If you are a woman who holds more of an agentic leadership style, then that 'jolt of assumptions' means that you do not fulfil the expectations of communal behaviour and you are forever letting people down because you are not meeting expectations by engaging in the mothering and nurturing role either. If you are demonstrating agentic gendered emotion behaviours, you will continue to jolt assumptions and continue to either have 'sold out' to fit in or will be seen as too masculine and rejected.

To illustrate this, I have a piece from 'The Times' newspaper from November 2007. This shows how the media have portrayed senior women political leaders with headlines of "After the Blair Babes come the Volupts (ladies of a certain age)", and "Who are the Volupts? Self-styled band of curvaceous women? Or Rare breed of aliens in a hostile environment?" On the other page are the five senior women leaders in politics, along with the headline "Harriet the Plotter and the Not Terribly Secret Chamber of her Old Feminist Friends". These senior women leaders are gendered through the 'mothering and nurturing' assumptions with the headline, "Girlie' issues such as the family are at the

top of the political agenda, partly thanks to a small group of women". The piece includes an interview with Harriet Harman, the only woman to have been in both the 1997 and the 2007 Cabinet, who is constructed not as one of the UK's leading political leaders, but attached to communal feminine behaviours. Harriet Harman resists, commenting "I am a feminist and I am in the labour party because I am a feminist".

5   Discussion and summary

Here, I return to the leadership labyrinth. I am looking down on it or across it – to see the repertoires of emotion management and emotion work that senior women engage in on their leadership journeys. There are different expectations of women's emotionality, women's self management, emotion management and emotion work. There are different expectations of how men and women can 'vent' emotions. For example, women frequently absorb masculine displays of emotion – of shouting, confrontation, posturing, pacing, aggression, territorialism, battle cries, emotionally charged politicking. At the same time, they engage in emotion work to manage their own 'masculine' emotion so that they are not perceived as too aggressive, too intimidating, too driven, too emotional or too unstable. Some senior women engage in emotion management, repressing their 'masculinity' because others expect their leadership interactions to be communal. From my own perspective, it is very confusing when people expect me to mother and nurture in the professional environment. So, some of the questions I am looking to explore are around, how do you navigate through the labyrinth? No one teaches you how; no one really talks about it; you have experiences, you make mistakes, we each have our own scars, we take the wrong turns and some of us exit. Very few women make the right combination of moves first time to land at the centre of power.

I also want to explore further where senior women play out their emotionality and vulnerability – their frustration and their feelings and emotions associated with leadership. What 'outside-inside work' spaces are senior women using to engage in emotion work as means of emotional management? Woman's success as leader therefore, also depends on how well or how poorly she navigates her way through her sexual stereotype and her work competence, and how men and women judge that balancing act. Is she highly skilled in being agentic or communal enough at the right times, in the right places, to navigate, project, establish credibility and gain access to the boardroom?

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