NITA CHERRY AND JOY HIGGS

1. STARTING THE CONVERSATION

The Scope of This Book and Research Approach

This book explores how women in educational institutions experience their leadership work. It responds to calls that such domains of challenging human practice deserve to be considered and understood not only through the lenses provided by existing academic theory, but even more deeply through first hand accounts of what it is like to try to do difficult things and to learn how to do them better. As a result, the book is based on accounts of how women in two different educational settings – universities and secondary schools – have learned to take up authority and how they use it in the context of leadership. Through this research project, we have had the opportunity to talk with 28 women occupying senior roles in education. At the time of the interviews, half of these women were principals of independent secondary schools in Victoria and the others were in professorial and senior leadership roles in Victorian universities.

The conversational interviews were designed to give these courageous women an opportunity to speak freely about how they understand and enact the leadership opportunities that their roles afford them. Their formal roles as chief executive officers and academics are frequently described in policy documents, job descriptions and other elements of the public discourses of their employing organisations. In practice, however, the ways in which these women individually take up and enact the authority and influence possibilities of their roles are frequently different to, and exceed far beyond their position statements, varying over time, shaped by many factors other than the mandates and expectations of their employers.

Our research project sought to "hear inside stories" – meaning both listening to their insider stories of understanding and practice, and really hearing inside their stories – beyond the words spoken, to encounter their experiences, challenges, successes and tribulations. We sought to make their stories both the starting point and the ongoing touchstone for the interpretive work we undertook as researchers. Theory is used inductively to help make further links between the first hand accounts of our participants' lived experiences – their intentions, ideas, feelings and actions – through the interpretations of the researchers and the concepts offered by a range of literatures. There are good reasons to be interested in these inside stories. One is the ambiguity and volatility of the professional practice domains in which such women work. Education at every level is increasingly challenged and stimulated by the range of expectations placed upon it and by rapid changes in the resources upon which it can draw.

Consider, for example the impact of globalisation not just on the interconnectedness of nations, people, organisations and endeavours but also the increased

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international practice standards that demand accountability and raised performance. Alongside and within these performance drivers are unending and escalating technological and information revolutions that make the goals of education subject to rapid liquid change and the task of educational leaders a perpetual battle to stay on top of the opportunities as well as the demands such changes bring. Further, while educational systems strive with utmost dedication to ensure the soundness of the acts, experiences and outcomes of learning and teaching, these same systems and their leaders are increasingly becoming educational market managers, and frequently victims, of educational commodification, as they face tasks of marketing, competition, student attraction to their products and program packaging experts.

The face of educational literature has changed to keep up with practice and system changes. We see, for instance, the emergence of new discourses about leadership under the emergent, messy and contradictory dimensions of complexity (e.g. Stacey, 2012). Another literature focus is on the continuing urgency of concerns to understand gendered differences in leadership practice (see Bostok, 2014). Our participants would strongly support this recommendation. Indeed, many of these developments in educational leadership and directions significantly challenge the ways in which we understand leadership in contexts, well beyond those of education: in corporations, government at all levels, the third sector, military and community settings. Juntrasook et al. (2013) have explored the extent of this challenge of understanding leadership in context, noting the unhelpful ways in which both academic and popular literatures tackle the expectations and formal mandates associated with leadership roles.

These expectations, they suggest, routinely oversimplify the complexities that face contemporary leaders and overestimate the control that individuals actually have over their practice worlds. They echo the comments of Gronn and Ribbins (1996) who famously observed twenty years ago that leadership theorists, not just organisations, have always attached great and exaggerated significance to the agency of individual

leaders. In contrast, framing of leadership from complexity perspectives more often couches it in terms of influence, rather than control (Stacey, 2012).

The complexity argument is that it is the variable, highly contextual and socially negotiated dimensions of leadership practice from which we have most to learn. This is strikingly different from the preoccupation in the leadership literatures with trying to find a generic set of characteristics of effective leaders – and a catalogue of successful practices for them to use – that can be simply and un-reflexively transferred from one context to another. We have found this complexity argument a vital aspect of study in our research. Women who have succeeded (in the traditional sense) and triumphed in the face of today's academic worlds' challenges and complexities, do so by internal control and control of their environment, not just by the acquisition of accepted, generic leadership characteristics and management and survival of the influences impacting on their working environments.

Perspectives that recognise the ambiguity, volatility and complexity of leadership work call for recognition of leadership practice as being continuously embodied, improvised, adjusted and co-created, in ways that are often unconscious, spontaneous and unacknowledged. If this is the nature of practice, it has some important implications for research. One implication is to step away from the preoccupation with theoretical constructions based on the grand narratives of transformational and charismatic leadership that have dominated the literature for the last twenty-five years. This new approach requires researchers to move towards inductive, open-minded approaches to the study of leadership practice and blending the critical and creative (Higgs & Horsfall, 2010). And increasingly, researchers who recognise the complexities of contemporary practice advocate research methods that attempt to capture the subjectivities of practitioners themselves and the range of ways in which their experiences and understandings are expressed (Cherry, 2010; Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012; Higgs & Cherry, 2010).

Why write a book about women in education? Women are represented in higher, secondary and primary education in Australia in significant proportions. Education is a very significant industry in terms of employment, and in terms of social as well as economic impact. But this is not simply a question of numbers. In *Women at Cambridge: The Meaning of Success*, Bostok (2014) offers a compelling glimpse of what could be possible if many more women were able to participate fully in their workplaces. She explored the perceptions of a diverse group of women at Cambridge University who were nominated by their peers as being successful, where success was defined as making an important positive difference to their working environment. Bostok argues that fully inclusive workplaces are good for men as well as women, creating environments in which everyone can thrive, do their best work and align their working lives with the things that matter to them beyond work. Her concern is to move debate from its current focus on trying to fix the problem of women at work to a more sophisticated exploration of what it takes to create constructive workplaces that bring out the best in everyone. Our book is based on a similar aspiration. And like Bostok, we see this capacity as a key dimension of leadership work itself. By understanding how women have gone about creating positive differences in

educational environments, our goal is to stimulate more comprehensive conversations in many other workplaces.

THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND THE CULTURE OF INQUIRY

In the light of what has been described so far, we focussed the interview conversations with our participants around their experiences and choices rather than directing them around particular theories or views of how these women would respond. Our broad research questions were:

- How do senior women in universities and schools describe their experiences of exercising leadership in their workplace?
- How do they take up formal mandates to lead and/or mandate themselves to lead?
- How do their accounts resonate with accounts of practice as messy and complex?
- What do their stories suggest about gendered social practices, and the relationships and networks in which they were working?

These questions guided the design as well as the focus of the study. The interview conversations were created by the following questions. They sought to open up the participants' thinking about their professional practice. We were basing this approach on the position that practice is a complex phenomenon and experience. In dealing with these complexities practitioners typically operate at a highly automatic level in relation to many regularities of practice, leaving their conscious thinking and strategising to focus on unusual, critical and very difficult practice tasks. To bring the diverse aspects of practice to their minds and allow them to articulate both what they did and why in their work roles, we developed practical questions and prompted them to tell the stories of their practice. Similar strategies have been used in our other research projects such as Joy's research on practice wisdom (Higgs, 2016) and Nita's research on policing (2014). In this project we asked the participants:

- What is your (academic/work) role?
- What are your responsibilities?
  Could you give an example of how you influenced an outcome or a decision before you had "positional" power? What strategies did you engage? Why do you think you were successful or unsuccessful?
- For your current position please give one example of a time when you successfully influenced an outcome or decision by "lateral" means. What was the work or meeting or other setting for this incident? Why do you think you were successful?
  For your current position please give one example of when you were unsuccessful in influencing significant outcomes. What was the work or meeting or other setting for the incident? Why do you think you were unsuccessful in this case?
- In the last 10 years what factors have impacted on your willingness and ability to take up leadership roles in the organisations you have worked for?
- Do you experience gender differences being a dynamic in the leadership work that you do and if so how do you experience it?

These questions proved to be very useful in encouraging the participants to reflect and understand their practices and underlying rationales. They were comfortable telling stories of their roles and leadership experiences.

OUR READINGS

This is an inductive study and the stories of our participants are offered as our interpretations or first readings of the data, for which we take responsibility, acknowledging that other readings are possible. Our readings are inevitably selective but we sought to stay with the participants' language and descriptions. A useful word to describe what we have done is the curation of stories, both large and small: selecting from the material to create arrangements of data and narratives that stimulated and challenged our reflections and interpretations. In turn, our readings can provide a stimulus for the reflection and thinking of others. Different selections and arrangements would create very different possibilities for further thinking. This sort of curation also opens up very many possible ways of engaging with theory. A range of different theoretical frameworks that cross several different disciplines can be used as a series of lenses to highlight different aspects of the texts created through the curations.

The use of plot discourse analysis suggested by Juntrasook et al. (2013) not only turns attention to the socially negotiated and contextual dimensions of leadership practice, but also to what they argue has been marginalised by research on academic leadership: those who are not in formal roles of leadership but who enact leadership at a range of levels within educational institutions. We have tried to create active plot lines, meaning that we are not just creating laundry lists (here is a thing, and here's another thing) or piling up a series of snap shots. Our intention has been to create a sense of how people's practices develop over time, of intense engagement with practice situations, whether in times of crisis or more mundane experiences that nonetheless shape practice.

The intention of the presentation of the stories is to open up lines for further exploration and inquiry, rather than offer findings based on rigid codes and categories. In this sense, the presentation is meant to be suggestive rather than definitive. For the same reason, it has not been our intention to resolve or smooth out inconsistencies or tensions in the data. Indeed, we have been keen to retain the messiness and contradictions of practice stories. In these ways we explore what women say about their practice experiences of leading in educational contexts, and explore how they understand themselves as leaders. We seek to capture their subjectivities and the range of ways in which their experiences and understandings are expressed. And we explore how the women's practitioner selves are constructed through telling their stories.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

Chapters Two and Three of this book present the voices of the women, first in the academy and then in the schools, with a minimum of interpretation. The material is grouped under some broad headings but the intention was not to distil or reduce the voices of the women but rather to represent the full range of what they shared with us.

Chapter Two describes the varied and significant roles, contributions and achievements of the university women and represents what they said had motivated them to try to influence things and to make a difference in their university settings. It also describes the range of ways in which they have developed the bases or foundations on which they can be influential.

The chapter goes on to present the specific ways in which they have gone about being influential, either in face-time encounters with others or more indirectly, over time and at a distance. The chapter also describes the challenges they have experienced as they sought to establish and exercise influence. Some of these challenges specifically concerned issues of gender. The themes in this chapter directly reflect the first three drivers of the research project: to understand how these women choose to describe their experiences of exercising workplace leadership; how they say they take up both formal and informal mandates to lead; and how they experience differences in positional and non-positional leadership practice.

Chapter Three does a similar thing in relation to the voices of school principals, beginning with a description of their working settings, roles and contributions. It describes why leading schools has been important to them; how they have developed their leadership base for being influential in their schools; and how they have tackled challenges in exercising leadership, including those related to gender. Chapter Four explores the dimensions of leadership itself, beginning with an overview of some of the ways in which leadership is commonly understood, and then comparing these with the ways in which the school principals and academics describe leadership. Across their conversations with us, they discussed the attributes and capabilities of leaders, based on their experiences and observations rather than on theory or book-reading.

Between them, the women generated a range of leadership dimensions that are aspirational for any one person but represent a catalogue of the various attributes of leadership that might be useful in particular situations. The chapter then moves to an exploration of the actual choices that these women have made about the leadership work they undertake, and how those choices are negotiated and enacted in actual practice settings. The chapter concludes with a statement of leadership as a field of practice activity that incorporates the knowing, doing, being and becoming dimensions of professional practice.

Chapter Five presents some specific examples of an influencing strategy that, intriguingly, was used but never named, by many women we interviewed. Changing frames is a powerful way of inviting a group to "look again" at what they think they see, know and understand. It can create discomfort, even anger, as at least one story in this chapter relates, by upsetting the status quo of power, status and perceived order. It can also create fresh possibilities for consideration and action, re-kindling energy, offering new solutions to problems or even changing what is thought of as a problem.

The interesting thing about changing frames is that it can be accomplished without carefully constructed intellectual arguments, or comprehensive processes of consultation, but by simply changing seating arrangements, adding a new agenda item that gets regular attention, or inviting new people into existing conversations. Changing frames can be made explicit and important, but equally it can be subversive, subtle and

modest. That so many women offered very clear examples of it but did not classify or announce it, might well say something about the ways in which women lead.

In Chapter Six, leadership work is put in a broader context, understood in terms of the many different hats that senior women in universities and schools wear. The diversity of these roles is explored in terms of the skills and insights used to prioritise and manage the time and effort that is committed to each of these roles over time. Contributions explored include teamwork, program management, research programs, system leadership, student supervision, mentoring and role modelling, communicating, and external representation and liaison.

One of the key aspects of leadership practice is the way in which an individual chooses to take up and exercise authority. Chapter Seven is concerned with the negotiated and contested dynamics of authority, calling up the messy, often unconscious and gendered dynamics of leadership. Accounts of leadership in much academic and popular literature simplify and rationalise leadership theory and practice, overstating the agency of leaders and their capacity to understand and control the increasingly complex environments which impact upon them and their organisations. By contrast, these practice-based accounts reflect the politics, the competitions, and the constantly evolving and contested nature of authority in organisational settings. Most popular and academic accounts of leadership also focus on people in public or organisational life who occupy roles right at the top of organisations, so it is inevitable that they more frequently describe the ways that men take up authority. This chapter explores the accounts of women who have grappled over many years with the messy and contested dimensions of using authority, and with the consequences of challenging traditional cultural norms that both men and some women use to reinforce the authority practices of men and challenge the right of women to be authoritative in the same ways as men.

Chapter Eight continues to explore some of the themes raised in previous chapters, which alerted us to the many different ways in which leaders can attempt to influence the behaviour of others and the events, environments and processes that shape their practice. This plays out in their efforts to exert influence either in face-to-face situations or at a distance, in real-time or over time, with small numbers of people or many. We also glimpsed in previous chapters some of the challenges involved.

This chapter further explores the challenging dynamics of engagement suggested by the academic women's accounts of face-to-face situations. They were very aware of many aspects of real time influence dynamics, and mentioned them in the context of challenging encounters that very often involved men. This led quite a few to speculate about the deep drivers of practices that appear to be gender-based and reflect entrenched habits of both women and men.

Reading of the transcripts led to the conclusion that many women are well aware of the real-time dynamics they associate with both male and female behaviour, but prefer to take their concerns and assumptions about what is going on off-line during actual conversations, preferring instead to find ways of working around the difficulties that real-time encounters present them with. Only a very few spoke about actually confronting or naming the troublesome dynamics in real time. One possible implication of this is that women must not only deal with the discrepancy between

what they would like to happen and what is actually happening, but they must also work harder after the encounter to achieve their goals in other ways. The other issue explored in this chapter is the difference in real time behaviours that seem to emerge when reading the individual accounts of those academics in executive roles with the accounts of academics whose authority was less clearly defined. These accounts strongly suggest that having significant formal authority that is recognised by others enabled these academics to enact a number of very effective strategies in real time, regardless of whether they were dealing with men or women.

Chapter Nine unpacks more detail in relation to one particular hat worn by the school principals. This group were very clear that as well as being CEOs, they saw themselves as directly leading the learning of girls. For all of them, this was a passion and deep commitment. They believed that they were role models to their students, seeing it as particularly important for girls to observe women in leadership roles. And they were keen to explain how they had come to hold that view of their roles.

Most of the women in this group headed up single sex girls' schools and they emphasised their commitment to supporting girls' life-long success. However, the principals of co-educational schools in our sample shared these beliefs. All principals were concerned about the girls' futures after they left secondary school, and described the newer ways they were thinking about, and actually implementing, to support girls to continue achieving their potential as adults.

Chapter Ten provides compelling evidence of the principals' concerns about gender practices among school leaders. Most of them related specific anecdotes about the differences in the way they have seen men and women leaders of schools behaving, even now when they are senior leaders themselves, mingling with senior men and women leaders at conferences. Along the way, they had encountered and had to deal with leadership environments that when dominated by men have taken on an uncompromising "blokiness" that has been relatively intolerant of different styles. Ironically, however, one of the major motivators for these women in wanting to help young women become strong leaders is actually the behaviour of women, including some women leaders, whom they perceive to collude in supporting male power behaviour. Most of these women have been in the system for some time and having grown up with male and female gendered leadership practices, were very alert to unconscious acceptance that women should adopt more feminine modes of authority and not challenge the status quo in ways that make them, and the men, uncomfortable.

Chapter Eleven explores educational settings as contested spaces that can be fraught with challenges brought about by constant and often conflicting changes. From the accounts that were offered to us, taking on a leadership role and performing its challenging tasks was seen as a space that requires courage, particularly for women. Courage is manifest in action, decisions and assertive behaviours that look admirable and leader-like in men, but can be criticised as being aggressive in women. In a world where *easy* is rare, perseverance is also thought to be a key role in achieving leadership goals and pursuing challenging tasks, whether self or system imposed. Most of the women who spoke with us were also clear that trying to survive leadership work on one's own is very difficult over the long haul.

Having support networks of peers who are walking the same path and engaging with the same challenges provides the support of someone who knows what it is like to lead (in good times and bad) and someone who can share ways of coping and succeeding that have been learned from actual practice. Support networks can also include the people who report to leaders. There is a great advantage in having networks and colleagues who are outside the immediate workplace and the employing institution's communication space, and beyond that institution's power consequences. Having such people, trusted friends and professional support and development companions is vital in enabling leaders to survive and sustain energy.

Continuing the themes of the previous chapter, Chapter Twelve uses the concept of emotional labour to further explore significant strains involved in undertaking leadership work. Emotional labour means limiting or hiding spontaneous feelings like anger, irritation, nervousness, sadness, or delight and excitement. In some situations, employees are expected to modify the extent of their feelings or express them in ways that are culturally acceptable to their organisation, colleagues, clients and other stakeholders. And in others, they might have to pretend to be friendly, optimistic, interested, or calm.

Commentators on emotional labour make the point that although significant work is involved, often this is not acknowledged or explicitly rewarded by employers, for several reasons. Sometimes successful and sustained emotional effort is mistaken for so-called "soft skills" or "emotional intelligence" that it is assumed come easily or naturally to the person. If, over time emotional work becomes more difficult, then work that could once be readily accomplished through reasonable skill, turns into work that requires considerable emotional effort and strain. Or it might be that organisational culture prohibits the acknowledgment of emotional labour, so that it becomes undiscussable or even out of awareness. Some would argue that this is most likely to happen when there are significant power differentials in play, so that some portion of the workforce takes on labour that is not expected of others.

Some of the emotional work that women take on in organisational settings is of this kind. We observed in their accounts that a significant number of the women leaders – both academics and school principals – in this study regularly undertake emotional labour, and they realise that they are doing it, and that it is not valued or supported, yet they collude with the power dynamics that generate it.

Chapter Thirteen concludes the book by exploring three questions: Where does practice wisdom fit in relation to educational leadership? How does it relate to women in educational leadership? How do women in senior educational positions understand and develop leadership wisdom? Each of these questions opens up intriguing territory, inspired by the subtle and elusive notion of phronesis or practical wisdom, valued by ancient society and still relevant and powerful today. The women in our study have been engaged for decades – and are still engaged – in a domain of practice that inherently demands constant re-negotiation, that is emergent and arguably complex. Educational leadership is never going to be an easy ride in a world of liquid modernity which entails accelerating understanding of how learning might happen but not how to make it happen. And it is not easy in the context of the domination of the market models of educational funding and delivery including the commodification of learning

and teaching. The idea of practice wisdom in connection with educational leadership offers not only a powerfully and refreshingly different way of understanding the experiences, opportunities and dilemmas of our academics and school principals, but creates a portal for readers of this book to step into this space themselves.

You might have had experiences that resonate in some way with those of the women who participated in our study. Your experiences might be quite different, located in times and places that bear little resemblance to what you have read about in these pages. We invite you, nonetheless, to consider what part does practice wisdom play, and whether it is valued, in your experiences so far in education and leadership. How might your own practice be inspired and illuminated by a desire or curiosity to engage wisely? How might educational leadership by men as well as women, be enhanced by appreciating the role that practice wisdom can play?

We hope that the honesty and wisdom of the women we spoke with, and in turn shared with you, will provide many fruitful triggers for your own practice journey.

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