7. Bodies and Identities in Constructing Leadership Capital

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Identities, bodies and leadership capital

In this chapter, I explore two interrelated aspects of public leadership that have received little attention. The first is 'identity' and I argue that leaders are under new pressures to produce 'appropriate' leadership identities (Alvesson and Willmott 2002). Second, I draw attention to the importance of bodies and bodily performance in public calculations of leadership and who delivers it.

I begin by defining the concepts of identities and bodies and their importance in producing leadership capital. Drawing on the results of a pilot study into representations of leaders' bodies, I argue that leaders' identities and bodies are under new scrutiny.

Leadership is at least partially established by leaders giving an impression of (cerebral) intelligence, invincibility and invulnerability — of mind over body. The leadership of women, and potentially leaders of different racial and cultural backgrounds is undermined by their bodies being fore-grounded in public representations. Women leaders face particular challenges, expected to establish leadership in the context of stereotypical views that see them as women and bodies, not leaders. How should leaders react? One commonly-argued option is for women leaders to ensure their bodies are camouflaged. I conclude the challenge is a more complex task of identity work for leaders: acknowledging how one may be represented and scrutinised and seeking to choose how one reacts to these conventions in order to subvert them.

Producing leadership

People in all sorts of public roles are under new pressures to deliver leadership and produce a leadership persona, which I define here as a persona or projected sense of self that 'looks' like leadership. The expansion of leadership ideas into the corporate sectors and beyond has meant that now people working in for example, schools, community organisations, not-for-profit, sports and health sectors, are all subject to pressures to 'be' or 'become' leaders.

In the production of leadership identities, societies regulate the identities that may be taken up and individual leaders conform to, and struggle against, societal and organisational scripts of who they should be as leaders. Scholars have characterised this dynamic process as 'identity work' or 'forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that may be productive

of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness’ (Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003: 1165). It is important to note that while leaders may have always been engaged in this process two trends may have magnified identity pressures. The first is proliferating media channels which increase scrutiny of and speculation about leaders’ lives. Even those who formerly have been able to work inconspicuously such as bureaucrats or community leaders now often find themselves feted as role models and featured in magazines, websites and the like. The second trend is the measurement and management of leader performance that is now a pervasive aspect of organisational life. Appraisal processes, feedback instruments and other techniques of selection and promotion mean that most leaders are regularly tested against and expected to have their identities conform to, organisationally and societally-specified norms of success. Part of leadership work is producing a convincing leadership persona.

Bodies and bodily performances, including physical stature, physical features such as stance, gestures and facial characteristics and the way these are represented are also important to the construction of leadership personae. Here again there are new levels of visibility, scrutiny and management that apply to leaders and their bodies. The bodies of men and women, of indigenous and non-Anglo leaders, are often represented differently, activating unconscious processes and societal archetypes that reinforce or undermine authority, power and leadership capital (Sinclair 1998). For example, photographs of presidential campaigner Hilary Clinton capture large teeth and an appearance of desperation that are not present in photographs of her male rivals. Such representations are not accidental, according to feminist theorists who argue that they reflect a fear of female power or the ‘monstrous feminine’ (Creed 1993).

So, identities and bodies are important in the production of leadership and leadership capital. By adding the term ‘capital’ to leadership, I am following a tradition of usage to underline collective and complex processes of production. Leadership capital or an agreed reserve of leadership credibility is collectively negotiated and allocated to certain individuals by societal groups and norms. I also suggest with this notion of ‘capital’ that some groups and individuals may have access to more resources in creating leadership. We naturally expect certain individuals — native English speakers or well-educated men, for example — to be likely to provide leadership. Others, such as Indigenous or women leaders, cannot so easily draw from this established bank of expectations about where leadership will lie.

Pressures to produce a leadership persona

Political and corporate leaders are increasingly being encouraged to craft their personae, lives and their legacies to reinforce their status as leaders. From a leader’s point of view, this may involve authoring a biographical narrative that helps establish and deliver one’s credentials as a leader to followers.

Institutions, including corporations, political parties and governments gain an interest in monitoring leader identities and performances. Leaders are subject to image 'makeovers' and coached in communication styles. Corporate leaders cultivate personas that engender confidence among stakeholders and share-markets. They select the forums to which they lend their 'presence' while avoiding over-exposure. There are now, in Australia at least, 'beauty' pageants for business leaders in which panels select top leaders in particular categories, for example 'Young Entrepreneur' or 'Best Director'. These and other events are often photographed and stage-managed to convey the requisite levels of gravitas with a hint of 'quirkiness' or individuality.

The many pressures described above impinge on leaders who feel compelled to manage their personae (Collinson 2003; Thomas *et al.* 2004; Thomas and Graham 2005; Linstead 2006; Sveningsson and Larson 2006). New leadership discourses around asserting one's authenticity, for example, may heighten anxiety to demonstrably secure one's identity as a leader. Despite such efforts, there often remains an inescapable predictability about these representations of leadership, creating what Guthey and Jackson (2005) describe as an 'authenticity paradox': pressure to manufacture an 'authentic persona' which, by its very process renders that authenticity impossible.

Perceptions of leadership or greatness are always bestowed by followers. They are indelibly tied to a society's myths and history, which in the Australian case is interwoven with assumptions of masculinity, physical toughness and self-reliance (Sinclair 1994). A recent example of these gender effects in leadership identities occurred in the 2007 Australian Federal election campaign during which the then Leader of the Opposition, Kevin Rudd, described his eviction from his childhood home. This story about his identity was successfully used to establish his 'battler' credentials, and to show the roots of his claimed economic conservatism. In contrast, Rudd's Deputy, Julia Gillard, was featured in the media in her childless and partnerless home, symbolised by an empty fruit-bowl. This story of Gillard's identity — as a single, childless woman — was used in some parts of the media to question her status as 'normal' woman and in turn, her credentials for leadership.

As these and other examples show, how leaders go about their identity work reveals that it is rarely a process of simply crafting and projecting a self. Available leadership spaces and societal readiness to endow leadership capital are already deeply inscribed by gendered and cultural assumptions (Eagly and Karau 2002; Heilman *et al.* 2004). Women leaders in traditionally male dominated environments experience particular pressures to produce non-threatening leadership selves, to camouflage aspects of their gender, their children and sexualities (Thomas *et al.* 2004; Thomas and Graham 2005). Men also experience

pressure to conform to often narrowly prescribed understandings of who a male leader should be.

Leadership bodies

The preceding discussion focused on pressures to project a successful identity but the bodily production of leadership is also a crucial and neglected aspect in leadership research.¹ What part do bodies, and public representations of bodies, play in producing or undermining leadership capital?

As part of my research in corporate leadership, I have studied photographs of corporate leaders in the business press. If they are male, leader images are of two main types: the large headshot or the shot of head and upper body. The upper body is presented as dark, without definition and often shading seamlessly into the background. Garments function to be uniform and camouflage with the occasional quirk: a bow tie, watch, or a freckled hand that allows a fleeting glimpse into age and vulnerability. If lower bodies are included in the photo they disappear into the background, groins and hips are shielded (sometimes literally with hands or arms) and bodies reduced to a silhouette. With full body shots, men are pictured against neutral or structural backdrops, rarely cluttered with objects or people. The overall effect is to render the body invisible or irrelevant. This leadership is without a body and therefore invincible and immortal (Sinclair 2005). All that's important is in the head, conveyed in a steely gaze or lines that function as reassuring badges of experience.

If we turn to look at representations of women leaders the photographs are very different. More of the body is included and more skin — in arms, legs, throats. Clothing, jewellery and other personal props give more away about the character of the leader. Colours are more evident in clothing, sometimes conveying frivolity or vanity. Backgrounds are more likely to also speak about this leader and can include photos or books, sometimes with a general sense of clutter that is rarely part of a male leader's photograph. Representations of male leaders of Indigenous or non-Anglo backgrounds are more likely to foreground body features, potentially reinforcing racial stereotypes (see also Sinclair 2007).

To more systematically explore these observations, we undertook a pilot study of the representation of leader's bodies in a selection of Australian newspapers and business magazines² over the week of 9-16 November 2007. We wanted to map how leaders' bodies were photographed and represented in the media, to explore which criteria emerged as important in the framing and imputation of power to some leadership bodies.

We chose four variables to explore: body composition or how much of leaders' bodies was included in the photograph (from head/neck, through the addition of shoulders or armpits, to waist, groin and below groin or full body); the amount of (non-facial) skin visible (from none to arms, legs, cleavage/upper chest, waist

up and combinations of these); the clothing in which they were photographed as either 'neutral' (expected for their role, such as a business suit) or 'non-neutral' (unexpected or out-of-context clothing or garments); and backgrounds which we classified as 'neutral' (barely visible, predictable, bland, unimportant) or 'non-neutral' (leaders in surprising settings which changed the way they were viewed). The independent variables we mapped were type of leader (community, political, business or public sector professional), their sex and their ethnicity (Caucasian and non-Caucasian).³ The sampling period was a couple of weeks before the Federal election and so political leaders were probably unusually well-represented in the media.

Many factors emerged as important considerations in how leadership bodies might be read and interpreted in this pilot study. One is the size of the picture and the positioning in the paper and on the page. Another is the important role of captions which change the way a pictured body is viewed. For example, in one of a media star and a woman who were involved in a dispute, the caption listed their names and added theirs was 'just a physical relationship'. We recorded in which newspapers and magazines leader portrayals occurred. The impact of editorial policy and media ownership on leader portrayals is also potentially a rich area for further analysis.

A criticism of our study might argue that we were capturing simply photographers' biases and conventions, perhaps in turn a reflection of editors' interests in selling papers. The media is manipulative in who and how it chooses to portray leaders, for example, closer to the election the soon-to-be deposed Government leader, John Howard, is pictured in funereal darkness and in another case, in darkness with an illuminated exit sign behind him. A related concern is the presence of our own biases. Others looking at the same photograph might make very different judgements about these leaders.

We acknowledge both concerns as limitations. Our study does not aim to capture an objective picture of how leaders' bodies are viewed, because no such unitary or final view is possible. Another study would be needed to systematically test people's responses to these representations of leaders. However, it is both possible and important to begin to systematically explore the multiplicity and features of representations.

Further, media gatekeepers of body representations play an important role in reflecting and shaping the public gaze about the nature of public leadership. Our intent is not to identify facts but discover more about the body as mediator in taken-for-granted processes of constructing leadership.

What did we find? Out of approximately 493 representations, there were 412 men and 81 women, including 76 leaders from community, 190 political, 161 business and 66 public sector professionals. There were only 17 non-Caucasians in our study (a number we judged too small to meaningfully analyse) but these

were largely in the community and business sectors. These raw figures already show not just who is in leader positions, but who is regarded as embodying leadership worthy of news readership.

Turning to body composition, 20% of representations of male leaders were of head only and a further 15% with shoulders. For women, only 13% were head only and 9% with shoulders. In contrast, 37% of women (compared to only 20% of men) were portrayed with their whole body. The portrayal of whole-body was particularly noticeable with women community leaders (58%). 72% of community leaders were pictured with their waists, groins and/or full body showing. This contrasted with 63% of business leaders. Even where more of the bodies of business leaders were shown, they were likely to be rendered unimportant by clothing, lighting or situation.

On the skin exposed variable, 93% of male leaders had no skin apart from face exposed, while only 34% of women were in this category. Sex differences become more interesting by looking at what parts of the skin are captured and portrayed. While only 4% of men had arms, legs *or* cleavage/upper chest exposed, 33% of women were portrayed with one of these areas revealed. Looking at multiple combinations of skin exposure, only 2% of men (or eight out of 414) men were portrayed with two or more of the skin of arms, legs and cleavage/upper chest visible, compared to 33% of women (or 27 out of 82).

We also found sharp differences between the sexes in whether male and female leaders enjoyed neutral (for example offices or walls of buildings) or non-neutral backgrounds and clothing. 35% of women were presented against non-neutral backgrounds (for example, Queensland Premier Anna Bligh in an aeroplane), while only 21% of male leaders were photographed against novel or unpredictable backdrops. Looking at clothing, these differences were even more marked, with 40% of women leaders represented in non-conventional clothing (for example, not a business suit) whereas only six per cent of male leaders were portrayed in this way.

Although it can be argued that women have a wider range of acceptable clothing, these findings still seem to suggest that there are likely to be subtle – and less subtle – markers that are included in representations of women that may draw attention to, for example, idiosyncrasy or sexuality, which in turn may undermine their capacity to be seen as leaders. Even though social conventions, such as clothing, are different for men and women, it is important to understand the way these conventions are then exploited: for men it is to conceal and downplay bodies while highlighting intellect power; for women highlighting dress and bodies does the reverse.

What does this pilot study suggest about the role of bodies in the production of leadership? First, there is evidence here that leaders from some sectors experience more visibility but it is visibility of a certain kind. Political and

business leaders are much more widely portrayed than community leaders (which might be expected given the selection of newspapers and magazines we chose). Among those commonly portrayed political and business leaders, men significantly outnumber women and men are many times more likely to be portrayed without bodies or other-than-facial skin. Such portrayals, we argue, reinforce an image of cerebral mastery and substance rather than bodily idiosyncrasy or frailty (Sinclair 2007).

How should leaders react?

Some leadership commentators argue that we are in a 'postheroic' leadership phase. Yet other evidence suggests followers continue to collude with the idea of leaders who are in some way above bodily matters, not vulnerable to bodily ailments and who can deliver mythic feats in maintaining share prices or keeping down interest rates. These leaders are 'above more ordinary men' in their powers (Sinclair 1994; 2005). We know that male leaders are at least as likely as women to experience serious ailments which will undermine their capacity to lead. Yet the findings above show that when we examine representations made available for the public gaze, we are being asked to believe that male leaders are less subject to the limitations of their bodies.

Through our pilot study we have documented a systematic bias in representations which portrays more of women leaders' bodies and skin, a tendency which potentially undermines their leadership. Feminist and other research affirms that power, gender and bodies are integrally connected (Butler 1993; Gatens 1996). Norms about leaders' bodies and their presentation are often interwoven into cultures. For example, in traditional Chinese cultures, a mandarin's status is signified by high collar and large sleeves that hide hands and foster inscrutability. In many Western cultures, young women perceive they have little power beyond the sexual power of their bodies. In showing off more of their bodies they gain fleeting power, but are simultaneously condemned to body-defined identities.

Representations of gendered bodies thus interact with likely attributions of power, authority and leadership. Women's bodies can be portrayed as frail (not stable or sound), elderly (cranky or 'past it', for example, particularly photographs of Indigenous women leaders), surrounded by distracting clutter (not focused on the job), or sufficiently generous to suggest a failure of self-discipline.

Critical and feminist scholarship has convincingly demonstrated how creating 'otherness' enables the norm to go unseen (Benjamin 1988). Further, dichotomies such as mind/body function alongside gender and racial dichotomies such as male/female and black/white to ensure that some people are defined and judged as bodies, without mind. Feminist theory also shows how the location of all that

is sexual on women leaders prevents us from seeing the way sexualities are threaded through our appetites for leadership and the performances some male leaders deliver.

So how do, or might, leaders respond? There is a genre of literature and advice that encourages women leaders to conform — to dress professionally but innocuously, to be assertive but not aggressive in how they talk and negotiate, to steer an inoffensive path in the body language they adopt.

Yet, a now substantial body of research confirms that it is not what the woman leader does or even looks like that is important but how that behaviour is perceived and judged (see for example Heilman *et al.* 2004). Such judgements take place against a backdrop of gender-inscribed assumptions and stereotypes that are beyond the control of the leader. So, no amount of ‘dressing-for-success’ or finding the right height of shoe heel (too high=sexually available, too flat=lesbian or feminist) will necessarily imbue an image of leadership.

A different way forward may lie in leaders — of all genders and cultural backgrounds — being aware of the effects of these processes. By being aware, several things become possible. First, leaders can seek to influence the kinds of photographs and representations that are taken and used. Leaders may choose to downplay bodies in the clothing or type of shot that is taken. Alternatively they may choose to *not* do so, to make their bodies and their bodily performances a part of their leadership work. In other research, I have drawn on case studies of Chief Commissioner of Victorian Police, Christine Nixon, and Indigenous school principal, Chris Sarra, to show how paying attention to bodies can be a powerful addition to leadership work (Sinclair 2007).

Further, there is power for leaders in developing an understanding of the wider societal forces that shape how their leadership is seen. Being given the concepts to understand one’s experiences as a product of structurally and socially determined forces alongside individual action is existentially empowering. In my own ‘journey around leadership,’ drawing on feminist research to help explain my experience enabled me to begin to see the ‘bigger picture’ of what was going on when I, as a woman, was working with predominantly male executive groups.

For the leader, such a deeper understanding and awareness may also enable the capacity to sit apart from the immediate need for acceptance, belonging or approval. This capability is explored in Paul Atkins’ chapter in this volume under the title of ‘Leadership as a Response not Reaction’. It involves developing the capacity to differentiate our reactions from the observed experience: to both watch our lives and leadership at the same time as living it.

In my experience working with leaders, most readily identify the societal and organisational identity ‘scripts’ that prescribe who they should be and how their

bodies should conform. Once identified, there is the possibility of choosing how to react such as continuing to perform to win favour and recognition or to not conform to script for the moment or under these circumstances.

Conclusion

Leadership and leadership capital is constantly being negotiated and produced through the identities and bodily performances of leaders interacting with the responses of audiences. The high level of scrutiny experienced by many leaders in the political, business and community domains introduces new pressures on leaders to present convincing leadership identities and bodies. For some, the opportunities for performance and 'exposure' support claims to leadership while, for others, tacit but powerful norms in representation and stereotyping potentially undermine leadership.

Leaders have various ways of responding to these pressures, from active collusion through various strategies of camouflage, sense-making, interrogation, distancing and resistance. Because leadership capital is collectively produced, no strategy can ever be considered as individually successfully accomplished. It is rather a matter of navigating through the externally and internally-generated pressures and anxieties with insight and understanding of wider structural forces. The goals of this kind of identity work in leadership may be to argue for a deeper understanding about the way in which identities and bodies are interpreted and to exercise some choice about how, as a leader, to react.

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ENDNOTES

¹ There is a tradition of feminist research examining the role of bodies (for example, Butler 1993), work focusing on bodies in organisations and the production of masculinities in the workplace, yet very little of this has been taken up in the leadership literature. There is however, a new theme in the leadership advice genre which focuses on tuning the leadership body as a way of coping with stress and further research examining how the body may be a resource for leaders in mediating more positive work relations (see for example Heaphy and Dutton 2008).

² Data collection and analysis was undertaken independently by Dr Pat Seybolt. Decision criteria were discussed and refined as the study progressed. Eight newspapers and magazines were included: *The Age*, *The Age Weekly*, *The Australian*, *The Australian Weekly*, *The Financial Review*, *The Financial Review Weekly Magazine*, *Boss Magazine* (appears in *AFR*) and *Business Review Weekly*.

³ With each of these dependent and independent variables, there were clear photographs which were hard to rate. We independently rated some and discussed others. Who constituted a leader was often a difficult decision and particularly who constituted a 'community leader', for example the wives of politicians were featured extensively in this period and also retired political leaders. We classified the former as 'community' and the latter as 'political'.