

The Importance of Worldviews on Women's Leadership to HRD

Gary McLean

McLean Global Consulting, Inc.

gary.mclean@mcleanglobal.com

Mina Beigi

Liverpool John Moores University

m.beigi@ljmu.ac.uk

Abstract

Problem: The challenges faced by women in leadership, to some extent, appear throughout the world, across country-based cultures and religious traditions, even where there has been progress. The eight articles that comprise this issue raise questions related to women in leadership, providing a cross-case opportunity to explore what might yet be needed to empower women in leadership roles in business, politics, non-government organizations, academia, and the family.

The Solution: There are no easy solutions that emerge from our analysis across these eight articles. Worldviews influence women in leadership; from these articles, we understand the influences better and glimpse opportunities for improving the status of women leaders, globally, as well as within specific countries and religious traditions. We also suggest perspectives that might lead to valuable studies that will help/pave the way for developing future women leaders.

Stakeholders: HR scholars and practitioners, potential and current women leaders, and those working with or accommodating women leaders in multiple contexts are the main stakeholders of this issue. Furthermore, because this is the concluding article to this issue, all of the stakeholders listed with each article will be interested in our overall conclusions to this issue.

Keywords: Women, Leadership, Country Cultures, Religious Traditions, Leadership Development, Worldviews

The Importance of Worldviews on Women's Leadership to HRD

Worldviews affect how we perceive and react to the world, shape our intended and actual behaviors, and how we evaluate our own and others' performance.

Worldviews also shape our attitudes toward the world and everything going on in the world. Based on the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991; 2001), individuals' attitudes lead to their behavioral intentions. This is true about women in leadership.

Whether male or female, our worldview influences how we perceive that women function in leadership. Exploring leadership experiences of women leaders, authors in this issue, through the lens of their worldviews, allow us to reach a better understanding of women in leadership and their actions. Such understanding sets the stage for designing relevant leadership development programs for women as one way of addressing the inequality that exists between men and women in leadership positions, an important objective for HRD in today's world (e.g., Bierma, 2015; Jacobson, Callahan, & Ghosh, 2015).

“Women Leaders Rising”

The heading for this section comes from a documentary that we both viewed in 2013, *Girl Rising*. The film illustrates nine stories, each from a different context or worldview. The stories follow nine girls who strive against seemingly insurmountable odds to get an education. The bitter truth is that these stories do not go back to centuries ago, nor even decades ago; they are accounts of what is happening in the 21st century in nine different countries. Here is a brief summary of one of those stories.

Suma, a six-year-old girl from Nepal, worked from 4:00 a.m. until late at night as a *kamlari* (indentured servant). She washed, cleaned, fed the goats, and went to the woods to fetch firewood. When free from her tasks, she minded her master's kids who all

went to school and made fun of her for her torn clothes. Suma continued to work for a second and third master, until a schoolteacher changed her life. The teacher convinced her master and his wife to send her to night school to get educated when she was 11 years old. The school was run by social workers whose mission was to educate girl kamlaries just like Suma. Suma was set free, with the persistent help of a night school teacher who kept visiting her master to remind him of the law against Kamlari, domestic violence, and trafficking and the laws supporting children's and labor rights. Suma started a new life, a free life with dreams she wished to come true. In this story, Suma's family supported her brother to receive an education; the poor family was not cruel to Suma, but when there are limited choices, males are the lucky ones, or, as in this story's case, the less unlucky ones.

Most scholars have focused mainstream leadership theory and research on those who have already made it to leadership positions or are most likely to get there (i.e., mostly males). We believe this to be the case for most leadership literature (including the papers included in this issue). While there is a role for traditional (i.e., mostly male) leadership research, it is critical that HRD and leadership scholars step out of their comfort zones to explore what leadership means for women and, perhaps, even more, challenging, to discover more authentic leadership for women and men, working together as equal leader partners in their indigenous contexts (McLean, 2010).

We emphasize the need for those in the HRD community, both scholars and practitioners, around the globe, to change how we approach leadership. From our point of view, HRD's role in developing women leaders is similar or close to what the two teachers in our opening story did: they looked around and found the problem, used their

resources to help and facilitate setting Suma free to lead her life and achieve her dreams. From an organizational perspective, we believe that HRD scholars, with their humane values, need to study and pave the way for those who can, but are not privileged enough, to make it to top leadership positions.

A Male Perspective in Women Leaders Rising

There are many worldviews that are not included in this issue. One significant omission has been a male worldview of women in leadership. While this brief section cannot take the place of a full article, perhaps it will illuminate one male perspective. In this section I will use an abbreviated form of an emerging methodology in HRD, auto-ethnography (Grenier, 2015) or narrative ethnography (Alagaraja & Wilson, 2016, in press).

Several, including the reviewers, have wondered how I (McLean) could have committed so much of my professional life to gender issues. When I was a youngster, the neighborhood in which I grew up consisted of six girls my age and no boys. We learned to negotiate; I would play dolls, skip rope, and play ball up against the wall, and, in return, they would play tackle football, marbles, and hockey. These relationships continued until college. I didn't date any of the girls, but I often served as a *faux date* when there was an activity requiring a partner, and we were not in a relationship at the time. When I entered the university, I did a double major in secretarial studies and business administration. My father had graduated from high school in commerce, so I grew up watching him type and take shorthand (a requirement at his time). I was intrigued and wanted, like so many kids, to emulate my father. No one told me that secretarial studies was a female major, until I showed up for my first class—me and 34

young women. And the business administration courses (at that time) were solely for young men. Only one other person did this double major—a woman. We became good friends, sharing our feelings as the only one of our gender in one half of our double major. Over the period of my university education, I became just like one of the girls. I learned all about their frustrations in the dating world, how disillusioned they were in their career dreams because of their gender, and what it was like to have parents supporting them in their education only so they could meet a husband.

I continued my education in graduate school in business education, another field dominated by women; the chair of the department was a woman. During my first two years of teaching, at Quinsigamond Community College in Worcester, MA, all of the students in my classes were women. As I continued my university teaching in business education and then in HRD, my students continued to be dominantly female.

My wife dreamed of becoming an ordained clergy, but early on, women could not be ordained in many denominations. When that changed, she pursued a seminary degree and became a clergy person, only to find that the churches in which she served saw her as less than the male clergy they really wanted.

While impossible to put myself in a woman's shoes, the pain I experienced from these neighbor girls, my student peers, my own students, and then my wife, I became committed to changing the world (as some of you will remember reading in McLean & McLean's 2001 definition focusing on changing all of humanity). I was heavily involved in the feminist movement during the 1960s. I led the fight in my church denomination to allow women to be ordained (it happened in 1984). I have worked hard in both my research and my consulting practice to open opportunities for women. I have also learned

that, when women are prevented from achieving their dreams, men, too, suffer. We take on more stress (and heart attacks) when leadership is not shared with women. When men are busy outside of the house, we lose the joys of childcare (when that is our choice), with the joys and challenges that childcare brings with it. We lose the opportunity to create a truly equal opportunity to share with our life partner, if our choice is for a female partner.

Have we made progress? Certainly. Do we have more to do? Absolutely. That is why this issue is so critical for both genders and why this issue is essential for HRD to take on in an aggressive way. I will probably not live long enough to see men and women sharing equal opportunities for leadership. But I am optimistic that the progress, slow as it may have been, will continue and, ultimately, we will find that equity. We owe it to both genders to see that happen. At least, this is one male's worldview on women in leadership.

Observations

In this section, we share our insights and themes that arise from our review of the articles in the issue.

Unexplored Women Leaders' Worldviews Worth Scholarly Attention

In the process of preparing this issue, we were pleased by the interesting topics that found their way into this issue. We anticipated that there would be unexplored areas in how different worldviews might affect women leaders; it was obviously the essence of the issue. While receiving, selecting, and reviewing the articles, the variety of worldviews playing a role in women leadership and the quality of their exploration affirmed our expectations. We observed that, while each article looked at a unique worldview, they all

played a significant role in moving women's leadership literature forward. Also, all articles opened invaluable horizons for future research on the topic.

Qualitative Epistemologies Dominate

It should not be surprising that the only methodologies (or epistemologies) used in the articles in this issue were some form of qualitative approach—critical theory, feminist theory, and phenomenology. This is consistent with the observations of others about research on women's leadership (Marshall & Young, 2006). In spite of the fact that we are all, males and females, steeped in positivistic thinking with its associated efforts at generalizability, researchers on women in leadership recognize that such thinking is limited, perhaps even misleading. What is critically needed in such research is developing a deep understanding of women's experiences and critiquing existing societal norms that challenge and hinder women, requiring qualitative epistemologies, as demonstrated by the authors in this issue.

Some Progress Made

While there are significant differences in the progress being made by women in leadership, depending on the context, each of the articles points to some progress. Yet, even in that context in which women appear to have achieved the greatest equity (Sweden), there is room for improvement.

Equity Does Not Exist

As warned by Carter and Silva (2010), we should not be fooled into thinking that, because there has been some progress, we have received the goal of equity. We still have a long way to go before we achieve equity. Every article in this issue confronts this problem. And there is little that any author has been able to offer regarding how to

correct this situation. We do not have equity; we need equity. So, what do we need to do?

We have been in this process for over a century, starting with the suffragette movement (and even before). That is a very long journey, and we still have so far to go!!

Culture (or Worldview) Is Critical

Each article in this issue describes a different culture. That culture might be reflected in one's spiritual/religious, national, family, geography, tradition, and other perspectives. This is another reason why any positivistic research is not going to be very helpful in exploring leadership. It just does not make sense to try to find anything that is generalizable when leadership is so contextual. And these contextual factors do not exist singularly but are stacked, so that any one situation might be marked by two, three, or more factors. An interesting typology to research some of these contextual factors is described in Hannah, Uhl-Bien, Avolio, and Cavarretta (2009).

Homemaking and Childcare (Seldom for Men)

In all of the reading that we have done on leadership and leadership development, we have seldom seen any reference to homemaking and childcare, or the lack of such consideration being made explicitly, *unless* the subject of the leadership focus is women. Why is that? Everyone, men included, needs to be concerned with homemaking. And if men are parents, childcare is part of their home job description, or should be. Why do articles about women in leadership include these roles when this is not the case for men? Yet most of the articles in this issue discuss these two roles as challenges for women and barriers keeping women from leadership roles. These arguments also support some religious proscriptions keeping women from moving into leadership roles.

Leadership/Management Divide Missing

We think that every academic has struggled with the question of differentiating management and leadership (see, for example, Toor, 2011). The debate, according to Toor, has gone on for a very long time without any resolution based on empirical data. Our review of the articles in this issue, however, provides case-based evidence that there is no distinction. In not one of the articles is there any effort on behalf of participants (or, for that matter, the authors) to make a distinction between the two. While they write about leadership, many (most?) of the participants were clearly in management roles. So is the attempt to differentiate these concepts simply a straw horse? Is it time academics gave up their effort to differentiate the roles? We are not making that argument, though there is little evidence in this issue that the debate should continue. And there is no clear differentiation that emerges from these cases. Perhaps Bass (1990) has had it right all along; it is not about differentiating management from leadership, but, rather, it is about differentiating types of leadership.

What Is Needed Now in Research

Based on our review of these articles, we focus in this section on our recommendations for needed research.

Situate Research in Current Theory and Literature

Exploring topics in unexplored contexts works best if the research is situated in current theory and literature in both the research problem and in the discussion of the findings. As different research approaches treat theory differently, this linkage may occur before data collection, as happens in quantitative studies, or after data analysis, as typically happens in qualitative studies. Further, unless researchers clearly and explicitly discuss how their findings differ from or confirm what we already know in HRD and

related fields, including management and organizational behavior, their findings cannot easily find their way into the ongoing discourse on that topic.

Researchers need to reconsider justifying the need for a study solely by mentioning that the research population has not been studied before or is understudied. The fact that one population has not been so far studied does justify that they are worth scholarly attention to some extent. However, it is the researcher's obligation to share with readers why they think that the population and the focus of the study are important. At some point in the writing, the researcher must present the outcome of a rigorous review of the literature, highlighting its importance by demonstrating theoretical gaps that the research can fill, thus justifying the importance of the study .

Hear Different Voices When Focusing on Women Leaders

As the literature shows (Bonebright, Cottledge, & Lonnquist, 2011; Byrd, 2009), there is a dearth of research on women leaders and that is one of the main drivers for this issue. However, focusing on women leaders does not necessarily require limiting research participants to women and to particular contexts. Although in some cases, it is useful to include women participants only, in many cases, it may be beneficial to hear both genders' voices to gain an unbiased and broader understanding of the phenomenon under study. Males and females, the LGBT community, international contexts, ethnic groups, organizational contexts, and other relevant contexts are all perspectives that matter in examining and promoting women leadership. At the end of the day, women leaders work with different groups, including genders. As this issue has emphasized the role of context in leadership, hearing women leaders in a specific context without

knowing anything about the others' responsibilities and contingencies limits our level and depth of analysis.

Further, including women leaders' family members', employees', and co-workers' perspectives in studies on women leaders will allow us to illustrate a better picture of women leaders' work and family lives; thus adding to the HRD literature.

Although such studies have been conducted in management (Eagly, & Carli, 2007; Eagly & Heilman, 2014), HRD scholars, specifically in this issue, have limited their participants to women leaders.

Listen to the Unheard Voices

As argued in the first part of this article, having equity in leadership opportunities benefits the world, we believe. But there has been limited research to support this premise. So we invite researchers to explore what is needed to help both men and women to strive for equity in leadership positions. As Katz (2012) argued, leadership in today's world requires both genders equally to chart new roles. We need to discover what those new roles will become.

There is another group of voices that are often unheard in research on women leaders. We assert that we also need another stream of studies that consider women who have been screened by the social, economic, educational, and other boundaries; those who have never made it into leadership positions, but who could/should/deserve it. We do not mean necessarily confining the research agenda to underdeveloped or developing countries; this is happening around the world; even in the most developed countries, as the opening article of the issue shows. What we encourage is listening to those unheard voices who never made it or unless helped will never make it to leadership positions. We

believe that there are those who have a plethora of new perspectives, talents, and skills to offer to the world of leadership but who will never taste/have not yet tasted it nor are expected to unless helped.

Use Innovative Research Approaches and Multiple/Complementary Data Sources

As mentioned in the Observations section of this article, all of the articles in this issue employed qualitative approaches, mainly phenomenology or a form of critical theory. Although we celebrate the increasing interest in qualitative research because the management field has largely ignored qualitative research for years, we do suggest using innovative approaches to both qualitative and quantitative research. For example, adopting ethnography can help us gain a deep insiders' attitude towards women leaders. Another example is using diary studies, both qualitative and quantitative, that enable us to acknowledge the daily fluctuations of leaders' perceptions, motivations, and engagement among others. Biography is another intriguing form of research that has not yet been widely embraced by HRD; few researchers have the courage to undertake such research.

Recognizing that almost all qualitative studies in this issue used interviews as their collection method, we also suggest collecting multiple types of data, such as documents and observations. In this digital era, there are interesting possible sources of data, such as e-mails, texts, twitters, weblogs, intranets, and social media profiles and activities. In cases in which researchers do not have access to any type of data but interviews, we suggest conducting multiple interviews, specifically in phenomenological studies that require a deep understanding of the participants' lived experiences (Creswell, 2007).

Recognize that the Research Context Matters in Implications Sections

HRD researchers must consider the research context when discussing the implications of their study for HRD practitioners. HRD roles, responsibilities, and practice, as defined by McLean and McLean (2001), might differ in different geographical and cultural contexts. It is only after learning about the dynamics of HRD in one context that a researcher can provide the audience with practical implications of a certain study. For example, if a researcher looks at women leadership in Thailand, research implications cannot follow for any other country. We believe that having a western view of HRD, despite studying non-western contexts, might account for the similarity of research implications for HRD practice that sometimes occur across contexts. Further, given that the articles in this issue used a qualitative methodology, implications for practice become even trickier, and qualitative methodologies do not lead to generalizable outcomes. In these cases, the contexts for implications apply very explicitly to the respondents. Any further implications can be hypothesized only.

Conclusion

We conclude with excerpts from the scripts of our opening story's character:

"I've seen where change comes from.

When it comes, it's like a song
you can't hold back.

Suddenly, there's a breath moving
through you, and...

you're singing!

And others pick up the tune and

start singing too.

And a sweet melody goes out into

the world...

and touches the heart of one person.

Then another.

And another.”

Girl Rising (Robbins, 2013)

References

- Ajzen, I. (1991). The theory of planned behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 50(2), 179–211.
- Ajzen, I. (2001). Nature and operation of attitudes. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52(1), 27-58.
- Alagaraja, M., & Wilson, K. (2016, in press). The confluence of individual autonomy and collective identity in India: A narrative ethnography using an Indian-U.S. socio-cultural lens. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 18(1).
- Bass, B. M. (1990). From transactional to transformational leadership: Learning to share the vision. *Organizational Dynamics*, 18(3), 19-31. doi:10.1016/0090-2616(90)90061-S
- Bierma, L. L. (2015). Critical human development to enhance reflexivity, change discourse, and adopt a call-to-action. *Human Resource Development Review*, 14(2), 119-124. doi: 10.1177/1534484315585206
- Bonebright, D. A., Cottledge, A. D., & Lonnquist, P. (2011). Developing women leaders on campus: A human resources–women’s center partnership at the University of

- Minnesota. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 14(1), 79-95. doi:
10.1177/1523422311429733
- Byrd, M. Y. (2009). Telling our stories of leadership: If we don't tell them they won't be told. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 11(5), 582-605. doi:
10.1177/1523422309351514
- Carter, N. M., & Silva, C. (2010). Women in management: Delusions of progress. *Harvard Business Review*, 88(3), 19-21.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Eagly, A. H., & Carli, L. L. (2007). *Through the Labyrinth: The truth about how women become leaders*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Eagly, A., & Heilman, M. (2014). Proposal for special issue of Leadership Quarterly on gender and leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 25(6), 1186. doi:
doi:10.1016/j.leaqua.2014.11.004
- Grenier, R. S. (2015). Autoethnography as a legitimate approach to HRD research: A methodological conversation at 30,000 feet. *Human Resource Development Review*, 14(3), 332-350. doi: 10.1177/1534484315595507
- Hannah, S. T., Uhl-Bien, M., Avolio, B., & Cavarretta, F. L. (2009). A framework for examining leadership in extreme contexts. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 20(6), 897-919. doi: 10.1016/j.leaqua.2009.09.006
- Jacobson, S. A., Callahan, J. L., & Chosh, R. (2015, pre-print on-line). A place at the window: Theorizing organizational change for advocacy of the marginalized. *Human Resource Development Review*, 14(4). doi: 10.1177/1534484315608555

Katz, A. (2012, May 18). Men, women equally charting new roles. Retrieved September 15, 2015, from <http://bakerdaboll.com/pdf/B&D - Business Courier - Article - Men Women New Roles - 18MAY2012.pdf>

Marshall, C., & Young, M. D. (2006). Gender and methodology. In C. Skelton, B. Francis, & L. Smulyan (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of gender and education* (pp. 63-78). San Francisco, CA: SAGE.

McLean, G. N. (2010). The need for indigenous theory and practice in human resource development in Thailand. *NIDA HROD Journal*, (1), 1-19.

McLean, G. N., & McLean, L. (2001). If we can't define HRD in one country, how can we define it in an international context? *Human Resource Development International*, 4(3), 313-326. doi: 10.1080/13678860110059339

Robbins, R. (Director). (2013). *Girl rising* [Motion picture on DVD]. CNN Films

Toor, S. (2011). Differentiating leadership from management: An empirical investigation of leaders and managers. *Leadership Management and Engineering*, 11(4), 310-320. doi: 10.1061/(ASCE)LM.1943-5630.0000138