Researching Leadership Space: Women Leaders in Kenya

This research conceives of women’s leadership as a negotiated space, and explores the lived reality of women leaders in community-based organisations in Kenya.

As the majority of leadership theories seem to be geographically, sectorally, and gender biased, in general they provide us with a male model of leadership derived from business and military origins, from the Global North. (Odhiambo & Mitullah 2010:12-13; James 2005; Fowler et al 2002). When we in Northern Europe learn and practice leadership ourselves, we do not usually pay attention to the ontological and epistemological foundations of these theories, but they do affect the manner in which we frame and research leadership (Kempster and Parry 2011), above all in the context of civil society, and in the context of countries outside the Global North.

This research used Grounded Theory, and is based on a critical realist ontology. It draws on the concept of interpellation (Althusser 1971 cited in Briggs 2007); on the Strategic Relational Approach (Jessop 2005; Hay 2002); on the concepts of space, place and time; and on my own model. It aims to uncover how women leaders conceptualise, enact and experience their leadership in connection to their womanhood, and explore whether there are relationships between these concepts as experienced by the women in their work and home contexts. This research is located in Western Kenya, however the methodological approach, based on a critical realist ontology, is, I argue, of wide applicability.

It begins by uncovering the principal leadership conceptualisations prevailing in Kenyan society, and how they do or do not “interpellate” women as leaders. (Louis Althusser 1971 cited in Briggs 2007). I have tried to tease out the current conceptualisations of leadership by the women leaders from their enactment and experience, while recognising that these very conceptualisations are informed and constructed by prior conceptualisations, enactments and experiences of both the women and the many other actors in her society known and unknown to her.

Then it examines the effect of societal structures and changes of context on women’s agency, and demonstrates how some women are able to strategize and act to negotiate leadership space in their community and in their homes, while others are not.

This approach demonstrates how these leaders, embedded though they may be in their environments, still do have the capacity to reflect on change. I argue that the leaders are strategic actors, able to make decisions affecting their own lives and the lives of their beneficiaries and colleagues while balancing the demands of their near and extended family. For example, being a part of a village and/or tribal structure, the leader may feel obliged to provide favours to people from his or her village, even if such actions were contrary to the goals of their organisation.

Finally this research concludes that rigour and the art of leadership research and of leadership development programmes (LDP) for women leaders lies firstly in being contextually situated, in local
lived reality. It should focus on increasing awareness of self as being situated within, but separate from society. The curriculum and pedagogy of LDPs should focus primarily on co-constructive critical thinking rather than on taught problem solving skills alone. Through a critical co-constructive approach, my research suggests that the women leaders will be more able to negotiate the enlargement and the nature of their leadership space, and negotiate increased opportunities to perform leadership, as she herself chooses to define it, in place of reproducing leadership performances that do not take account of her contextualised situation, nor the fuller aspects of her identity as a woman leader who is actively in pursuit of societal goals.

By linking this perspective with the contrast between “banking education” vs. “problem-posing education” which stimulates critical reflection [Freire 1971], I argue that LDPs may be able to empower these leaders beyond teaching them the skills to do their work more efficiently, towards a critical awareness of their position relative to competing domains.

My research group was composed of people who were either in a Leadership Development Programme (LDP), on their way to a LDP, or had been on a LDP. In the first phase I was researched men and women community leaders, and in the second phase I concentrated on women leaders only, as the issues they faced emerged as the more complex and pressing. As my research progressed, I completed and moved on from the more positivist task of evaluating leadership training, in favour of understanding the experience of leadership, and I began to engage in a more co-constructive research process. As a result, I and we, perceived different conceptualisations and strategies at play, many of which enlarged agency, and deployed different strategies in different contexts.

This research confirms that it is not easy to maintain a boundary for these leaders between their personal lives and their professional lives as leaders. They are expected to provide for their families and extended families through patronage and diverse forms of help, if not jobs then information leading to jobs and to educational opportunities. This does, however, eat away at the time the leader has to focus on the goals of the organisation. The expectation to benefit one’s community or family can challenge the leaders’ values set. Given the context of poverty, is understandable.

(Non-) Interpellation of Women into Leadership

Using Louis Althusser’s concept of interpellation (1971), this research suggests that different contexts affect both the interpellation and condition the rules and factors that influence interpellation in different leadership arenas. e.g. home, education, church, politics.

My research concludes that women leaders are more likely to feel interpellated into leadership roles in church, and higher education arenas, than in politics. This tendency seems due to the overlap between the conceptualisation of womanhood and the foci of responsibilities in these arenas. That is to say, in church roles there is a high overlap with the caring image that I observed as being central to societal conceptualisations of womanhood. In education, there appeared to be a strong overlap between the responsibilities of teachers and women in the sense of raising children. In higher academic circles, women appeared more likely to be accepted as leaders if they were perceived as having excellent academic qualifications, and if they presented themselves as first and foremost being happy and fulfilled in their roles as wives and mothers.
To be a woman leader she must be perceived as morally upright, but a woman cannot be perceived as morally upright if she is not married. On the other hand, once married, it appears that in their congested lives, and in the social norms of labour division of their society, the woman leader had so many responsibilities related to husband, home and children, that there was very little time available to be a leader. It appeared as if it was a catch 22 situation.

Secondly, where an unmarried women is enacting her leadership according to how she conceptualises her leadership, other women may not take directions from this leader on the grounds that she is an unmarried person with no children and therefore she has, Salome said, “Who is she to give me instructions when she cannot even win a husband or have children, she is not a good woman and therefore I will not let her be my leader”. Thus it appears that the definition of good womanhood and good leadership do not sit together easily in the western Kenyan context.

**Critical Co-Constructive Research and Education**

I agree with Kempster and Parry’s 2011 proposal that “applying a critical realist frame of reference to grounded theory research can augment the strengths of the Grounded Theory method”(Kempster and Parry 2011:117).

I wished to develop a methodology which reflected a critical realist ontology, which would enable me to trace the empirical, real and actual factors which underlie visible and less visible realities. I also wanted my research process to be consistent with my ultimate desire for this research to be useful in improving leadership development programmes for women leaders. Therefore my preference was to co-construct the knowledge that emerges from this research, in co-operation with the women who participated in this project. The knowledge would ideally emerge by jointly analysing the (anonymised) data through the lens of the SRA model, in small group settings.

I preferred this co-constructive research methodology, because I believe that its more equal relationship is respectful of women leaders and researcher; that the women leaders hold much of the knowledge themselves, consciously or unconsciously; and that with some process facilitation, they can begin or make a preliminary analysis of the data themselves, or at the very least, be able to critique, add to, or support, my own analysis of the data. This would increase the quality of the research outcomes. The process of knowledge co-construction (including the control involved in analysis/interpretation), enacts a research relationship in which power is shared with the respondents, whose lives are being described and possible affected by this research. Lastly, as befits research concerning leadership development, in a co-constructive process the learning benefits are shared.

1500 words excluding title and Bibliography
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