Guest editorial

Theorizing women and leadership. Different spaces, different conversations: theories and practices for these times

We were inspired to issue a call for papers for this special issue in response to our involvement in a global initiative to develop theory around women's leadership. The emergence of this special issue is particularly motivated by the lacuna of research in business and leadership that explicitly seeks to theorise women's leadership, particularly with regard to the intersectionality of women's leadership with alternative forms of organising. We knew that this journal would prove to be an outlet that would welcome papers that implicitly and explicitly questioned the theorisation of women's leadership and also drew attention to the different empirical locations in which women's leadership occurs.

When we issued the call for papers for this special issue, it was in association with the *Theorizing Women and Leadership. Different spaces, different conversations: theories and practices for these times* conference, which took place in May 2017. We designed the conference to develop and progress themes from the theorizing women and leadership global network and made a specific point of engaging with experiential activities and practices that explored alternative modes of theory development. We hoped to encourage critically reflexive submissions that grappled with the intersubjectivity of theory development processes, including the relationship between women's leadership, space and place. We also hoped that submissions would want to explore the intersectionality of women's leadership with new ways of organising and acting for political and social change, emerging from the questions "leadership of/for what [. . ..]?"

In the context of concerns about gender equality and social justice, the ways in which women professionals and leaders learn how to become leaders (Elliott and Stead, 2013), do leadership and develop leadership remains empirically and theoretically under developed. The special issue comprises four papers which have a concern to progress our understandings of women's leadership with the deliberate intent to include the voices of women in leading roles from a range of occupational and organisational settings and contexts. Mariann Hardey's *paper Women's Leadership and Gendered Experiences in Tech Cities* examines the gendered experiences of professional women as they navigate their way across and between dominant cultural boundaries in order to legitimise their knowledge and expertise in the tech city. The paper is located in a new type of place, which Hardey describes as situated at the intersection of digital culture and space. While researchers are engaging with what is "new" in these types of place with regard to relationships, boundaries and identities, less attention has been paid, Hardey argues, to the inequalities which exist at the "intersection of space, mediated contexts and relations enabled by technology". It is in this context that Hardey's paper draws on the accounts of 50 women holding long-term senior roles in organisations in one of the tech cities. Hardey's findings raise important questions about the resilience and pervasiveness of masculine cultures within tech cities and within the tech industry more widely.

Christina Bullock's paper *Driving new narratives: women-leader identities in the automotive industry*, is located in a more established industrial context, but one which stereotypically is not welcoming to women. Having undertaken interviews with 16 women occupying a range of senior roles in the US automotive sector, the study expands our knowledge about women's experiences of their leadership careers as they navigate the dissonance of achieving high positions while being members of a minority group. The paper extends research about women leaders' experiences of corporate environments more

broadly, where traditional views about the gendered division of labour create imbalances of who has power and privilege.

Juliet Ramohai's paper *Women in senior management positions at South African universities: their movement in, and out of, universities* is based in an empirical location more familiar to the majority of this journal's readers. The authors note the lack of attention paid as to why so few women in South African universities remain in senior positions. South African universities suffer from a lack of representation of women at senior levels, so the authors seek to make sense of the narratives and life histories of women who have either held, or are holding, senior university roles. The study's findings indicate that the women interviewed had been subject to bullying and humiliation, and the women felt they were under the constant surveillance of male bosses. The authors conclude that if institutional structures, cultures and practices do not assist women in senior roles, or with aspiration to senior roles, women will continue to leave higher education positions in South Arica.

Leanne Dubzinski, Amy Diehl and Michelle Taylor's paper *Women's ways of leading: the environmental effect* presents a conceptual model to examine how women enact executive leadership. They argue that senior women working in masculine environments, who do not conform to masculine ways of leading, may find it difficult to break through the glass ceiling. It is only in environments with more gender diversity that women leaders have a greater opportunity to "operate from their best authentic selves". The conceptual model, developed by Dubzinski, Diehl and Taylor, provides a framework through which organisations can interrogate their gendered culture. They suggest too how it can be applied in the context of learning and leadership development interventions, including by coaches who work with executive women.

Together, these papers draw attention to the importance of contextually aware research that acknowledges the particular space in which leadership, its practice and challenges are situated. By attending to the different spaces investigated in these articles, we are able to gain an appreciation of issues in common that show the need to continue to press for awareness of gender inequalities in organisations and the relationship with place and space. Importantly, they also reveal greater insight into the "how" of leadership and in so doing help to develop a more detailed understanding of the ways in which gender operates through processes and practices. This, in turn, can reveal the need for further inquiry in those spaces that offer opportunity for social change.

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Further reading

Elliott, C. and Stead, V. (2008), "Learning from leading women's experiences: towards a sociological understanding", *Leadership*, Vol. 4 No. 2, pp. 159-180.