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**Title:** Collaborative Theory-Building on Women’s Leadership: An Exercise towards Responsible Leadership

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This paper discusses a collaborative process designed to stimulate theory-building about women’s leadership which we propose as a model for responsible leadership practice. The authors reflect on the experience of engaging in the process and how it stimulates critique of dominant leadership approaches that assume a top-down hierarchy, and limited engagement with stakeholders. We examine how the women’s leadership theory-building process design, based on principles of inclusivity and enquiry, offers potential for a model of leadership practice that is more distributed and less hierarchical, so enabling a responsible and more relevant approach to the complexity of contemporary leadership. Our contribution is twofold: 1) to illustrate how we can draw on a design for emergent theory building about women’s leadership to inform processes of responsible leadership practice, and 2) to propose a model of leadership development that attends to the facilitation and enabling of dialogue towards ethical decision-making, which recognizes the need to balance a diversity of claims.

Theoretical context
We draw on Maak’s (2007) exploration of responsible leadership in a global stakeholder society as a relational and inherently moral practice as a foundation for our reflexive exploration. Responsible leadership, Maak suggests, differs from traditional leader-follower understandings of leadership by recognizing how leaders must manage and deal with the moral complexity resulting from multiple relationships with relevant stakeholders. Responsible leadership is dynamic, requiring pro-active engagement with stakeholders. This involves facilitating and enabling dialogue towards ethical decision-making that attends to and balances a diversity of claims. Inevitably, Maak writes, this process will involve dealing with complex moral dilemmas that emerge from different socio-cultural contexts and value bases. Responsible leadership thus has ethics at its core (Ciulla, 1998), and it follows that we view leadership as a social-relational and ethical phenomenon that takes place in sites of social interaction (Maak and Pless, 2006). In spite of significant interest in leadership and its practice in a global society, there is however limited research that examines ways in which responsible leadership might be developed and sustained (Maak, 2007). This paper draws on the experience of a collaborative theory building exercise around women’s leadership experiences as a means to propose a model that facilitates and enables dialogue that allows for inclusive processes to attend to competing and diverse stakeholder claims.
Collaborative theory-building

This collaborative exercise formed part of a larger approach to generate and advance theories of women and leadership. The design, developed by women’s leadership scholar Susan Madsen in conjunction with research theorists Julia Storberg-Walker, Susan Lynam, and Ann Austin, was developed in recognition of a dearth of critical research on women’s experiences of leadership. The dominance of leadership theory based on the male experience has resulted in a lack of work that attends to the theorizing of women’s leadership and that sustains a dominant male leadership discourse (Calas and Smircich, 1996; Lamsa and Sintonen, 2001; Stead and Elliott, 2009). The collaborative theory-building model, intended as a means to address a gap in women’s leadership theorizing, aimed to bring together multiple perspectives from researchers working in diverse areas connected to women’s leadership. Core to the model is a focus on leadership as process; illuminating its dynamic and shifting nature (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011). Also implicit in the model design is the notion of leadership as ‘responsible’, accounting for and accountable to multiple stakeholders. This attention to inclusivity across disciplines and views challenges normative approaches to thinking about and developing leadership that are typically leader-centric (Jackson and Parry, 2008), hence drawing on limited experiences and perspectives which tend to (re)produce dominant ways of thinking about and practice of leadership (Stead and Elliott, 2009).

Reflections on the collaborative exercise

The empirical foundation for our exploration is our participation in this collaborative exercise as members of a ‘collaboratory’ formed to focus on the phenomenon of second generation gender bias.

Tasked to identify actions to develop avenues of research and theory on this topic, we reflect on our experience of participating in the exercise and of working as co-collaborators. We will draw attention to the diversity of cultural backgrounds, social contexts and work purposes that motivate each member of the collaborator. For example we observe how those focusing on developing women’s leadership development practice help to ground theory by examining what ideas mean in practice. Conversely we reflect how academics concerned primarily with concept development bring value to connecting ‘macro’ ideas of power and gender to everyday micro practice and policy. We also discuss the impact of working with a
group of people previously unknown to each other. We reflect how this encourages dialogue that is more probing and questioning with attention to understanding and unearthing assumptions that underpin individuals’ ideas. Adopting this reflexive approach illuminates how decision-making involves negotiating multiple and potentially conflicting values and concerns.

Towards a model of responsible leadership
Identifying the processes used to accomplish this task within our collaboratory, we detail a series of iterative processes that combine to illustrate a model of responsible leadership practice. These include using epistemic objects such as frameworks or theories to position ourselves and our values in relation to the task, and to enable dialogue as a means to resolve competing interests and ethical dilemmas. Reflecting the neglect in the literature of alternate views, this collaborative exercise aimed to offer an inclusive process to allow for alterity and difference. As such the exercise therefore acts as a stimulus for exploring fresh ways to think about and to practise leadership.

We conclude the paper by summarising how this example of women’s theorizing about women’s leadership can model possible processes for responsible leadership theory and practice by: a) outlining the practices and processes mobilized within a collaborative theory building process including the adoption of a reflexive approach to elicit agendas, concerns and perspective, and b) an emphasis on dialogue as a complex and enabling process to include and manage multiple agendas.

References


