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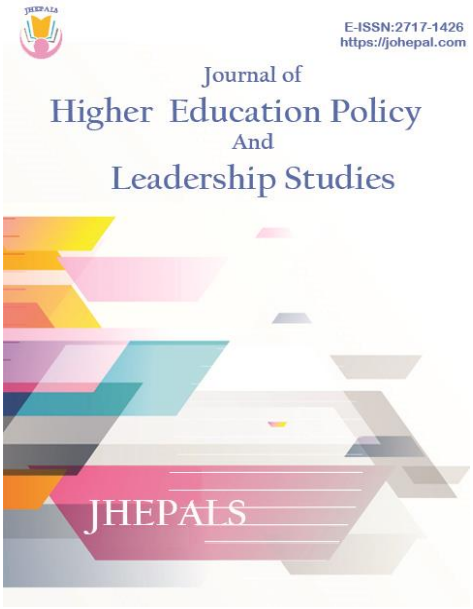
Work Identity and Gendered Liminal Spaces in Inclusive Leadership Development: A Higher Education Case Study



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Work Identity and Gendered Liminal Spaces in Inclusive Leadership Development: A Higher Education Case Study

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Abstract

We take an organisation-wide approach to exploring the complexities of gender and leadership at work, with a focus on action. Within the context of a university, with an Anglican Foundation, the paper provides a specific workplace lens. The research is central to a wider project, designed to further the organisation's understanding of leadership and gender, to be better placed to promote inclusion, facilitate change, enable shared learning and support knowledge transfer. As part of a participatory, qualitative design, semi structured interviews were conducted. Interviews involved 17 participants, aged over 18 years, gender identities consisted of 14 females and 3 males, from within professional and academic services within the University. Framework Analysis was employed as it lends itself to a team approach and further enabled a collaborative exploration of findings. The main findings were centred around liminal spaces in leadership development and the gendered nature of leadership. These findings have informed the development of recommendations to ensure organisational engagement in the development, and therefore the sustainability, of action taken.

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Keywords: Leadership; Gender; Identity; Organisational Change; Higher Education

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Introduction

Recognising a challenge and acting on it are two steps which have informed the design of this project. The organisation central to the paper holds a self-identified issue in relation to gender and representation in leadership. Supporting positive change provides a motivation for the project, facilitated by a better understanding workforce experience. The process of change is central to creating and supporting a work environment that is successful and enabling, and this will be focused upon as a key driver for the research.

With society and its relationship with work being at a complex junction in the history of employment (Gavin et al., 2022), it is important we recognise the barriers that stand in the way of employment generally and good employment specifically. These barriers include social and environmental factors (Blustein et al, 2018) and of particular interest to this paper, problems in tackling long-standing gendered traditions in employment roles; recognised in literature as being an enduring problem of contemporary employment (Durbin, 2022).

The present study explores gender equality and leadership in a Higher Education Institution (HEI) taking an organisation-wide approach to investigating the complexities of gender and leadership at work, with a focus on action. Funded by the Church University Fund, with a context of an Anglican HEI, the research as part of a wider project provides a specific workplace lens and is designed to further understanding, to be better placed to promote inclusion, facilitate change, enable shared learning and support knowledge transfer.

The research is undertaken in recognition of organisational challenges and an understanding that the impact of not employing intervention is costly at a personal and organisational level. Part of the rationale stems from the recognition of the issue being based in traditional, hierarchical foundations and appreciates the broader constructs and definitions of leadership (Raffo & Clark, 2018). Alongside this is the consideration of organisational discrimination, that exists in a contemporary work context. Individuals risk being disadvantaged by less tangible and inadvertent discrimination or discriminatory practices than in previous generations. However, the problem persists, and the indirect nature of discrimination increases complexity, whilst still potentially resulting in outcomes as severe as overt negative behaviours (Walker et al, 2022). While organisational discrimination can be considered to have reduced in recent years, perceived discrimination remains a risk to organisations and employees, with implications for performance, wellbeing and satisfaction (Kartolo & Kwantes, 2019). The COVID-19 Pandemic has seen an intensification of gender related inequalities, with a risk of reversal of progress (Özkazanç-Pann & Pullen, 2020). This is not a task to be tackled successfully through targets alone, as striving for diversity in representation at work is a continuous and changing concept, one that will out-live any targets and relies on good intention and effort (Risberg & Corvellec, 2022). How organisations approach these topics is reflective of the organisational culture (Heasman, 2017), with the extended recognition that perceptions of discrimination are influenced by contexts that extend to societal circumstances outside of the organisation (Kartolo & Kwantes, 2019). Both the culture and the societal context can be associated with the behaviours and responses within the workforce.

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Inclusive Leadership Development in HE

Leadership demographic and structure informs culture, organisational culture, defined as shared perceptions of work practices and work units that vary from other organisations, is unique to an institution (Van Den Berg & Wilderom, 2004). While culture is informed by the originators of the organisation, it is maintained by the retention and recruitment of individuals that endorse that culture and the challenge is for the organization to remain adaptive and relevant (Schein, 1983). The founder in the context of this paper is the Church of England, originally as an education provider for trainee teachers in church schools and now in the support and maintenance of faith based higher education institutions (The Church of England, n.d.). Academics in the field explore three central perspectives to culture development: Leader-trait perspective, where the development of organisational culture focuses on the emphasis individual leaders can have on the creation of culture and the positive or negative impact of this, dependent on those leadership traits, Leader-Cultural Transfer perspective, which holds the experiences of leaders previous experiences of cultures as central informants of the culture they create and Functionality Perspective, which is informed by the environment and context the organisation operates within (Kim et al., 2022). Fostering an organisational culture that creates advantages in performance, job retention and job satisfaction is beneficial institutionally and individually, when these are achieved through shared goals (Klein, 2011). How positive cultures are fostered and measured is an area of further research opportunity (Kim et al., 2022) but literature supports that organisational cultures that enhance relationship development and shared goals, as opposed to competitive and individually focused achievements, benefit from decreased perceptions of organisational discrimination (Kartolo & Kwantes, 2019). With company culture being an influence on employee attrition (Chatterjee, 2009, El-Rayes et al., 2020) and synergy with culture and the individual's values leading to longer retention rates (Inabinett & Ballaro, 2014), this paper recognises the importance of cultural context in the nature and methods of organisational learning.

As per individuals, organisations need to continue to learn, to enable positive transformation, organisational learning is a process that needs to be central to culture and will in turn facilitate a continuous learning environment in the long term, core to sustainability and future-readiness (Odor, 2018). With a key approach being communication and openness to innovation (Odor, 2018), facilitation of learning for individuals and organisations requires an awareness of cognitive dissonance; recognition that as people acquire new information this can conflict with learning they already held, causing discomfort (McGrath, 2017). Approaches to this discomfort are key and organisations can enable individuals to use the dissonance positively through their interventions, by creating opportunities for challenging the norm (Dechawatanapaisal & Siengthai, 2006). The exploration of gender and leadership in an Anglican context is a complex illustration of this, with the potential to both complement and challenge wider understanding of equality. Taking the Church of England, as an example, there are legal and institutional structures which now promote equality for women but in practice there are barriers created by conflicting beliefs and behaviours of traditionalist members of the Church (Fry, 2021). As a University with a Church Foundation, the community involved in this project is working in an environment which has an identity as a Higher Education Institute with faith-based values (The Church of England, n.d.), providing the opportunity to explore the topic of gender and

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leadership through the lens of this workforce, with the intention of furthering understanding and awareness as a learning organisation.

Gender within organisations reflects that of wider society, therefore there is the need for an increased recognition of the complexity and breadth of gender identities (Dray et al., 2020). While gender inequalities are an established field of research, there remains topics that are under-researched both in subject and context (Traylor et al., 2020), which are also reflected in this paper. Providing participants with the opportunity to explore their understanding of gender, leadership and self-awareness in their own work context, this research is focused on the identified need to enable gender equality in Higher Education leadership (Advance HE, n.d). Due to the original rationale deriving from a self-identified, institutional emphasis on advancing equality of representation in leadership for women, there is a greater focus on more traditional, binary representations of gender. However, the paper acknowledges the benefit of equality and inclusion intervention at an individual and organisational level with recognition of the opportunity for wider learning and implementation (Bhopal & Henderson, 2019) and considered this in the methodology that will be discussed.

The context of this research builds on the principles of the Athena SWAN Charter (AdvanceHE, n.d.) as a catalyst for change. This is in response to the widely researched area of gender in relation to senior management levels (Schein, 2001) and the contemporary reflection of this issue in University leadership, where only 29% of Vice-Chancellors, 37% of executive team members and 31% of heads of top tier academic structures are women (AdvanceHE Knowledge Hub n.d.). Bringing together the foundations of the organisation, understanding of culture and the identified challenge of under-representation in university leadership, this research is part of a wider project.

Taking an Anglican, HEI (The Church of England, n.d.), as the community focus of a participatory research project, this paper is an exploration of gender and leadership in a Church University setting. Considering organisations as communities enables the application of Community Participatory Action Research (CPAR) and thereby the opportunity to facilitate change in a community context (Lawson et al., 2015), which complements the university campus culture central to the institution. CPAR is an intentionally collaborative and democratic approach to the tackling of self-identified issues within a community, as it requires self-awareness and awareness of relationships in the research process (Barbera, 2008, p. 142), reflected in the self-reported issues of gender representation in leadership in higher education (Advance HE, n.d.), relevant to this study.

Research Methodology

Community Participatory Action Research (CPAR) provides the opportunity to work collaboratively, which can facilitate shared benefits for all parties, reducing mistrust, facilitating, expanding and respecting the knowledge of academic, community and organisational contributors (Ahmed et al., 2004). CPAR is defined by Minkler (2005) as an intuitive collaborative approach that combines exploration, participation, and action to prevalent social issues within a community. It is for this reason that CPAR was specifically chosen for the project; to incorporate and enhance the voices of those employed within the University community. Finding mechanisms for developing understanding of others in

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organisations is important as issues can arise when the employer and the employee have differences in expectation of the workplace, expectations that can be defined as the Psychological Contract. Being aware of the expectations of the employee can facilitate the meeting of their psychological needs, and in turn their own efforts to fulfil those needs, resulting in a productive contribution to the workplace and beneficial outcomes for both parties (Rousseau, 2003). This two-way set of expectations is unwritten and recognises the importance of the behaviours and values of both parties in the wellbeing of the individual. The communications and actions of leaders, with the need to differentiate for individual employees, requires knowledge competencies within the management structure to support and facilitate positive employee experiences (Weinberg & Doyle, 2017). Enabling the participation of employees in organisational change is a way of developing awareness, supporting autonomy and job control, which are promoters of wellbeing and productivity at work (Day et al., 2017).

Embracing the CPAR approach, four researchers conducted seventeen semi-structured interviews with both professional and academic staff across the university. The four researchers all have diverse academic and professional backgrounds, which are complementary but allowed for collaboration and peer learning in the process of conducting the project. Expertise from the disciplines of Occupational Psychology, Social Psychology, Sociology, Business and Education enabled multi-disciplinary approach to the gender related topic and the function of supporting organisational learning and change.

The project design was overseen by an inter-disciplinary Steering Group, which included representation from the organisation and other Higher Education partners. Ethical approval was gained at an institutional level, through an anonymised blind review process.

An interview schedule with set questions and prompts was devised and distributed across the research team for implementation in the interview process. To recruit participants, an invitation with details about the project was uploaded to the university's portal website, participant identification codes were allocated on a first come, first serve basis. These were later replaced with pseudonyms, which were checked to ensure anonymity at an institutional level. After gaining informed consent with all participants, semi-structured interviews took place online, using Microsoft Teams, the length averaged at 46 minutes per interview. 17 Participants took part, all aged over 18 years. 14 participants identified themselves as female and 3 identified themselves as male, it was not a requirement for participants to be in existing formal leadership roles and the participant group consisted of those in established positions and those drawing on their wider understanding and experience of leadership. Questions ranged from self-awareness in leadership, to gendered experiences and ideas for change, derived from the literature that informed the rationale for the project. Participants varied from academic and professional backgrounds including both full and part-time employees at the university. Due to the nature of the university (being a small, single campus) the research team ensured strict confidentiality and the participant information reflected the understanding of risk and sensitivity required in this context, anonymising all transcripts before the analysis stage. To encourage the CPAR aspect, participants had the opportunity to have an active role in the anonymisation of the transcripts by being provided with the chance to reflect on and edit their contributions following the interview, this was to ensure they had confidence in the

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research process and endorsed the application of the research to the organisational context they were working within. This allowed for any misinterpretations to be corrected (overcoming some of the limitations of using online interview recordings) and further anonymisation, assuring participants were comfortable with the dataset.

The method chosen for examining the data was framework analysis. Framework analysis is defined by Goldsmith (2021) as a form of thematic analysis, in which the framework approach has a more rigid organised structure of derived themes. The research group chose framework analysis as it lends itself to a team approach and further enabled a collaborative, cross-disciplinary exploration of findings (Parkinson et al., 2015). The first step in successful framework analysis is to familiarise oneself with the dataset, through familiarisation, the research team could highlight reoccurring topics and themes within the interviews. Three members of the project, who come from different disciplinary backgrounds, coded a transcript together to form a preliminary set of categories and codes. In order to sense check, a fourth member of the team then used the proposed framework on the same transcript to trial and test whether the categories and codes were comprehensible and coherent. Following Parkinson et al.'s (2015) methods, the research group piloted the preliminary framework on multiple transcripts all whilst creating, editing, and adapting codes and overarching categories to encompass all findings.

Once the codes and categories were set, the framework was complete. The transcripts were then uploaded to the qualitative data management software, Quirkos. This software was particularly useful for its visual and graphic display of the data, colour specific bubbles for different categories and codes made the dataset perspicuous. Line-by-line coding then proceeded to take place, to make sure all the data was encapsulated into the findings. This type of coding works especially well with in-depth, detailed data about pragmatic problems and processes in socio-cultural environments (Charmaz, 2013). This process allowed the research group to remain open to the dataset and closely analyse and identify implicit actions, meanings, and significance. Once all the transcripts had been coded thoroughly, the major findings of the data were evident and were used to inform the development of recommendations.

Findings

Throughout the interviews two clear areas of focus emerged, the personal and organisational nature of leadership and the hegemony of gender in the everyday and potential leadership spaces. The first superordinate theme centred around liminal spaces in leadership development with two subthemes of psychological contract and supporting mobilization through recognition of positive and effective leadership. The second superordinate theme focused on the gendered nature of leadership both within the organisation and more broadly.

The gendered nature of current and prospective leadership positions both in relation to self and organisational contexts formed a clear and often returned to theme in the interviews. Although the majority of participants downplayed or denied the significance of gender in their working lives when directly questioned, gendered spaces, boundaries and interactions characterised the majority of examples provided by participants to describe their current working lives in the organisation.

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Liminal Spaces in Leadership Development

Throughout the interviews all participants spoke in detail about the gendered nature of leadership, work and the ways in which these impacted on their perceptions of organisational support for leadership development. Participants identified barriers that impact their progression within the workplace, this is captured in the concept of 'liminal spaces' where participants recognised the opportunities and roles within the organisation but in turn describe the complexities involved with transitioning into them. This is reflective of international and sector specific contexts in relation to gender representation in Higher Education leadership, where barriers include Internal Objective perspectives of others and External Objective perspectives relevant to societal norms, for example, home circumstances and existing leadership identities. These are identified as barriers which prevent women from progressing, or where progression does happen, prove to be challenges (Maheshwari, 2023). Participants shared experiences, where their contributions were overlooked, or where they were unable to contribute (often due to their wider personal circumstances), which are reflected in the reality that women are more like to be balancing care responsibilities and expectations; as a complexity that conflicts with progression (Morley, 2014). Examples given by participants were often nominal in size or event but reflect the notion that microinequities both directly exclude others and become manifested in their own self-reflections and in turn their contributions (Rowe, 1990).

Psychological Contract

For all participants the psychological contract is central to their understanding of their own place in potential future with and capacity for support and progression nurturing within the organisation. In particular, the organisational environment and ethos of support for career and leadership development was an essential element of the psychological contract when starting or continuing their working lives and careers with the organisation.

Alongside the explicit and articulated terms and conditions captured in the written contract of employment, the psychological contract captures the expectations, ethos and environment which participants have when starting work for the organisation. In the interviews it became clear that support and opportunities for leadership development as part of career progressions were integral to this psychological contract.

> And my view is quite simply if you if you sought high office (and leaders often don't appear, they don't spontaneously generate, they've often been planning this route for a very, very long time.) So, if you sought high office then you have also made a contract that you will take the moral responsibility that goes with it, in my view. So yeah, I have high expectations of my leaders. #Anna

> My paper diary. So, I absolutely love it and this is significant to management. And the reason why I love it so much is because it belongs to me. So nobody else can say this is their policy or this is something. I know this is my diary and I have absolute control over it, and that again matters. And this is why I love it much more than Teams or anything else 'cause I choose, how it's populated and I choose what goes into it. So, in terms of management, I love it because it gives me an absolute choice on what I'm going to do. #Anna

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These reflections centred around autonomy and responsibility, from the perspective of being led by others and having personal control at work. Psychological contracts also come with leadership in relation to expected behaviours, and again, although not part of terms and conditions appear integral to perceptions of successful and aspirational leader. For participants their leaders' actions and espoused values were intrinsically bound into their perceptions of the organisation's success or failure in fulfilling the psychological contract.

> Moral contracts, they exist. So, leaders have a huge moral responsibility. I'm not asking them to be Saints, that's unreasonable, but I am asking them to be consistent and to be fair. #Anna

> If you break these contracts, I mean, and they're not paper contracts that you sign. I know that, but. #Anna

Participants placed the onus for talent nurturing with the organisation and the responsibility for ensuring workers are recognised for knowledge, expertise and talent is an implicit aspect of successful leadership. In part the psychological contract extends beyond the organisation and successful leadership is bound with an agency in enabling mobilisation amongst the workforce and to be a force for recognition and recompense beyond salaries. Although unwritten, the importance of the recognition and fulfilment of the psychological contracting in recognising and supporting talent and progression underpins not only satisfaction but for participants the continuing commitment to their roles in the organisation.

> I think the challenge is for an organisation to work out what is it that people really know about... it's a sort of find their talent. #Lilly

Participants spoke of differing routes to leadership and reticence of some women to push forward for opportunities without prior recognition or encouragement. In providing recognition and opportunities for development, the psychological contract is key in supporting and enabling space for leadership progression across all genders. For example, Bella reflected on the gender differences in the context of standing for positions of additional responsibility through internal elections:

> the kind of attitude from like the males that had run for elections was they didn't feel like there was kind of any societal pressures ...the females that run, both those that were successful and unsuccessful, felt like they needed more of a kind of pushed and like some kind of encouragement to actually apply for it I mean, I know I did. #Bella

> If you want workplace diversity everybody needs to support that and not just senior leadership. #Ava

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Inclusive Leadership Development in HE

Throughout this subtheme it is clear that for participants, the opportunity for recognition and development are an instrumental part of their working relationship with the organisation and that leadership is an agentic force which has the potential shape and foster inclusivity and enablement across the organisation. Reflections on how this could be done effectively were evident in experiences of participants and are captured in the following sub-theme.

Within the liminal spaces, participants described historic and informal leadership contributions they had made in other contexts, but that were not reflected in their present employment. These examples manifested themselves in discussion captured under Psychological Contract (Cullinane & Dundon, 2006), where individuals shared that they had experience and knowledge to contribute but that they don't get to do so in their current employment. Reasoning for this was varied and included current role expectations, working relationships and lack of opportunities for contribution. This is a consideration for the individual, as cynical attitudes have negative consequences for the attitude holder and they are more likely to have reduced job satisfaction (Johnson & O'Leary-Kelly, 2003) and for the organisation, who through lack of recognition of in-house skills and knowledge, will be missing out on contributions. This perspective of lack of appreciation and engagement of organisational resource is contradictory to understanding of effective organisational learning, which requires the workforce to individually and collectively generate knowledge by acting and reflecting together (Odor, 2018). This expectation by participants informed a recommendation that the Annual Appraisal Cycle is reviewed, with an intention to increase the opportunity to capture the areas of leadership in a role and more broadly from an individual's experience. This is with the intention to enable opportunity for personal development and service development (quality and business growth), by allowing opportunities for sharing the skills and knowledge they have through voluntary roles, wider lives and previous / additional employment. The self-selective emphasis is recommended in the context of autonomy, control and wellbeing at work (for individual and organisation) (Weinberg & Doyle, 2017).

Supporting Mobilisation through Recognition of Positive and Effective Leadership

Within the concept of liminal spaces, participants captured definitions of leadership and reflections of the hierarchical, formal leadership structures of the organisation versus the characteristics and behaviours they were able to draw on, from either within their role or from broader contexts. Participants acknowledged that there were examples of leadership that they or others exhibited, which were not reflected in job role, but were informing practice and change. The lack of recognition and opportunity to contribute was cited as a barrier for progression, as individuals didn't see themselves reflected in the leadership around them. This echoes literature over decades on an international level, that identifies the need to increase efforts to support female progression into leadership roles due to the gendered attributions made to senior organisational structures (Schein, 2007).

Theo shared his understanding of leadership qualities and the personal gap he felt he needed to address:

> The leader is able to engage with people on a very personal level, and lots of students come to him to have that kind of personal relationship... I very much

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> like those interpersonal roles and interpersonal relationships. I'm not very big on, I'm not very good at, sort of talking to crowds or anything, #Theo

Participants reflected on what enabled their transition into other roles and personal development opportunities, with an understanding of how effective leadership supported this. Throughout the interviews the impact of positive leadership was linked to personalisation and a perception of investment by leaders in individual career progression. Participants linked positive leadership with perceptions of feeling valued and recognised by leaders and the impact of this feeling of support from leader was noted as a significant milestone in career progression for those who experienced and benefitted from this.

> Having a leader who believes in you and actually even gives you those opportunities is really key and actually has been a bit of a turning point in my career, really, to be honest, yeah. #Poppy

On a broader level, positive leadership was linked to organisational change through role modelling and 'leading by example'. Positive leadership was characterised through actions and perceptions of participants own values and ethics being reflected in positive leadership examples, such as those identified below.

> seeing **** (another leader) have their pronouns in their signature. I saw that really actually influenced a lot of people to do the same, which was interesting. #Poppy

> knowing the people that you lead as well so you can maximize sort of their experience and their… I don't want to say usefulness but usefulness really, you know in the workplace. #Poppy

The ripple effect of positive leadership for participants appears to provide inspiration and motivation for leadership development and promotes an inclusive environment where leadership opportunities appear in reach and possible, as demonstrated above by Poppy in the identification of a role model. The proximity of leaders both physically and in terms of workforce knowledge appears an important factor in perceptions of effective leadership.

In contrast, to this tangible example of leadership development within an organisation, participants describe informal spaces for leadership development outside of the workplace, that are not necessarily recognised in their roles or workplace identity. Indeed, the transitional spaces from external to internal appear to diminish and devalue nontraditional leadership experiences. When participants described these nontraditional leadership experiences, their language was couched in uncertainty and reduced value, signalling a lack of certainty in the credibility of their experiences as 'authentic' leadership. Pauses, repeated use of words like 'suppose', indicate this lack of certainty and echo the need for recognition by participants from leaders and the organization.

> So I have been a leader in practice...but coming into the academic world, I don't find it that fluid #Mia

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Inclusive Leadership Development in HE

> I suppose there are previous positions I have held...interns...student workers etc so I suppose there was a degree of leadership in that #Freya

Throughout this theme, participants reflected on the ways in which their commitment and satisfaction with their working life is bound to the psychological contract and the ways in which leadership within the organization supports and promotes a shared vision for inclusivity and opportunity. Where participants have experienced this recognition and support, it has become pivotal in their career progression and leadership aspirations. Where this has not happened, participants perceive their experiences and potential as devalued and the distance between current leaders and their leadership aspirations is magnified.

Gendered Nature of Leadership within the Organisation

Leadership in the organisation was characterised by its continuing patriarchal character and more broadly that stereotypical masculine qualities were perceived as still inherently implicated in descriptions of leadership as result of traditional social constructions of leadership in western culture. Perceptions of leaders and leadership were captured by participants, who identified similarities and differences between themselves and leaders they observed. Historically research explores the gendered nature of leadership (Schein, 2007) and the means by which organisations need to overcome barriers that this presents (Yoder, 2001). This was reflected in these findings, where some participants heavily reflected on the relevance of their gender in their workplace, with a recognition that individuals would benefit from increased proximity to and understanding of current leaders. Female participants drew on differences between their own leadership and that they observed and /or they thought was expected of them, these experiences are supported in literature capturing the gendered nature of leadership definitions and attributes (Pullen & Vachhani, 2021). Interview data additionally provided strong examples, where individuals of both genders felt they had a clear and beneficial link to senior leaders, either directly or through strong lines of communication via immediate line managers, and the ability to influence the context and content of their own workload.

Gender as a Conduit to Leadership

The hegemony of gender in leadership development is most acutely perceived in the ways in which gender itself is seen as a facilitator to progression and leadership. Participants linked the 'naturalness' of male routes to leadership with broader traditional social construct of gender in which leadership is characterized as a masculine quality and that for those people who do not self-categorise as male, leading or being perceived as a leader is disruptive and challenging to still existing social norms.

> I think there is a masculinity. I think it's an inherited masculinity. Again, I think it's part of that breaking the mould that hasn't necessarily happened. I think it's reflecting Society's structures in general. #Anna

> Leadership is endowed on a person from within a group usually. The challenge and the tricky thing is that I think men are socialized to take the lead. #Lilly

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> The whole of our culture says be a man. Take a lead, make a decision, be decisive. #Lilly

The hegemonic links between masculinity and leadership can be noted in the quotes above which illustrate the ways in which gender is embedded in the language used to describe leadership. 'Taking', being decisive, the language of agency, control and language shaded with other traditional masculine leadership roles for example military leadership. The organisational leadership ethos appears to embody this hegemonic gendered division in work and leadership. In particular, participants describe a linear relationship between leadership and gender with increasingly levels of seniority being associated with a predominance of male leaders and limited availability of roles at higher levels of the institution.

> When you go one up, higher and above, it seems to me it's more male heavy and I don't know why that is. I would have thought they would have wanted to get more of a balance given the tradition, the history of the university. #Lilly

> I think he crossed the Great Divide, so he was in the in the Men's club with all the other people who dress in suits and behave like that and tend to go off and have, in the days on campus you know, go off and have coffee together and have meetings together and having his own office made a massive difference. #Stella

> Sometimes I feel that everyone in my area of work is a woman and their bosses are men in a lot of cases. #Freya

As shown above, participants describe the distance between predominantly male leaders and women workers, not in traditional metaphors of glass ceilings, but in terms of a 'great divide' and 'mens' club, spaces in which people who do not self-describe as male struggle to reach and if successful feel out of place within.

Participants spoke of stereotypical female qualities in contrast to and as a barrier to progression and successful leadership.

> So, there's the big male figure with his suit and his tie, and his grumpy face. And then there's lots and lots and lots and lots of women, quite some or most of them Smiley because they're keen to please. Keen please little women keen to please, and also bring Smiley to each other. You know, how are you? I'm alright, how are you? How's your mum doing all that stuff going on busily where the Male is just like where's your work? #Stella

The quotation above from participant seven uses a series of powerful visual metaphors to illustrate the constructions of the power imbalance implicit in everyday constructions of workplace leadership. In contrast to the 'big' single male figure who is all about productivity, women are characterised as lesser through the repeated use of the words 'lots' and 'smiley' which downgrades the stature and seriousness of women in

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leadership using alliterative repetition to produce an avian metaphor of flocking and clucking.

Hegemony of Gender in Work

The stereotypical 'lightness' of women in the workplace was a theme which fed into participants descriptions of the importance and impact of their own gender identity in their current roles as well as their perceptions of career trajectories. In their current roles, participants described multiple instances of being overlooked, talked down to or even explicitly being marginalised due to their gender identity.

> I had instances where those colleagues or applicants have asked to speak with a male colleague because they don't think that I can be in a position where I can help them being female. #Freya

This lack of seriousness which participants experience in their day to day interactions extends to a perceived lack of trust in participants' expertise and experience as a consequence of gender bias and negative stereotypes.

> I wouldn't say they talk down to you exactly, but. I don't know. I think the expression is mansplaining, isn't it? #Maria
> Yeah, I just think women aren't trusted. It's weird, it's so weird. It's so weird. #Lilly
> Yeah, it happens quite often. My opinions are not taken seriously. #Lilly
> And yet my contributions are often questioned and critiqued. #Lilly

Female participants described gendered constructions of credibility and expertise, including the physical environment, as maintaining the gendered constructions of entitlement to space in the working environment with women constricted and not given 'room' to flourish.

> All the men had their own office and all the women were sharing usually three or four to an office, and that that space makes a difference. #Stella

Far from being a perception which could be changed through progression and career development, the consequential 'lightness' of women appears to be ingrained and lifelong with the gendered division which is also recognised by male participants for whom expectations of success are seen as a burden rather than a privilege.

> And I remember hearing there a few times when I said I was going for interview, oh, you'll be alright because you're a bloke. #Noah

In contrast to Noah's observations, Theo considered that gender did not effect their work environment:

> hmm. Not in any way that I know...can't really say it affected me at all. #Theo

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> I can't think of any of the opportunities I've been in that would have been hindered or helped the fight being of either gender. That I can think of. #Theo

The ultimate intersection of gender is with age and for participants although leadership may be seen conventionally as a characteristic to be developed with age and experience, this does not seem to cut across the genders. Participants highlighted negative connotations of female ageing in terms of a barrier and a difference in career progression and trajectories between men and women as they age.

> Why should leadership only be for older more well-paid people downwards. #Anna
>
> It should be perfectly OK to be an older woman, but there's still a slight little oh dear, she's bit of an old woman, that one. Even the phrase there's a kind of a feeling, I think in society that older women are perhaps that's because I'm an older woman. #Ava
>
> Men get it set into a kind of a trajectory of getting more powerful, so you get that sort of experienced older man, you know patriarchy. Look at me, I'm experienced old and I have grey hair, whereas women tend to as they get older and get grey hair be slightly patronised so you get the bright young woman but the older menopausal woman is a bit of a, you know, for goodness sake even in academia where it shouldn't happen in academia. #Stella

Participants described a range of competing and often contradictory negative stereotypes and gender biases which characterised their day to day working lives and influenced their own experiences and the perceptions and experiences of those around them. Participants use imagery and language that illustrates an emotional response to these experiences, as well as demonstrating an intention not to contribute further to negative stereotypes by clarifying that examples don't apply to all.

> You'll let me get away with things. You'll be gentle, kind, sensitive, caring and all the rest of it. And you know about fluffy stuff, but you don't really know anything that's, you know. #Lilly
>
> O, we're angry, we're sexually promiscuous, we are fast to judge, we have poor parenting skills. Or rather we have dominating parenting skills, so all of these things come into play. I'm certainly not making the claim that everyone holds these stereotypes, but I am aware those stereotypes are out there in the ether, and I am also aware that they can influence people's opinion in that subliminal fashion. #Anna

From the being too harsh, too soft; untrustworthy, angry or smiley, it would seem that far from being able to aspire to leadership, women walk an impossibly fine line to navigate the competing negative stereotypes which characterise women and leadership. When in combination with other distinguishing characteristics both older and younger women perceived age as a further barrier and subject to a range of negative performance related perceptions.

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Inclusive Leadership Development in HE

The impact of gender stereotypes and gender identity was further emphasised through Poppy and their description of the benefits of perceiving aspects of their identity as non- gender conforming.

> Somewhat I suppose I think, yes and I don't know I. I think it's just think it's the advantage of being pretty binary with your gender is that it's just something thats there is isn't it? And I've never really. It's the only time it's really been something to think about within a personal context is when I was a kid. I was a bit of a tomboy I suppose, but yeah, I guess I guess it does define me to some extent, but not something I think about too much really. #Poppy

The impact of gender in leadership and leadership development is intertwined with broader social constructions of gender which underpin everyday work experiences for the participants. That leadership in the organisation and their own relative space in that organisation are also embedded in a gendered discourse of leadership and potential as masculinized is noted but not seen as anachronistic by participants the broader social context.

Conclusion, Discussion, & Recommendations

The research team utilised themes to inform recommendations to the organisation, which in turn will be taken forward into another stage of research. Here we will discuss each of the key findings and recommendations. The recommendation of a Leadership Blog is proposed as a method of promoting leadership role models in their broadest sense. Both the distances felt, and the beneficial proximities others described, support a recommendation for greater transparency and proximity to leaders and informed a recommendation for a Leadership Blog or similar communication to provide an opportunity to share characteristics, expertise and experiences of leadership and increase the visibility of existing leaders. Supported by literature, as an opportunity for reducing leadership impostorism (Kark et al., 2021), identifying role models is a way in which the individual and the organisation can positively tackle under-representation (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017). This is in the context and role of existing leaders shifting the focus of employment for women from the current role they undertake, to their future aspirations (Mattis, 2001) but comes with a recognised limitation that the impact of role models in work identity formation is a less researched area (Sealy & Singh, 2010), providing opportunity for future research.

The second recommendation is review of the Annual Appraisal Cycle, with the intention to increase the opportunity to capture the areas of leadership in a role and more broadly from an individual's experience. Reviewing how we capture the wider experiences of the workforce, beyond their current employment, would enable individuals to share (on a self-selective basis) the knowledge and experience they have that may not be directly related to their existing contributions within the organisation. This is with the intention to enable opportunity for personal development and service development (quality and business growth), by allowing opportunities for sharing the skills and knowledge they have through voluntary roles, wider lives and previous / additional employment. The self-selective

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emphasis is recommended in the context of autonomy, control and wellbeing at work, for the individual and organisation (Weinberg & Doyle, 2017).

The third recommendation is in the context of Skills and Knowledge: Retention and Acquisition; a review of HR policies relating to CPD is proposed, in terms of their content and their visibility to the workforce as part of the Annual Appraisal Cycle. This responds to participants recognising the gap between the policy, legislation and their personal experience, echoing sector understanding that organisational change in universities needs to be facilitated by multifaceted approaches, including people issues, cultural issues, technological issues – beyond the writing of strategy (Rogers, 2019). Taking lessons from behaviour change strategies, understanding of the organisation's specific circumstances needs to be taken into account, to ensure a legislation-informed, one size fits all approach, is avoided. Instead, the legal and policy requirements are translated into effective change via good communication practices, knowledge and skills acquisition and endorsement by senior leadership (Weinberg & Doyle, 2017).

Finally, it is recommended that a standing agenda item is included in the meeting cycle of the People and Inclusion Committee (or similar) to allow for the specific consideration of inclusive approaches to progression. A review of Equality Impact Assessments and their action plans is a recommended starting point as a way of using an existing method of assessment and change implementation. However, following the earlier recommendations this needs to be undertaken in the context of wider leadership endorsement, clear communication and from an informed position. This recommendation leads us on to a further opportunity to extend the project, beyond this paper, through which we propose research that utilizes a Delphi Panel (Fletcher & Marchildon, 2014), to involve representation of the leadership expertise within the institution. This is designed to ensure organisational engagement in the development of recommendations, and therefore the sustainability of action taken; falling into the wider design and ethos of the project's CPAR design (Lawson et al., 2015). Co-production develops outcomes using negotiation, which is outside of traditional methods of instruction (Bovaird, 2007), a Delphi Panel will engage those with influence on policy and practice, to complement the wider design of the project which has engaged contributors from the workforce. This focuses on shared learning, decision making and ownership of process and output, which CBPR more generally (Viswanathan et al., 2004), and this piece of research more specifically, is intended to enhance for all involved. Involvement of a Delphi Panel in the next stages of development of these recommendations recognizes the limitations of a qualitative project which draws on the experiences of a minority. It provides a process to further opportunities for exploration and the inclusion of re-storied data, to provide context to recommendations and allow for the voices of those interviewed to be directly engaged with.

These recommendations are made in the context that change cannot successfully come about if the onus remains on the individual(s) affected and the recognition that procedural, structural, organisational changes will liberate change for others, beyond the intended beneficiaries (Kark et al., 2021). Allyship is an example of this, where a member of the dominant group works with members of the minority group, in order to advocate for them and provide support. The benefit of this behaviour is wider and provides opportunity for education, behaviour modelling and intervention (Warren et al., 2022). Facilitating inclusive change is aligned with positive leadership styles, which are responsive to diverse

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perspectives and experiences, for example via Authentic Leadership where the individual's own awareness of their circumstances, strengths and weaknesses benefits their interactions with the workforce and can facilitate inclusive environments (Cottrill et al., 2014).

This research is intentionally localised to a specific organisational community and draws on the detailed contributions of a small participant group, in order to explore their experiences and perspectives. This provides one lens through which gender inclusivity can be considered in the wider transformation project linked to Athena SWAN and provides a platform for further research, consultation and implementation. The opportunity to extend this learning to other Higher Education Institutions is provided through funding-related and wider sector networks, with an opportunity for further learning and action. The wider context that this research fits into, is one of a multifaceted approach to better understanding leadership representation and opportunities for inclusion. This is in the context of recognised ambiguity in diversity research, work practices and approaches (Risberg & Corvellec, 2022) and as a result an over-arching recommendation to continue multi-faceted approaches to facilitate change (Vongvisitsin & Wong, 2021).

The research has provided an opportunity to engage with an internationally recognised, complex issue in organisational development and gender, while remaining focused on the self-identified topic of a specific employer. This is central to the intention of the project, which was designed to inform organisational understanding and change. The context of an Anglican, Higher Education Institution steeped in history and operating in a complex climate has given this piece of work a specific lens through which to explore opportunities for values-based, inclusive leadership development, which have wider applications to other organisational settings. There is opportunity due to the richness in data and the wider context, to draw on the gender-specific findings of the project.

This piece of work has been set in the context of sector and organisational boundaries, which have evolved over many years. However, it is also set in a culture that is embracing opportunity for change organisationally and has been supported by the institution. This openness to engagement and conversation provides opportunity for organisational learning and wider development of projects such as this.

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Human Participants

The authors confirm that informed consent was obtained from all individuals who participated in the study, and that the research protocol was approved by Lincoln Bishop University Ethics Committee (Ref: REC 12-22).

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Originality Note

The authors conform that this manuscript is original and has not been published before and is not currently being considered for publication elsewhere.

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The authors claimed that there is **"No Use of Generative AI/ AI-assisted Technologies"** in preparing this research.

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Dr. Sue Becker is a Social Psychologist and participatory researcher now working at the University of Hull as Research Coordinator for ClinPsyD programme. At the time of this research she was affiliated with Lincoln Bishop University in the role of Programme Leader for Psychology. Her research focusses on authenticity in partnership working. Previous projects have focussed on supporting inclusivity in Higher Education.

Ms. Robyn Jackaman is a Sociology Lecturer at Lincoln Bishop University. Robyn joined the research team as a student researcher and is now focused on her PhD project at the University, alongside Lecturing. Her PhD is focused on young adult women's experiences and knowledge of the female body.

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