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What is This?
Discourses of Leadership: Gender, Identity and Contradiction in a UK Public Sector Organization

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Abstract This article explores leadership as a discursive phenomenon. It examines contemporary discourses of leadership and their complex inter-relations with gender and identity in the UK public sector. In particular, it focuses on various ways in which managers' identities are constructed within discourse, produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies (Hall, 1996). Drawing from interviews with senior managers employed in a large UK local authority, this article researches the dominant discourses of modernization and the primacy afforded to discourses of leadership in the council. It explores first how these discourses become part of managerial workplace identities, and second, what other discourses help to shape managers' identities. Contradiction, discursive production, plurality and ambiguity feature heavily in the analysis of these managers. Accordingly, the article questions dominant hegemonic and stereotypical notions of subjectivity that assume a simple, unitary identity and perpetuate androcentric depictions of organizational life.

Keywords discourses; gender; identity; leadership; poststructuralist feminist perspectives

Introduction

This article examines the dominant discourses of modernization and leadership within a UK local government context and explores how these have become part of managerial workplace identities. Both mainstream management literature and government and organizational policy bear witness to an increasing and escalating interest in effective leadership as the means to secure employee commitment and thereby enhance organizational performance and the achievement of ever-demanding goals and targets. There is a growing imperative within public sector organizations generally to demonstrate better leadership by delivering efficiency and effectiveness, through organizational performance assessment frameworks and targets (Collinson & Grint, 2005; Davies & Thomas, 2001; Exworthy & Halford, 1999; Ferlie et al., 1999; Ford, 2005; Pollitt, 1993).
Work organizations are a central arena for the contested site of identity and both management practitioners and academics alike are recognizing its prominence (Foldy, 2002). The research that informs this study suggests that the experiences of managers in the crafting of their identities are complex, multifarious, contradictory and ambiguous. The aim of this article is to analyse critically not only how competing discourses of leadership are to be found in the day-to-day narratives of those employed in senior management positions in a UK local government setting, but also to expose the fragmented, contradictory and androcentric nature of leadership identities and discourses. It explores how even managers who are receptive to the latest models of leadership promulgated through the modernization discourse also carry with them other ways of doing management and leadership and other ways of ‘being’ within the organization. Central to this article is the adoption of a post-structuralist feminist methodological approach, which is used to enable fresh light to be shed on leadership theories. Poststructural feminist thinking throws a challenge to the concept of the unified and coherent individual of western philosophical tradition of the disembodied subject governed by conscious and rational thought. Instead, it seeks to deconstruct the hegemonic assumptions of whole and coherent subjects with a unified sense of identity, and to draw attention to the shifting, complex and at times contradictory subject positions and the plurality of subjectivities (Weedon, 1997).

This article is divided into three main sections. The following section provides an overview of notions of identity, discourse and gender and their complex relationship to leadership discourses. This is followed by discussion of the context within which the current study is based. The third section provides an analysis and discussion based on an empirical study within the local government case study organization, so as to explore how leadership discourses merge with other discourses and subject positions for these managers, thus reinforcing the extraordinary complexity of organizational life.

Identity, discourse and gender

There has been a striking turn to and critique of the exploration of identity and ‘projects of the self’ in contemporary writing within social theory. The more recent explosion of ideas has triggered an avalanche of interest in studies of identity across the disciplines of philosophy, anthropology, social sciences and psychology (Bauman, 2001; Collinson, 2003; Hall, 1996). Du Gay (1996: 9) proposes a definition of identity as ‘a person’s sense of who they are’, while others proffer an account that appears to establish meaning by defining identity in relation to the self, subjectivity and identity. Among others, Roseneil and Seymour (1999) refer to the recent rediscovery of identity by social and cultural theorists. They remind us of the significant history of interest in identity formation and construction within sociology and social psychology, particularly with the tradition of symbolic interactionism and, most notably, the work of Mead and Goffman.

This growing focus on identities has been taken up in organizational studies in two ways. The first of these approaches focuses on how workplace practices contribute to the constitution of the identities of organization members (du Gay, 1996), how organizations may achieve greater control through the coercive construction of
subordinated identities (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Collinson, 2003; Kondo, 1990) and how organizational members themselves may construct differentiated identities through oppositional practices (Collinson, 1992). The second approach starts from the standpoint of organizations themselves having identities, and explores ways in which these identities may be identified and categorized, constructed, maintained and controlled. It is the former approach that provides the focus for this article.

Within the more recent theorizing on identities, two main strands have been identified (Roseneil & Seymour, 1999: 4): a social theory strand and a poststructuralist strand. Both these strands offer alternative ways of articulating identity. The social theory strand offers a historicized narrative of the development of identity conceptualized as self-identity, as the individual’s conscious sense of self (Giddens, 1991). It attempts to anchor our sense of self in the maelstrom of social life, to create ontological security in a world of rapid change and to enable individuals to construct for themselves their biographical narratives. In Giddens’s terms (1991: 75) the self becomes a reflexive project: ‘we are not what we were but what we make of ourselves’.

The poststructuralist strand, in contrast, offers insight into the problematic of identity and cultural difference and the theoretical deconstruction of identity categories, notably the significance of power in the construction of identity through difference. This perspective takes the constructivist position of social theory into deconstructionist directions. Poststructuralist approaches recognize the significance of context and the role and power of discourse in shaping organizational and social practices. As Delbridge and Ezzamel (2005) attest:

> the constructive role of language is perhaps the defining characteristic that distinguishes poststructuralist literature from other intellectual approaches . . . where attention shifts decidedly towards an appreciation of the power of language in constituting the world, in the sense that language/discourse is taken as the means by which human actors engage, make sense of and construct the world. (p. 607)

Precisely because identities are constructed within not outside discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies. Identities can be regarded as the meeting point in discourses and practices in which we position ourselves as the social subjects of particular discourses. Thus discourses and related discursive practices form the means through which individuals’ identities are crafted. From a Foucauldian perspective, the exercise of power, the production of knowledge and institutional practices combine together to produce multiple, overlapping and contradictory discourses which in turn create different kinds of subjectivities (Hall, 1996). These discourses offer subject positions for individuals to take up and the positions (identities, behaviours, ways of seeing the world) vary in terms of the power they offer individuals. Some of these subject positions are long term, while others are momentary and temporary, and in this way our identities are in constant flux, depending on the changing positions we take up or resist.

Poststructuralist approaches also challenge the humanist conception of the unified essential subject. Hall (1996) posits that within poststructuralist accounts of identity,
there is no essential, true or pre-social self, but that identities are constituted or performatively enacted through the subject positions made available to us in language or under cultural codes. He argues that identities are fragmented and fractured, multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions, constantly in the process of change and transformation. Drawing on Saussure and Derrida, Hall stresses the claim that identities are constructed through and not outside, difference, and as a consequence, are inherently unstable, divided and haunted by the liminal presence of the ‘Others’ from whom they seek to distinguish themselves.

This approach challenges the coherent, distinct, unitary and core sense of self that is frequently assumed in mainstream organization studies of identities. Proponents of a poststructuralist approach argue that we do not possess a homogeneous identity but many contradictory selves that form a heterogeneous process rather than a fixed state (Sarup, 1996). As Roseneil and Seymour (1999) suggest, poststructuralist theories:

emphasise the instability, fluidity, fragmentary and processual character of identities. They reject the idea that there exists some ‘ontologically intact reflexivity to the subject, which pre-exists the subject’s placing in a cultural context’ (Butler, 1992: 12) and instead regard the subject as constituted through discourse. (p. 4)

Whatever semblance of unity there may be in our subjectivity ‘it is embodied and performed as a choreography of many levels into one socially operational self’ (Braidotti, 2002: 160). Drawing on the impact of psychoanalysis on the subject, Braidotti argues that it is the unconscious self that undoes the stability of the unitary subject by constantly changing and redefining her foundations and by the paradoxes, contradictions and idiosyncrasies that instil instability at the core of the self. In a similar vein, Mouffe (1992) develops a narrative of identity that avoids the coupling of identity with essentialism, and allows the scope for political agency on behalf of an identity, even though identity is both partial and transient. Rather than seeking an essentialist core identity, Mouffe suggests that it is both momentary and dependent on the discursive context and agency of individuals. Not only are these discourses complex and contradictory, but also they are further compounded by a sense that we simultaneously occupy numerous subject positions and identities (Collinson, 2003).

Adopting this poststructuralist perspective as a means to better understand and articulate identity and subjectivity, we need first to identify the relevant discourses and positions they make available. Our selves are constructed through the multiple discourses or narratives within which they are momentarily positioned. Individuals seem to want to make sense of their biographies, of their significance in the world and of what they are doing in the workplace. For managers in the workplace, this reinforces the ambiguity and complexity of managerial identities and how this influences managers’ senses of themselves. It is the contradictory, fragmented and multiple discourses of the self that this study aims to explore.

Recognition of the significance of the social context and socially constructed nature of leadership is of critical importance to the study of leadership discourses, but this approach may still overlook a fundamental dimension in the study of organizational life, notably that this performative process of leadership is achieved through
a range of exclusionary practices that aim to offer a homogeneous definition of what a leader in an organization is expected to be. One such exclusionary practice is the failure to consider the androcentric nature of organizational life and the lack of recognition of this concept in many organizational studies.

An exploration of a poststructuralist feminist critique of organizational research is a useful starting point here. Within the field of management and organization generally, the feminist voice has been slow to be heard, in no small part as a consequence of the domination by men and by discourses that continue to privilege the trappings of masculinity. Feminist critics point out how the existing body of organization and management theory assumes implicitly that managers and workers are male, with male stereotypic powers, attitudes and obligations (Acker, 1990, 1998; Calas & Smircich, 1992; Hearn et al., 1989; Martin, 1990, 1994). Organizational structures, cultures and everyday practices have all been shown to constitute the ‘ideal employee’ and especially the ideal manager as a disembodied and rational figure, one which fits more closely with the cultural images of masculinity rather than femininity. Femininity on the other hand, has tended to be associated with embodiment, emotions and sexuality; as such it is constituted as subordinate to ‘male’ rationality and possibly out of place in rational organizations (Fournier & Keleman, 2001).

Discourses on leadership (as well as corporate strategy, culture and other features of organizational life) are understood typically to involve core elements of masculinity that reinforce male identities and thereby sustain asymmetrical gender relations in organizational life (Collinson & Hearn, 1996; Hearn et al., 1989). Kets de Vries (1994) refers to the endurance of the myth of logic and rationality (the masculine) and by implication, the absence of emotionality or irrationality (the feminine). This favouring of masculinity and the pervasive associations between men, power and authority in organizations appears to have been taken for granted. Thus the literature and the practice of management have consistently failed to question its gendered nature. It is the masculine voice that governs discourse and exchange, the worlds of communication and economy (Burrell, 1992; Harding, 2003; Oseen, 1997). Central to this discourse is the notion that the occupational role of leader is best understood through a hegemonic masculine interpretation. This theme is identifiable across the interview transcripts of both male and female managers forming part of this study. The type of behaviour deemed appropriate for managers in contemporary organizations coincides with images of masculinity and centres on rationality, measurement, objectivity, control and competitiveness. While men are portrayed as fitting organizational behaviour, women are associated with the ‘feminine’ characteristics of caring, nurturing, and sharing that are allegedly more appropriate for the domestic sphere and the reproduction of the home and the family. So, the cultural construction of femininity around body and emotions, and of masculinity around disembodiment and rationality, has made men the ‘natural’ inhabitants of organizational life, while positioning women as out of place in organizations (Gherardi, 1995). Fournier and Keleman (2001) identify many studies that show the effort that women have to invest in presenting public images that make them acceptable in the organizational world (see also Brewis, 1999; Gherardi, 1995).

Alternatively, women may downplay their gender identity and try to blend in as one of the boys, or as an honorary man (Collinson & Hearn, 1996), or a female man
Several studies have shown how women try to fit in by adopting ‘masculine’ styles, by being tough and aggressive or by adopting a cold professional approach (Calas & Smircich, 1996; Collinson & Collinson, 1996; Fletcher, 2004; Marshall, 1995). Theories of leadership still require the existence of heroes in order to make sense; notions of heroines do not tally (Oseen, 1997). As Fletcher (2004) observes, dominant traits associated with traditional models of transformational (heroic) leadership are masculine and are socially ascribed to men in our culture. These include such traits as individualism, control, assertiveness and dominance.

A feminist poststructuralist perspective has been adopted in this research, as this approach is predicated on the understanding that language and discourse constitute subjectivity. It therefore offers a theoretical basis for analysing the subjectivities of the managers in the study in relation to language, practices within their organization and the material conditions of their lives (Gavey, 1997). In terms of discourse, Weedon’s (1997) feminist poststructuralist account is influenced by the Foucauldian notion that language is always located in discourse, which is defined by Hollway as ‘a system of statements which cohere around common meanings and values that are a product of social factors, of powers and practices, rather than an individual’s set of ideas’ (cited in Gavey, 1997: 53). Feminist poststructuralist approaches have been influential in accentuating the significance of the multiple, contradictory and fragmentary nature of subjectivity and the kaleidoscopic strands of identity open to individuals (Collinson, 2003; Kondo, 1990). Shifting, contradictory and multiple discourses construct the leadership identities of these managers within the study, and these identities are simultaneously compelling and coercive, fluid and constraining.

Exploring the discourses of leadership, this study examines the fragmented and contradictory identities of managers and the ways in which managers shape their subjectivities. It delves into the complex connections, inconsistencies and tensions between discourses of leadership, gender and identity.

The research

The notion of modernization has taken a grip in the public sector and models of leadership have been promulgated that are seen to deliver the modernization agenda. The language of UK local government organizations now includes a discourse around leadership, which although introduced externally, now influences and informs the activity of local councils. The current government’s focus on the modernization of services calls for better leadership across the public services sector, and has resulted in a proliferation of initiatives aimed at enhancing the quality of management and leadership within these organizations. Numerous units dedicated to developing public and private sector leadership initiatives have been established. The Council for Excellence in Management and Leadership was founded in April 2000 with the remit of developing a strategy ‘to ensure that the UK has the managers and leaders

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of the future to match the best in the world’ (Council for Excellence, 2002: 1). The UK’s National Health Service (NHS), which employs 1.3 million people, created, in 2001, a Leadership Centre and developed a common set of NHS leadership qualities, designed to ‘set the standards for outstanding leadership in the NHS . . . which can be used to assess both individual and organizational leadership capacity and capability’ (DoH, 2002: 1). In local government, the Leadership Development Commission was established in 2002, and the so-called emerging strategy for leadership development in local government was produced in 2004, with the stated aims of providing: ‘A framework which will stimulate leadership development at the individual, team, local authority and national levels. It puts forward priorities that will enable leadership development within and across the sector as a whole . . .’ (Leadership Development Commission, 2004: 3).

This interest in effective leadership and the continued focus on arguments associated with the endeavour of continued performance improvement offer one of the prevailing discourses through which managers’ self-identity is constructed and maintained. These discourses of leadership in the public sector, depicted within the broader modernization discourse, provide managers with a means of self-monitoring, in which managers are ‘cultivated’ to become ‘autonomous, self-regulating, productive individuals’ (du Gay, 1996: 60; Rose, 1998). Thus our very identities and sense of self are crafted by our experience in workplace settings. Local government organizations, through the dominant themes of modernization and effective leadership, provide a vocabulary and way of behaving that constrains, influences and manipulates managers into how their very identities are constructed (Kondo, 1990).

It was within the context of the growing presence of discourses of leadership within local government organizations that this research was undertaken in a large metropolitan district council. The council had recently completed a year-long leadership development programme that was designed to embrace the concepts of so-called ‘new paradigm’ approaches to leadership, which accord with postheroic approaches depicted in the literature (Fletcher, 2004). The programme content incorporated the principles contained within the Leadership Development Commission’s (2004) outline leadership development strategy for local government organizations. Through this programme, the top 150 or so managers within the council had been exposed to contemporary mainstream thinking on leadership development within organizations.

A qualitative case study approach was adopted as being the most appropriate means to explore how discourses of leadership are to be found in the day-to-day narratives of those in senior and middle managerial roles in the council. In-depth interviews were conducted following a semistructured interview format, so as to guide the exploration of leadership in context, both in terms of exploring what discourses of leadership were present in the constructions of the respondents, but also to consider how they felt these impacted on their careers and how they made sense of work within the broader context of their lives. Interviews were conducted with 25 male and female middle and senior managers from across the council. The narrative data for this article are drawn from the interview transcripts of four of the directors from the larger study, although the core themes featured later were evident across the larger sample. These four directors were selected from the sample as there is some ambiguity in the management structure and the discourses of these managers can be seen to reflect this ambiguity. They are ostensibly very senior managers within the
structure and yet they remain excluded from the small decision-making group of officers comprising the Chief Executive and small group of deputies. At one level, as functional directorate leaders in a large council employing in excess of 22,000 employees, these directors are perceived within the organization as senior managers, and yet they occupy almost a liminal space between functional middle managers or section heads and the executive decision makers.

Interview transcripts were analysed through close reading and rereading, resulting in the emergence of several related discursive themes that were drawn on repeatedly by the senior managers involved. Numerous and shifting subject positions are identifiable, as respondents drew on different, often competing and at times contradictory discourses to construct and describe their working lives. Analogous with Thomas and Davies (2005) and Watson’s (2001) findings, there is much fluidity and multiplicity of subject positions in this study, around discourses of leadership but also around other significant projects of the (managerial) self. There were clear indications within the transcripts of both collision and slippage within and between the ways the managers constructed and depicted themselves, of the contradictory and fragmented discourses of leadership as well as other projects of the self.

### Contradictory discourses, analysis and discussion

Following analysis of the interview transcripts, four contradictory discourses emerged that feature as projects of the self across the 25 managers studied. The focus of this article offers an in-depth analysis of four directors’ transcripts, as these provide support to the complex, fragmented and contradictory interplay of the four dominant discourses. Within these four themes, two dominant features of hegemonic discourse on modernization and leadership emerge within the interview transcripts, and these are presented as macho-management discourses and postheroic leadership discourses. In addition, two further identity discourses are identified within the transcripts and are presented in this article as professional career discourses and social and family discourses, and these are explored later.

### Macho-management discourses

The first of these discourses was the predominance of macho-management approaches to organizational functioning, despite the rhetoric of transformational leadership that was abundant in the study. This approach is represented through more traditional leadership behaviours (embodied in early studies of leadership, and reinforcing trait and style approaches), and appears to draw more strongly from hegemonic masculinist discourses of leadership, reinforced through the subject position of a competitive, controlling and self-reliant individualist. The whole notion of leadership is arguably constructed through the leader–follower pairing, with the followers being the (subordinated) other to the leader’s (dominant) position.

Trudie is one of the four female directors employed within the council in a frontline service directorate. What is of particular interest in her interview transcript is the extent to which she draws on the co-existence of macho-management and postheroic discourses of leadership. Trudie had clear ideas about what to her depicted effective and ineffective leadership in local government organizations, and she was lucid in
her articulation of these discourses. She had an unambiguous sense of where her career was going and a strong commitment to making things happen within her directorate.

Trudie’s narrative presents a deliberate shift in more recent years away from adopting a more typically feminine approach to her work and managerial relationships and towards the adoption of a masculine subject position, presenting a more competitive and driven approach. Her transcript is replete with examples of ways in which she has learned to think like a man in other aspects of her work and this is illustrated in her discussion of how she abandoned the opportunity of a family holiday the previous year so as to ensure that she was available at work to lobby the executive during the informal corridor discussions that culminated in a huge uplift in her budgetary allocation, as she explained:

[T]here are phases where you have to do what you have to do and you don’t have a work/life balance. I mean, I would love to get away February half-term break and I’ve got my diary clear. Daren’t book it, ‘cos that might be the week, sod’s law applying, that’ll be the week that corridor deals are done on the political budget making and, you know, the same was true [last year] and I had a week clear and I didn’t go and that week, a conversation in the corridor made a million pound’s difference and if I hadn’t been there, we wouldn’t have had a million pounds in the budget, so I know that, so times of year as well, you know. Easter’s not a problem, ‘cos they’re all . . . you know, but that . . . so there are . . . so the nature of the job is such that some things have to take precedence.

It was apparent from the transcripts that the predominant organizational culture placed a premium value on achieving targets, delivering the CPA (performance management targets) agenda, reinforcing masculine values of competition between directors for the bigger share of the scarce resources between directorates and perpetuating the old boys’ network in which key decisions are made outside of the formal organizational arrangements, in corridors or on the hoof. This subject position of adopting masculine approaches is consistent with findings in the literature, as depicted earlier. However, I would argue that Trudie chooses to use this approach as one of many subject positions, to construct herself as a powerful force in a competitive and challenging environment. This can be further depicted as a tension between the co-existence of traditional (masculine) and more recent (feminine) subject positions. She describes a situation in which she was having a series of regular meetings with peers from other (neighbouring) organizations in which they were aiming to develop more partnership-informed relationships. She entered these meetings in a spirit of wanting to achieve better working relationships and initially adopted a ‘caring and helpful approach’, but it soon became apparent to her that she ‘was doing all of the work and getting none of the influence’. This encouraged her to change approach ‘and so I started to be a bit more arrogant . . . and chuck my weight around’ which had the positive effect that the other directors started to listen more to her and she became more influential in the decision-making process.

A second feature of the prevailing organizational culture is depicted by Alec’s description of the premium placed by the employing organization on the more traditional, macho approach to management and leadership. He portrays the organization as stuck in a time-warp of a former regime of command and control and a more
military understanding of the nature of leadership where the macho discourses of competitive, rational and individualistic approaches dominate. He perceived this approach as being relevant in the 1980s:

you know, it was all set up and they were still using these sort of military terms like ‘divisions’ and . . . and there was even then in the 80s very much this expectation that you could tell people to do something and that that person would go ‘yes sir’ and do it and certainly going back beyond that to when I first started working in [place of work] it was like that there was an expectation that sort of erm . . . because of your position in the hierarchy . . . if you told somebody to do it, they’d respond by doing what you told them and I don’t think . . . I don’t think that exists in anything like the same way now and I think you’ve got a completely different model to work with.

In a similar way, Stuart depicts the culture of the council as inward looking and risk averse, as a place that is more comfortable within the macho discourses of a competitive, process-driven, target-focused and heavily controlled culture:

I fear we’ve gone this . . . the transformational leadership programme and all that, I don’t see the culture of the organization changing as a consequence of that, I see some quite transformational leaders around the place . . . erm . . . battering on the walls of the cave to get out, but I don’t see it embedding in the organization as a culture.

He appears to be torn between contradictory and competing leadership discourses, presenting himself as someone who aspires to a more distributive or postheroic leadership approach so as to focus on leading and engaging his team of staff, yet he reluctantly admits that he is not actively paying any attention to his team, and tending towards the culturally accepted macho-management discourse adopted by the council:

I’m not giving much attention to [the team] because I’ve more or less drifted off . . . I’m so tied up in the corporate agendas now and fighting all the battles there. Erm . . . so I’m less engaged with my staff than I ever have been individually . . . any actual work that’s going on with people on development is happening lower down the food chain, and I’m not really engaged with. I suspect there’s not enough of it going on, but erm . . . but again, we’re a processed organization and a task-focused organization so . . . not a lot of time for that stuff.

These contradictions and collisions of leadership discourses and identities continue in Robert’s account. His statements are replete with personal ‘shocks’ that have triggered a change in his sense of who he is, and these are explored further below. They illustrate how leadership discourses can be contradictory and how selves can be fragmented and continually in process. He depicts two ‘chastening experiences’ in his work career that have caused him to challenge his approach and leadership style. The first of these came via his former personal assistant who alerted him to the negative effect that his highly macho behaviour was having on his staff, to the extent that rather than arrange to meet him face to face, they would approach his personal assistant to pass on a message, adding, ‘just slip him that piece of paper, don’t tell him I’m here’. He describes his earlier senior management years as being frustrated
by the desperately slow pace of change, and recognizes his impatience to make a
difference to the services for which he was responsible:

perhaps in the past what I’ve done is I’ve forced in things and been very
aggressive about it, and erm . . . superficially therefore got the change to work,
but it’s not been embedded necessarily, so I think I now recognize that I need to
be a lot more patient and erm . . . I bought myself a relaxation tape!

The second chastening experience he describes was that he observed how poorly staff
were being treated within his previous organization:

the organization I was then working for didn’t actually care about people, if the
truth was known, so if it needed to take someone out, it took them out, and I saw
that happen, and I thought ‘that could happen to me’.

The impact of these two experiences brought him to observe that he was in danger
of perpetuating this uncaring organization in his own managerial practices.

The accounts of these managers highlight how the dominant leadership discourse
within the organization reproduces a traditional macho-management identity. Three
of the four (male directors) presented here seek to distance themselves from this
dominant discourse. At the same time their accounts also reveal various ways in
which this dominant discourse features not only as part of their own sense of who
they are as managers in the organization, but also how these different leadership and
organizational discourses compete with one another.

Postheroic leadership discourses

The second discourse that emerged from the transcripts was the discourse of
postheroic leadership, presented as a more distributed or feminine style of leadership
that assumes a more relational, local and shared understanding of leadership and
organization. In each of the four transcripts, the respondents perceived their practices
to represent core features of a postheroic approach, while at the same time they
condemned more senior management for the absence of such approaches in their
behaviours. They perceive postheroic leadership discourses as being at odds with the
more traditional approaches to leadership that privilege individual male leaders,
hegemonic masculinity and hierarchical notions of power (represented in the fore-
going macho discourses). Postheroic discourses suggest a less masculine, rational
and competitive subjectivity and present a more feminine, connected and team-
focused identity in which the leader asserts the importance of making links with staff
and showing a genuine interest in what they do.

In relation to this discourse, Trudie describes how she undertakes her work ‘in a
hands-on way, so I went out all the time looking at services and talking to front-line
managers and people using the services and whatever’ to such an extent that she
perceived, ‘I was actually often the only person in the room [of senior managers]
who’d talked to the people delivering the services’. Her text presents a complex inter-
play of varying subject positions, sometimes in opposition to the construction of
effective leadership that she promoted at the beginning of our discussion. She
presents her ideal leader as having credibility and recognizing their fallibility,
ensuring that they surround themselves by people who complement their skills ‘and
who enjoy other people being better at things than they are’. She depicts a model of shared leadership that is more akin to postheroic leadership discourses, and yet what she presents in her accounts is the premium placed on masculine behaviours as the way to succeed as a director. She claims a dislike of the macho approach and yet finds it highly successful as a style to adopt in practice.

As far as the postheroic discourses are concerned, Robert describes the importance of his current role as that of being available to front-line workers:

One of the things that I attempt to do within the department is to . . . is to . . . make sure that . . . erm . . . there’s not a sort of hierarchy, particularly with the manual workers, but you know, like, they can come and talk to me and I can talk to them, and I don’t do that in any demeaning way, I don’t ‘f and blind’ to do it, but equally I don’t want there to be any false barriers in the organization.

He refers back to the personal feedback he received from the leadership development programme during which his staff reported that he was not sufficiently visible and available to them, which seemed to be at odds with his subject position depicted earlier. Robert’s various subject positions, as a postheroic leader who heads up the directorate, as an impatient manager wanting to effect changes more quickly, as the parent of a chronically ill child all compete in his daily work and surface at different points in his narrative.

Corresponding contradictions and tensions are evident in Alec’s depiction of what he refers to as a new model of leadership, which he perceives has been introduced because of market forces, of shortages of skilled professionals to complete the work that is needed, so that now there’s a greater emphasis ‘and far more attention being paid to people’s working environment and life’. The sense from this text was that of a tension between these subject positions, where he was feeling compelled – given the market pressures in the workplace – to adopt a more participative and facilitative approach rather than the (favoured) command and control style that featured more largely two or three decades ago. He reflects on changes he has had to adopt in his approach to his staff in more recent years, suggesting that:

you can’t instruct people to do things for you, almost like people have got to be wanting to do it and you’ve got to manage in a way that people want to do it for their own personal satisfaction rather than being told to do it and then reluctantly doing it, because you’re paying ‘em.

There is a sense of expectation within the texts of all four managers that they should embrace the postheroic discourse of a more connected, feminine, and distributive approach to leadership, and yet this combines with some reluctance, tension and oscillation in practice. The continued premium on macho management found in the prevailing leadership and organizational discourses serves to foreground the tension these managers experience as they attempt to embrace other subject positions and projects of the self. In addition to these dominant discourses of leadership, two further, and more personal discourses emerge. In certain respects all four discourses are in conflict, intersecting and contradicting each other. The organizational discourses of macho-management and postheroic leadership compete with personal and professional discourses and it is to these remaining discourses that we now turn.
Professional career discourses

The third theme that resonated with all the managers interviewed was a discourse around professional careers and progression through to the senior managerial positions that all four of these directors currently occupy. As Grey (1994: 492) has suggested, individuals’ careers, as part of the project of the self, become increasingly central the more they progress to higher levels of the professional hierarchy, notably (in Grey’s study) at managerial and partner levels in accountancy. While the professional career discourse can be seen as both an organizational and a personal identity project, the following exploration focuses more particularly on the career as a personal project of the self as a core feature of these managers’ constructed identities, and embedded in other features including social and family life (as explored in the final discourse below), as well as hegemonic leadership discourses (represented by the macho-management and postheroic discourses presented earlier).

The directors within this study all identified their career as fundamental to their life, although gendered differences once again surfaced in the transcripts, something that was not explored in Grey’s (1994) study. In relation to gendered career patterns, Trudie, who has been employed within the council since completing her undergraduate professional studies some 30 years ago, depicts her career progression as a slow and steady rise through the career hierarchy, spending

five and a half years as a front-line worker and then I did four or five years as a team-leader at least and then I did sort of middle-manager . . . erm . . . and then worked my way up the organization and moved around the department in its various phases.

This culminated in her appointment to her current post three years ago. She explores the career trajectories of women and men in her profession during this time, to highlight the differences between them. She contrasts what she sees as her slow but steady progress with that of men in her professional group:

if you were a man in 1974 and you’d done a couple of months of front-line work, you get a senior job and then if you’d done a sort of team-leader job for six months or a year, you could get a middle-management job . . . Erm . . . I didn’t do that, as I think women tend not to do that.

Women were expected to make a slower progress, or to stay within the lower grades of the profession, remaining within front-line work, rather than rising through the hierarchy to managerial positions. In making the transition from senior manager to director role, she described how she decided to apply for the director post when it fell vacant:

so, I thought ‘Right. What would a man do in these circumstances?’ ‘cos this is one of the bits of advice I give to other women: ‘Ask yourself what a man would do in the circumstances’, and the answer is a man would go and see the chief executive and tell them ‘I’m the only person who can do this for you and you’ll be in deep trouble if you don’t have somebody reasonable and if you’re nice to me I’ll do it’. So, that was more or less what I did.
There was once again a strong sense from Trudie that she had to take deliberate action to advance her career, in the same way that she had to be seen to adopt macho-management styles in order to be taken seriously by colleagues.

By way of contrast, Robert has been a director within this council for the last four years, having previously worked for a neighbouring council for most of his career. He describes his career as a steady and unplanned progression from being part of a team through to team leader and trade union activist across a range of departments in a service provider role in the council, culminating in senior manager and finally director roles. He describes his initial reluctance to progress beyond team leader, but explains how he was instructed by his former employers to either take a promotion to a managerial role in the council or lose his job completely.

In a similar depiction of the gendered nature of career progression, Alec describes his career progression as an opportunistic and steady climb through the career hierarchy, making it clear that many of his decisions about applying for the next senior post were driven by a desire not to be accountable to someone else:

Erm, almost like the person above me left, so you have the choice of going for the position or working for somebody new and each time until now I’ve always said, ‘I’ll have a go at that’ and each time I’ve been successful in getting the job, but I’ve never been chasing my way up the ladder saying, ‘oh, there’s a job in [neighbouring council A] so I’ll apply for that and now there’s a job in [neighbouring council B] so I’ll apply to go over there’.

Following graduation from university, he describes his career progression within the same geographical borough from professional roles at various organizational levels ‘until you get to the point where your next job is a management job’. He has worked in this council for the last 20 years and describes work as central to his life: ‘I wouldn’t be without it at the moment. If I do end up with days at home I always have work to do at home even if I’m on holiday so within certain parameters, I’m a bit of a workaholic’.

Unlike some of his colleagues who talked quite considerably within the interviews about both work and home experiences, Alec describes all of his peak experiences as work-related ones, notably witnessing the successful completion of many of his work projects. Similarly, he depicts the lowest spot in his experience as a time when the council were reorganizing and he was required to apply for his own post against competition from an open advertisement.

In a similar way to Alec’s serendipitous accounts of his progress, Stuart depicts his career development as largely serendipitous and unplanned, ‘with no great aspirations in terms of a career or . . . erm . . . what have you, it was just day to day’. On completing further professional qualifications, he describes an opportunity to apply for a job that he had not expected to get and from there the opportunities for promotion within the council continued to the extent that he was successful in every internal application for promotion right through to his current director post. He depicted his career trajectory as a continuous upward slope, with a stream of career opportunities that he neither planned nor particularly aspired to:

. . . no great aspirations in terms of career or . . . erm . . . what have you, it was just a day to day . . . well, I’ll get through these exams and when I’m qualified
I’ll get a slightly better job and, and slowly progress, and that was at least for five years I trained, and I moved to [current employer A] after five and a half years simply because there was a job in [council A] that was a notch up from where I was in [council B], and I was frustrated at [council B] and moved to [council A].

Stuart’s sense of self seemed to be torn between these competing discourses. In his external role, he had the freedom and discretion to be creative with who he was, and to practice contemporary styles and approaches to leadership. These seemed to be denied to him in his work within the council where he was focused on career progression. Yet, this focus appeared to be leading to a more unsettled time in his current director role:

I think it’s a just a sense of, of . . . I’ve probably reached that point in my life when I’m taking stock as I say . . . the twenties sort of were a bit of a blur and I suddenly found myself where I was, the thirties the career just sort of progressed and I didn’t question it, mid-forties now, I suppose I’m actually asking the question . . . what do I actually want, and I don’t think that’s something I actually asked for 20 years, I just did it for 20 years, and I’m now starting to say . . . now what do I want, do I want this . . . erm . . . you know, and . . . there are times when you think . . . well no, actually it would be nice to just, just do an ordinary job, just do a job that you do, you know, seven and a half hours a day and that’s it. Erm . . . you know, go pack chickens or something . . . stack shelves . . .

Having risen rapidly through his chosen profession and secured promotional opportunities and senior roles at a relatively young age, he presents himself as uncomfortable in his current role, and at a period of indecision as to what to do in the future. This period of restlessness culminated in a recent unsuccessful application for a chief executive post—the role he sees as his next logical career move. While Stuart presents his unsuccessful application as something of a relief, he expresses concern at the dilemma that now confronts him:

The thing that worries me about that is I don’t know if I can find peace, tranquillity, doing this job for another ten years, whatever, until I retire. Erm . . . I don’t know how you keep the motivation up. I suppose my motivation has always come from the next challenge and there’s that bit of me now that’s saying . . . well, don’t know if I need that next challenge now, but then if I don’t look for the next challenge what is motivating?

The above excerpts from the interview transcripts illustrate some of the ways that gender can intersect and inform managerial and leadership behaviour, in this case in relation to career progression and future roles. They exemplify a number of gendered discourses and differences associated with the career aspirations and expectations placed on women and men within managerial roles. As indicated earlier, there was far greater expectation that men will progress both more rapidly as well as to the more senior roles within the organization. All four directors felt that their careers were central to their lives, albeit in different ways, and the tensions and contradictions were equally apparent in these transcripts.
Social and family discourses

The fourth theme emerging from the analysis is presented here as social and family discourses. In all transcripts these discourses represent an opportunity to shed the work sense of self and adopt alternative behaviours and approaches to those expected at work. These social and family discourses illustrate multiple aspects of people’s lives separate from work and yet impinging on it, and they are depicted in a range of ways by the interviewees: as influences from their family and social lives as well as other occupationally related activities such as facilitating teaching and development programmes. This theme has been frequently pursued in studies of gender differences at work, notably in terms of the tendency for women to have greater numbers of competing pressures on their time outside of the workplace (Cockburn, 1991; Collinson et al., 1990; Collinson & Collinson, 1996; Wajcman, 1998).

In her portrayal of social and family discourses, Trudie was anxious to present a clear account of how she avoids outside-of-work influences encroaching on her working life, and explores ways in which she copes with the demands of a director-level role:

my family are very clear about supporting me as the breadwinner and have been for . . . my husband is a writer and that doesn’t make money, generally speaking, as you’ll be aware and erm . . . many years ago, we decided that it was better for him to be the homemaker and stay at home, so I have a wife and I couldn’t do the job without it.

Trudie seems to have accepted a need to approach work by managing and thinking like a man, in order to secure career progression, by having the equivalent of the support of a (surrogate) wife at home and by adopting masculine approaches to her working life. Her family life takes second place to the demands at work, where holidays have to be postponed and long hours are deemed to be necessary as work demands take precedence.

The theme of work taking precedence was also evident in Robert’s description of how it took a personal shock in his family life to encourage him to adapt his approach to work, and this has had an impact on ways in which he now prioritizes different aspects of his life. His daughter has developed a chronic health condition, which he says has forced him to re-evaluate what is important in his life, and this had a fundamental impact on how he construes work: ‘It’s meant that work has become quite different to me because of the importance of her illness. Erm . . . so that’s the sort of parallel time line’.

He described the high level of stress he felt while working as a senior manager and how in the last six years since his daughter’s illness, he has taken stock of the centrality of work in his life, and has ‘got rid of stress and started to become more realistic about what I can achieve’. He adds: ‘work is still important, but it’s only work’. At this point in the interview, Robert appeared to be slightly uncomfortable with what he was saying, as if he was trying to convince himself that work was less important, and that he could be more relaxed about its impact on him. He added:

Well, I sometimes have to remind myself, but you know, because I can . . . I can get obsessed, but I’m getting better at not being obsessed, and I probably have been a bit obsessed in my first . . . I’ve been here four years now, so I’m learning
to back off a bit in [name of council] as well I think. I’m trying to teach myself to.

The competing and contradictory discourses of social and family life together with the obsession with work that he is purporting to address bear witness to some of the tensions between various subject positions: as father and partner with intentions to adopt a more balanced approach to work and his family life; as senior manager and corporate director, with awareness of the co-existence of macho-management and postheroic discourses; and as an ambitious director with aspirations to further develop his career.

These contradictory and shifting discourses are also apparent in Stuart’s narratives in which he depicts numerous opportunities during his life to experiment with how he portrayed himself, as if recognizing from an early stage the opportunity presented through the plurality of subject positions and the degree of choice, freedom and flexibility that can come from this. As an undergraduate, he described how he chose to study at a university far from his hometown:

I went to Southampton so I went a long way, didn’t know anybody . . . and that was a very conscious thing that I deliberately went somewhere that was distant, that was new, and so for that three years I suppose . . . [long pause] . . . I . . . did a lot of inventing who I was in an environment that wasn’t pressuring me to something other than what I was, you know . . .

He went on to describe his ‘accidental’ involvement in the delivery of a programme supporting the personal development of graduates at the start of their careers; a role which he suggested was more fulfilling and meaningful than his substantive director role. He depicted this programme as a great opportunity to work with young people from different backgrounds and he became animated and passionate in his discussion about the opportunities this gave him to explore more creatively his sense of who he was. He described using his role as a facilitator in this development programme as an opportunity:

to experiment in how I would work with a group and with individuals, to experiment about how I . . . portrayed myself, erm . . . and I could . . . you know . . . in a sense each time I could go afresh to a group of students and choose how I was going to present myself to them and I did do a bit of that.

He presents this experience almost as a parallel universe with his work role, and one that was in stark contrast to his work within the council:

[It was] such a different environment to working in local government . . . erm . . . and I just think I learned an awful lot about myself through that period, so that was in parallel to this, this career sort of progressing apparently all on its own, of its own volition . . . erm . . . here . . . and then I was going off and doing that two or three times a year . . . erm . . . which was a . . . just a different dimension.

The height of this pleasurable experience seemed to be poles apart from the mundane and ‘grinding’ set of managerial responsibilities that faced him in his paid employment. In terms of generating a balance in his life and making sense of his work within
the broader context of the rest of his life, he indicates that having reflected on what was emerging from our interview discussion so far, he is refocusing his energy and ensuring a shift away from work and towards his life outside of work:

I think, I detect from what I’ve said I’m at a point in my life when I’m thinking . . . yes, it matters, and yes I can bring a lot to it, but I don’t have to bring all of me to it, but actually nobody is going to thank myself, thank me for killing myself doing this job.

In a similar vein to Robert, Stuart refers to a chastening experience that has had a fundamental effect on how he now approaches his managerial role:

at the lowest point a few years ago, the lowest points were one of . . . there was almost something self-destructive about it, that I was going to kill myself doing it, I was going to work and work and work until I made myself ill, erm . . . I think there was a point like an epiphany, it was like . . . well, if I go like this it’s, it’s going to end badly.

He describes this change as a turning point from which point he now refuses to allow work to encroach on his family and personal life, although this is something that has only happened in the last six months, and there was a continuing tension in his text that behind the optimism of work getting back to its ‘rightful place’, there is a looming fear that this role is all that he has to look forward to in the next 12 or so years until he is able to retire. He dreams of an environment, a utopia, that embraces the more distributive model of leadership depicted in the literature, suggesting:

if I had an ambition down the track it would be to work in an organization where there’s a bunch of people who are . . . can be brought together, aligned on a, a shared vision and I like to think it can be done the other way . . . it doesn’t have to be done through driving, it can be done through building a team that takes it there. But erm . . . I ain’t gonna get that here [laughs].

Notions of ‘parallel universes’ and ‘parallel time lines’ occur in both Robert’s and Stuart’s descriptions of their work identity and their family and social identity and yet these are shown in their texts as very much more in collision, tension and contradiction rather than separate and parallel. One fundamental source of tension seems to be that the dominant culture within the council subscribes to a macho leadership approach, and as a consequence, these directors feel unable to adopt the more connected and facilitative approach that they perceive would be effective in their managerial working lives.

**Discussion of data**

The foregoing data illustrate that the language of UK local government organizations now includes discourses of leadership which influence and inform the activity of the local government organization and the staff employed. These discourses significantly shape managers’ identities as they are crafted through workplace experiences. By defining the leadership practices and behaviours expected of their employees, local government organizations provide a vocabulary and way of behaving that work to constrain, influence and manipulate managers into how their identities are
constructed. However, I contend that those managers’ projects of the self go beyond these hegemonic and androcentric organizational discourses and extend to other features which include professional career discourses as well as social and family discourses and identities.

In this discussion I have emphasized the fluidity of discourses of leadership in the narratives of senior managers within a council. Rather than one dominant discourse of leadership that informs managers’ subjectivities, these compete as one of many sources of power. The co-existence of macho-management and postheroic leadership discourses (as well as the tensions between these two approaches) often combine with others including life outside of work, gender differences and professional career patterns. Notions of ‘successful’ leadership discourses vary both between and within the four managers’ texts. In terms of expressing their own views on leadership and what it means to be an effective leader, the range of possibilities seems endless. Each of them were keen to reiterate that they had never met ‘the perfect leader’, and that each of their definitions of effective leadership are bound up in elements drawn from many sources. As Stuart articulates, ‘I don’t think you look at anyone and say they were the perfect leader’. Similarly, Trudie professes that she is ‘describing bits of up to 15 or 20 people. I don’t think I’ve come across a single individual’.

In these narratives, different discourses compete. Trudie draws heavily on the macho-management discourse in her encounters with peers and bosses. She has recognized the failure of a more connected and caring approach at other points in her career and in her management of her staff. In contrast, Robert appears to be drawn to a different approach. Having been both the recipient and perpetrator of a macho approach in former roles, his chastening experiences have taught him the value of appropriating an identity that is more reflective of a postheroic discourse. Feedback from the leadership programme seemed to reinforce this alternative leadership discourse. His colleagues who gave him some feedback during the diagnostic element of the leadership development programme identified for him a need to work on becoming more available and accessible to staff, and indicated that there continued to exist many traces of the macho-leadership approach that Robert had hoped to eradicate. His social and family circumstances have encouraged him to adopt a more reasonable and balanced approach to work which is less consuming of his time, although this workaholic subject position still looms large in the text. In career terms, and in common with the other three directors, Robert professes not to aspire to a chief executive post and claims he would embrace the opportunity for premature retirement in the next reshuffle.

Within all four transcripts there lingers the background threat of a further re-organization within the council. All four expressed frustration at the current management practice within the council, arguing that they could do a better job than the current top management group – a team of four from which they are all excluded. Despite this, they are all keen to emphasize that they have no interest in the role of chief executive for themselves. As Trudie cogently expresses, in a sentiment that appears to be shared by the others:

who would want it? Ten or 15 million pounds worth of housing and refuse collection . . . you know, it’s not where my heart lies . . . erm . . . and all the political aggravation – I can’t do with that much time with politicians. I mean, I
have a lot of time with politicians and I think I handle it reasonably well and, 
you know, but, like, to spend much more time with politicians, I would not 
enjoy. Erm . . . so I’ve made a decision this year that I don’t want to do that.

The investments and subject positions that make up the identities of these four 
directors are constantly in process and frequently in contradiction with differing 
subjectivities dominating at varying times. The oscillation within and between these 
four main discourses represents the moment-to-moment choices, tensions and 
inconsistencies that these managers face between the subjectivities presented. The 
consequence of the interplay between the dominant discourses of leadership (notably 
between the more traditional command and control, macho style and the more 
distributive or postheroic models) combined with the influence on subjectivities from 
professional career discourses, as well as identification with family and social 
discourses present a multiplicity of subject positions within an organization – both 
within one individual as well as across a number of individuals.

Conclusion

This article has explored contemporary discourses of leadership and their complex 
relations with gender and identity in the organization of a local government council 
in the UK. The research shows that (perceived) charismatic and masculine models of 
leadership are still featuring heavily in these leadership discourses where macho, 
individualistic and assertive behaviours continue to be valued over the more feminine 
qualities such as empathy, capacity for listening, relational skills and so on. Where 
the rhetoric of a more feminine set of practices is suggested, such as within postheroic 
discourse, these have yet to be translated into practice as can be witnessed by the 
target-driven, financially motivated performance measurements that continue to 
dominate current assessment and audit arrangements in UK local government 
organizations.

This case study offers insight into the competing, multiple, contradictory and 
complex identities that can characterize part of managers’ identities. There is a multi-
plicity of meanings and understandings identifiable from the texts generated from 
this research, with individuals adopting a range of subject positions, at certain times 
fragmented and contradictory, at others connected and convergent, as they identify – 
or not – with various organizational leadership discourses. This research reveals how 
even managers who are receptive to the latest models of leadership also carry with 
them other ways of doing management and leadership, and other ways of being 
within the organization. The experiential views of these managers illustrate signifi-
cant contradictions, plurality and ambiguity, which serve to dismantle the dominant 
hegemony and ready stereotypes which favour notions of simple unitary lives. These 
managers forge their lives and identities within the tumultuous environment of 
change and uncertainty in the UK public sector. Their identities revealed both simul-
taneous and different selves, bursting with complexities and deeply felt, nuanced and 
often contradictory elements.

Typically, these managers adopted the language of dominant discourses of leader-
ship, but their actions were obscured by paradoxical and perhaps unintended conse-
quences and outcomes. Their accounts demonstrate that there is a continuing
privileging of masculine behaviours and norms as the basis for defining effective leadership. A feminist poststructuralist approach has guided this study, so as to best explore and expose the androcentric features of organizational life, as well as to accentuate the complex connections, inconsistencies and tensions between discourses of leadership, gender and identity. More specifically, this approach has offered a theoretical basis for analysing the subjectivities of men and women in relation to language, other cultural practices and the material conditions of their lives. The complex inter-relations between discourse, gender and identity dynamics are not only hidden but also considerably under-explored in organizational life and are worthy of further research investigation.

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References


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