

Questioning the Notion of Feminine Leadership: A Critical Perspective on the Gender Labelling of Leadership

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Traditionally, leadership has been equated with masculinity. Managerial jobs, at least in business and on senior levels, have been defined as a matter of instrumentality, autonomy, result-orientation, etc. something which is not particularly much in line with what is broadly assumed to be typical for females. Today, however, there seems to be a broad interest in leadership being more participatory, non-hierarchical, flexible and group-oriented. These new ideas on leadership are often seen by students of gender as indicating a feminine orientation. This article argues that it is necessary to critically discuss the whole idea of gender labelling leadership as masculine or feminine and suggests that we should be very careful and potentially aware of the unfortunate consequences when we use gender labels. Constructing leadership as feminine may be of some value as a contrast to conventional ideas on leadership and management but may also create a misleading impression of women's orientation to leadership as well as reproducing stereotypes and the traditional gender division of labour.

Introduction

The world of management is strongly dominated by men — and leadership is, or at least used to be, conventionally constructed mainly in masculine terms. This relegates everything socially perceived as 'non-masculine' (like family and acknowledgement of feelings, vulnerabilities and dependencies) to the marginal and places it primarily outside the organization — and also makes it harder for women (with family responsibilities for young children) to be recruited to and function in managerial jobs. The present ideas about feminine leadership and claims about women having an advantage in managerial work due to their femininity (e.g. Grant 1988; Helgesen 1990; Lipman-Blumen 1992) may be seen as a challenge to the dominance of cultural ideas about masculinity and a progressive force facilitating the options of women to reach senior positions, to act in these positions more in harmony with their (female) identities and values as well as transforming organizations into more humane, relations-oriented, flexible, participatory and caring institutions.

The thesis of this article is, however, that a radical transformation of corporations and other organizations is perhaps not best achieved by just getting more women into management, hoping that they will provide the missing elements for the creation of the

good organization. To repeat, vary and reinforce dominant rhetorics about all the good things that something feminine may add to leadership provides a mixed blessing in terms of organizational improvement. In particular, we find the notion of feminine leadership misleading and risky in terms of gender equality and social development. The major part of this article thus seeks to discuss ideas on feminine leadership and argues the case for seeking ways critically to understand management and leadership other than using feminine leadership as a slogan for promoting gender equality as well as other virtues, e.g. more humane organizations, increased participation, improved business, and so on. Instead of a blank rejection of the concept of feminine leadership we want to problematize it, recognizing positive as well as more negative ways of using it. Arguably, it has more value within a critical context — it can be used as a counterpoint to some conventional ideas on management and leadership — than as a means for empirically illuminating women's orientation to leadership or as a label for the promotion of women as candidates for managerial labour.

Our point is that the predominant values and ideas in our society, embraced not just by many men but also by many women (in particular those occupying or who are candidates for managerial positions), need to be thought through in a deeper way than is

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encouraged by what may be referred to as a 'narrow' gender vocabulary. Such profound rethinking goes far beyond issues of sex ratios or the employment of feminine leadership. Such values and ideas, like growth, exploitation of nature, hedonism, affluent consumption, careerism — firmly anchored in the material operations of capitalism and market economy — seem to be the major constraints to radical transformations. When such broadly shared values are circling around the dominance of instrumental rationality and the priority of material goods, it means an 'imbalance' between what is often referred to as 'the feminine' and 'the masculine', and in various ways these values preserve inequalities between men and women and (re)produce global inequalities. Arguably, replacing men with women in senior positions may have little transformative power. The present article tries to put feminine leadership in a broader and more critical context than is usual and discusses why we must be very careful about gender labelling and perhaps be more discriminating in using it in relation to leadership.

Leadership and masculinity

Historically and even today the manager and leadership have conventionally been constructed in masculine terms. A masculine ethic was part of the early image:

This 'masculine ethic' elevates the traits assumed to belong to some men to necessities for effective management: a tough-minded approach to problems; analytic abilities to abstract and plan; a capacity to set aside personal, emotional considerations in the interests of task accomplishment; and a cognitive superiority in problem-solving and decision-making ... when women tried to enter management jobs, the 'masculine ethic' was invoked as an exclusionary principle. (Kanter 1977, p. 22)

The numerical dominance of men and the resulting construction of leadership within a masculine frame of reference have influenced the number of women in management. There have mainly been two ways of explaining the small numbers of women in management: those emphasizing differences between men and women have mainly pointed at psychological traits and socialization background, different work orientations or educational/career choices, and those favouring the explanation that women and men are alike have pointed at sociological, structural explanations, such as the effects of positions in

organizations, organizational policy, interests, bias in evaluations, etc. A third orientation, bridging micro and macro is to consider the cultural contexts and how identity/subjectivity is being formed by cultural forces operating on the individual, at the same time as identity/subjectivity is a vital element in the ongoing construction of culture (Alvesson and Billing 1997).

Women are greatly outnumbered by men in positions of formal power and authority, high status and high incomes. Depending on where one draws the line and starts counting managers, the proportions vary. In the Scandinavian Airlines System, a large airline company, at a conference for top managers some years ago, 4% of these were women, 40% of the total number of employees were female (Billing and Alvesson 1994). In the US federal administration, half of the employees and 7% of those in the three top grades are women (Stivers 1993). In Western countries, perhaps 10–20% or so of middle-level managers and less than 5% of top level managers are females (Morrison and Von Glinow 1990). In the USA there are more female managers than in other countries; according to Northcraft and Gutek (1993), 42% of all managers are women but they hold less than 1% of top positions. Of course, statistics are always unreliable and frequently say more about norms for classification than about reality 'out there', but it is still clear that men have close to a monopoly on the most senior positions and greatly outnumber women in middle-level managerial jobs in virtually every country.

These numbers, but also deeply rooted cultural ideas and current processes of social constructions, give leadership a masculine image in most countries (Collinson and Hearn 1996; Hearn and Parkin 1986/87), even though this seems to be changing. Power and status are connected to the job and the content of leadership is 'framed' by certain kinds of (male) persons occupying and/or seen as appropriate for these positions, becoming the standard against which other categories are measured. This may prevent women (as well as working-class men and members of some ethnic groups) from getting such jobs and also result in biased evaluations of superiors, colleagues and subordinates. Also, according to Reskin and Padavic (1994, p. 96) 'most cultures share the social value, often rooted in religious beliefs, that women should not exercise authority over men'.

But what do we mean when we talk about masculinity and femininity? To begin with, we must realize that they are categories defined within culture, not by biological necessity and that they are created, together, out of a

complex of dynamic interwoven, cognitive, emotional, and social forces (Keller 1985). The feminine and the masculine are often seen as mutually exclusive and they are essentially related to the bodies of men and women. Throughout the western history of philosophy male and female have been contrasted using the opposite traits, rationality/emotionality, objectivity/subjectivity, culture/nature, etc.

A typical description of masculinity stresses features such as 'hard, dry, impersonal, objective, explicit, outer-focused, action-oriented, analytic, dualistic, quantitative, linear, rationalist, reductionist and materialist' (Hines 1992, p. 328). This concept of masculinity overlaps with what Marshall (1993) views as male values or the male principle: self-assertion, separation, independence, control, competition, focused perception, rationality, analysis, etc (ibid, p. 124). While recognizing the multiplicity of masculinity and that masculinity is shifting in the lifetime of individuals, Kerfoot and Knights view as its core, at least in managerial and organizational work, a preoccupation with a particular instrumental form of 'rational control' (1996, p. 79).

Masculinity and femininity are not fixed once and for all but are constantly changing and culturally and historically 'dependent' on the meanings we ascribe to them. Kimmel writes about historical constructions of masculinity and how the co-existence between the manhood of the artisan and the patriarch eventually was threatened when marketplace man entered the historical arena. 'He makes both freedom and equality problematic, eliminating the freedom of the aristocracy and proletarianizing the equality of the artisan' (1994, p. 124). Kimmel regards marketplace masculinity as the present normative definition of American masculinity and its characteristics, aggression, competition and anxiety as setting the standard for other men. 'The hegemonic definition of manhood is a man in power, a man with power, and a man of power' (ibid, p. 125).

Arguably, masculinity is performed by women as well as by men.¹ Fagenson and Jackson (1993) refer to research which has shown that 'the more "masculine" characteristics possessed by women, the more likely the women are to be perceived as successful managers and located in powerful corporate positions' (p. 315). They mention books which have been written and training programs which have been designed to help women managers emphasize so-called masculine traits (for example, Harragan's book (1977) *Games Mother Never Taught You: Corporate Gamesmanship for Women*). Women who are successful as managers are said to perform

hegemonic masculinity (Cheng 1996, p. xii). Hegemonic masculinity was defined by Connell (1987, p. 184) as a 'social ascendancy achieved in a play of social forces that extends beyond contests of brute power into the organization of private life and cultural processes'. Many collaborate to sustain the cultural ideals and the power of hegemonic masculinities (which need not correspond to actual personalities of the majority of men, there are not many actual Humphrey Bogarts or Sylvester Stallones, Connell writes).² Other patterns and groups (like women) are subordinated.

There is a price to hegemonic masculinity, and this is described by Kaufman (1994, p. 148) as a 'process through which men come to suppress a range of emotions, needs, and possibilities, such as nurturing, receptivity, empathy, and compassion, which are experienced as inconsistent with the power of manhood'. And we may add that this counts for many women managers as well in that they suppress these qualities. The problem for women as well as for men managers is that the suppression of these emotions and needs may well be unhealthy. Kaufman (1994) says that men suppress their emotions because feelings and emotions are associated with femininity.

Masculinity is often viewed as the antithesis of femininity: 'This notion of anti-femininity lies at the heart of contemporary and historical conceptions of manhood, so that masculinity is defined more by what one is not rather than who one is' (Kimmel 1994, p. 126).

So far a relatively clear-cut picture on masculinity/femininity and men/women has been outlined. Two kinds of complications need to be taken seriously. The first is that there are signs indicating a relaxation of this strong polarization of masculinity and femininity. Recent conceptions of leadership and management are more in harmony with what the gender literature frequently refers to as feminine values and orientations, although this kind of explicit link to gender is seldom made outside the gender literature (Blomqvist 1994; Fondas 1997; Gherardi 1995). Also organizations where men occupy all the senior positions may well celebrate orientations such as intuition, creativity, relations-orientation, recognizing the importance of feelings and so on (Alvesson 1995, 1998). This is not seen in terms of femininity, meaning that the cultural meanings in terms of gender seem to be changing. Management and leadership are decreasingly constructed in strongly masculine ways. This is something that the gender literature needs to be much more sensitive to.

The second complication is that women in management do not necessarily identify themselves with feminine orientations. This may very well be changing, if reconstructions of management and leadership in more pro-feminine terms provide more options for such identifications, but available studies of female managers indicate that they often either have or develop orientations and commitments that are more masculine than feminine, given the definitions in the gender literature cited above. Kanter (1977) refers to studies which show that women's identification with the masculine 'model' of managerial success becomes so important as they move up the organizational hierarchy, that they end up rejecting even the few valued feminine managerial traits they may have earlier endorsed. Hennig and Jardim's study (1977) of 25 senior female showed that identification with the father figure was significant for their success. All these women identified with their fathers rather than their mothers whom they tended to look down upon. In a questionnaire by Carlsen and Toft (1986) of Danish managers at various levels, more women (18%) than men (4%) reported a strong attachment to their fathers.

Neither the idea that management and leadership are firmly constructed as culturally masculine nor that females in managerial functions may deviate from such constructions can thus be taken as granted.

Despite indications that women in managerial positions have typically identified with masculine persons and meanings, the emphasis in research and popular writings has recently been to a higher degree on differences between women and men, suggesting that women favour a different leadership style, often referred to as feminine leadership.

Feminine leadership

The general interest in new ideas on leadership appears to have more or less accompanied the interest in feminine leadership and the increasing aim of bringing more women into management. The image of changing forms of management/leadership issues provides a vehicle for considering and facilitating career opportunities for women. Today we see a strong trend to bring forward differences between the sexes which are explained in gender-stereotypical ways (e.g. Grant 1988; Helgesen 1990). A salient idea here is the existence of what is called feminine leadership.

Femininity is often defined in complementary and corresponding terms to masculinity, as treated above. For Hines femininity is a matter

of 'the prioritizing of feelings ... the importance of the imaginative and creative' (1992, p. 314). Female values or the female principle are characterized by interdependence, cooperation, receptivity, merging, acceptance, awareness of patterns, wholes and contexts, emotional tone, personalistic perception, being, intuition, and synthesizing (Marshall 1993, p. 124) and Grant (1988) talks about 'nurturance, compassion, sensitivity, empathy'.

Women writers and managers have suggested that women managers may contribute in particular in the following important aspects: communication and cooperation, affiliation and attachment, power, and intimacy and nurture (Grant 1988). According to Grant and many other female writers (e.g. French 1986), women often have a different attitude to power compared to men. Unlike men, women tend to see power not so much as domination and an ability to control, but rather as a capacity, and particularly as a capacity stemming from and directed towards the entire community, it is claimed. Women's view of power is thus more relational and less purely individualistic. Some authors suggest that compared with men, women are able to exercise power in a more constructive way, mobilize human resources better, encourage creativity and change the hierarchical structures (Haslebo 1987). This may reduce self-confidence, but also promote self-disclosure, addressing one's own and the work units' weaknesses, establishing contact, building networks, monitoring problems and thus aiding learning and development (Fletcher 1994). Lipman-Blumen (1992) talks of a 'connective leadership' in which networking and shared responsibilities are central, encouraging people to connect to others and others' goals.

Fagenson (1993, p. 5) in her summary of the research suggests that women managers 'have a transformational, democratic, and/or "web" rather than a hierarchical style of leadership and more satisfied subordinates than men managers'. Helgesen (1990, pp. 38-9) defines what she calls the 'feminine principles' on the basis of one of her female interview statements. That is 'principles of caring, making intuitive decisions, not getting hung up on hierarchy or all these dreadfully boring business-school management ideas; having a sense of work as being part of your life, not separate from it; putting your labour where your love is; being responsible to the world in how you use your profits; recognizing the bottom line should stay there — at the bottom'. Helgesen emphasizes women's difference from men in that they are more caring, involved and listening than men. Helgesen

describes women in rather stereotypical expectations of other people, assuming that female managers are more 'soft'. In her terminology the woman manager becomes like the good mother.

Rosener found that women more often talk about themselves as interactive, they 'actively work to make their interactions with others positive for everyone involved' (1990, p. 120). Characteristics such as encouraging participation, sharing power and information, and enhancing other people's self-worth, getting others excited about their work and energizing them are highlighted among women. These specific orientations are normally seen as originating either in early childhood, where the separation-individuation process is more complex and longer for girls than boys, leading to more salient relatedness-orientations among women than men, or in experiences in the family sphere and, in particular with children.

The review literature is rather general and tends to embrace stereotypical ideas. Typically no distinctions are made between different groups of women (or men) or historical and culturally different settings. There is thus a tendency to 'essentialize' gender. It is, however, possible to emphasize that gender division of labour is an historical phenomenon and that social changes may transform the basis for this and hence for the subjectivities of women.

While Grant, Helgesen, Rosener and others emphasize the distinctiveness of female managers — or women's preference for leadership — and portray this as something in common for females, a rather large body of studies points in the opposite direction. Most comparative studies of male and female managers conclude that there are modest if any differences (e.g. Bartol 1978; Butterfield and Powell 1981; Dobbins and Platz 1986; Marshall 1984; Powell 1988). An important exception is Eagly and Johnson (1990) who do find support for the ideas that there are some sex differences, women being, for example, more participation-oriented. The general conclusion is, however, that women and men in management roles have similar aspirations, values and other personality traits as well as job-related skills and behaviours. Female managers often hold a similar impression. This was confirmed at a recent conference for female managers in Copenhagen (July 1997). The women participating also agreed that they had the same good opportunities to become managers as men, if they wanted to. Also the conference participants confirmed that the women present shared men's values or rather that they accept the 'male' norms in organizations.

There is no difference between male and female leaders — only between people — there are different types within each sex. When an organization chooses a new manager the only thing, which matters, is what the organization needs here and now ... women and men have the same good opportunities. But it is a fact that many women do not want to. I do not know why ... but women should not use their sex as an excuse for anything. Try again, I say, when they complain. I have never experienced that men only promote men. (Statement by the female police director of Copenhagen, cited in the Danish newspaper *Politiken*, 15 June 1997)

At this conference many women agreed that there were no obstacles for women to get to the top but hold the opinion that 'it is necessary that women take responsibility for themselves and their lives'. 'We shall learn to realize that it is possible to work 60 hours a week and at the same time be a good mother. It is all a matter of organizing yourself, for example with an au pair in the house,' one participant said.

This conference is only one example of the many 'voices of the field' that seem to confirm that women managers are similar to men and clearly accept the dominant values and rules in the organizations (e.g. to work 60 hours a week if you have a top position and that you must adapt to the job demands rather than the other way around).

A few studies have also investigated similarities/differences within the category of female managers. White (1995) wanted to investigate whether a group of women executives used interactive styles, and if and why there were styles they found less comfortable than others. She found that what these women had in common was not conditional on their gender, the only thing which seemed to be different from men was their higher level of commitment, to their careers, their organizations and their staff.

What this group illustrates clearly is their diversity. They have different approaches to life and relationships: they have different perceptions about situations and organizations; they are motivated by different things in contrasting ways; ... other differences are a result of their experience, their different ages, and varying expectations ... They differ in their interpretation and perception of what being a woman means and the part it plays in their life as a leader. (1995, p. 208)

Bayes (1987) arrived at a similar conclusion, stressing the diversity of female managers in public bureaucracies. All kinds of leadership styles were represented by the women — as was the case among their male colleagues. As with White's study, the female managers were perceived to work harder than the men.

From this one might conclude that the ideas about a specific form of feminine leadership as something anchored in the orientations or actions of women in managerial jobs do not receive much support. Perhaps the idea of feminine leadership should be seen as a regulative ideal, a normative construct, rather than an empirical phenomenon. It may be supported by work orientations among women in general, or at least a number of women, rather than grounded in the practice of females actually holding managerial positions. But also this kind of grounding appears as uncertain or at least unsupported. The whole picture is complicated by issues of selection to managerial positions, as well as transformations preceding and following social mobility and promotion. Those women wanting to become and being chosen for managerial jobs may differ from many other women; they may be more 'male-like' than the rest. Or, and better, they may *become* more 'male-like'. When people engage in a managerial career they do not just simply transport fixed orientations to the new situation, but develop or redefine new orientations, act in accordance with norms, expectations, material contingencies, etc., making it difficult, perhaps meaningless, to compare the ideals, subjectivities and actions of women in very different situations. Comparisons may say more about the situations than the persons (Kanter 1977; Lefkowitz 1994). Most people probably hold rather vague ideas of how they would exercise leadership before achieving (formal or informal) positions and specific settings where it becomes relevant. What people feel or think about leadership in the abstract is of little relevance compared to what they do in specific contexts. The latter is difficult to predict. They also vary greatly.

It is therefore not easy to accept the idea that there really is a feminine leadership embraced by most women which will be manifested by these once they get managerial positions and thereby have a formal position for exercising leadership, in great numbers. Claims such as that 'the full potential of feminine leadership will only be realized when a large number of women managers begin to assert their true identity and use their special talents' (Sharma, cited in Townley 1994, p. 151) are highly speculative and assume the existence of (a) similarity among women; (b)

fixed true identities and talents; and (c) that these will be played out as an effect of the force of the mass without being strongly shaped by the situation and contingencies. We do not think any of these three conditions hold up under scrutiny. The possible increase in numbers of female managers will be fused by many other changes, including changes in the orientations and identities of women, before as well as when entering and working in managerial positions.

It may be tempting to say that feminine leadership is a myth or an ideology invented by certain pro-managerial feminists, consultants and (other) stereotype-embracing people convinced about the fixed and radically different nature of men and women. It may, however, also be seen as a constructive counterfoil to prevailing or older ideas about leadership, a counterfoil making it easier for a number of females — and progressive men — to identify with leadership and get some guidelines and legitimation. In this article we will concentrate on problems. This seems called for, given the large and expanding literature often uncritically celebrating feminine leadership and the relatively limited critical literature on the subject matter (e.g. Alvesson and Billing 1997; Calás and Smircich 1993).

Some problems with the idea of feminine leadership

In the following, four central aspects of women managers and feminine leadership will be discussed: first, the idea that women have a different leadership style based on their different experiences, i.e. claims made in the literature about the origin or source of something specifically feminine in relationship to leadership; second, problems of integrating feminine leadership characteristics with instrumental concerns; third, the danger that ideas about female managers having a specific style will reproduce stereotypical expectations to women, thereby sustaining vital aspects of the status quo in gender relations; and fourth, the possibility of a specific conception of women managers being used in an exploitative way within the framework of mainstream forms of management.³

Problems with the basis of feminine leadership

Many students of gender appear to hold the view that gender-specific orientations are contingent upon the gendered division of

labour, meaning that the primary base for women's and men's different experiences and different orientations is the fact that men and women have carried out, and still to a considerable degree do radically different things in family work and on the labour market. The orientations of women are assumed to emerge from the family sphere, in particular in relation to nurturing children (e.g. Hartsock 1987). Strong gender differences in preferences for or style of leadership would then be an outcome of women being primarily responsible for children and a household.⁴

The promotion of female managers through the launching of the advantages of household and childcare experiences provides a mixed blessing in the reduction of gender equality as it draws upon, and in a sense celebrates, the placement of women in patriarchy, i.e. as primarily responsible for children and home (Alvesson and Billing 1997; Calás and Smircich 1993). The idea involves a conservative normalization of women as caretakers of primary children and family.

If the skills developed in the private sphere or in other ways developed by women (in early childhood or socialization) are not only transferable, but also an advantage in managing organizations, then why change gender division of labour? Advocates of feminine leadership claim that bringing up children and managing a home and family seem to lead to the endurance of stress, the ability to manage diverse tasks, intuition, problem-solving and skills in communication and coping with relations (Helgesen 1990; Grant 1988; Blixen-Krone Møller 1986; Haslebo 1987).

Problems of integrating feminine leadership with instrumental concerns

Without denying that running a home and work with children may lead to the development of valuable social skills, one may question whether these are fully transferable to all or most organizations, in particular those operating according to capitalist principles. Crucial here is the effective use of resources and getting results: this calls for a rather strong instrumental orientation. The cutting of costs and exploiting labour are frequently important elements here.

The notion of instrumentality marks a strong difference between capitalist managerial work, at least in many organizations, and 'family managerial work'. The latter is very much a matter of accomplishing well-being, harmony, and development as end-products. In business, these characteristics are, at best, of relevance if they are instrumental in accomplishing results. Fletcher

criticizes ideas about feminine leadership for pursuing a 'castrated' version of feminine values, skills and orientations. She argues that central to the mutual vulnerability, openness and mutual influence of the female orientation is reciprocity. This is 'antithetical to achieving pre-ordained instrumental goals. By its very nature, the outcomes of a mutual interaction are fluid, unknowable — the essence of creativity rather than management by objectives' (1994, p. 79). Even though 'business reality' does not exist simply gender-neutral — there is no best or only way of doing things — there is a considerable pressure for competitiveness and high profits that is not simply abolished with the entrance of more female managers. The instrumental nature of business and many other organizations clashes with the well-being of families. In addition, home-related skills may be seen as rather peripheral in relation to technical and core-competence knowledge. Assuming that the level of instrumentality as well as the relevance of technical skills and core competence differ between different functions and industries, the transferability of feminine skills to organizational contexts also differ.⁵ If female psychology and feminine values such as connection, nurture and acknowledging vulnerability are seen as central skills for women, they — to the extent that they are evaluated as having specific skills of relevance for managerial jobs — may appear more suitable as leaders of day care centres or personnel managers than as executives in industrial or financial corporations.

On the whole, one may question the full relevance and transferability of so-called feminine skills contingent upon family work to organizational context. The transferability is, arguably, greatest in 'family-like' organizational contexts. The idea of feminine leadership may thus reproduce gender divisions of labour at the managerial level: female managers are seen as suitable for certain sectors and functions and less so for the most powerful and prestigious ones.

Feminine leadership as stereotyping

Another problem with the idea that women in leadership contribute a specific set of feminine values might also reinforce stereotypical views on women. Even if there may be some tendencies for men or women to express differences in values, style or skills in some situations, it is important not to exaggerate these. Variety within the categories of men and women is much more profound than clear-cut sex differences in most respects. As suggested by studies on gender and leadership, women differ greatly and may develop

all sorts of orientations. Men also differ substantially. Actually, one ideal in gender studies would be to allow such diversity to flourish without cultural gender standards and rules for being (sex roles) constraining and repressing individuals. This would call for great care in stating what is 'natural' or 'normal' for women or men or claiming that women are so and so. Gender stereotypes — even those aimed at being positive ones — run against this ideal.

Eagly *et al.* (1992) found that females and males in leadership roles were evaluated similarly by the subordinates except when behaving in an authoritarian manner, when females were evaluated more negatively. In this kind of leadership behaviour, females thus were discriminated against. Ideas about feminine leadership may well reinforce and legitimate such devaluations and narrow the leadership repertoire of females, but not of males. Sometimes feminists comment upon the frequent observation that at least some women in managerial jobs are perceived as bossy or authoritarian. This is typically 'explained away' through pointing at external conditions, such as the need to adapt to male norms (Cockburn 1991) or the female managers having responsibility but not power (Stivers 1993). This may be the case, but this reinforces the assumption that a woman does not 'normally' act in this way. But why should we not allow for the possibility of females also acting in a variety of ways in managerial work related to their subjectivity, life situation or judgement of what a particular work situation calls for in terms of permissive or harsh behaviour? The notion of feminine leadership may thus run against the ideal of broadening the options for non-constrained acts of women, and instead tie these to a rather narrow set of leadership ideals and behaviours.

Women's so-called special skills might be exploited

A somewhat different problem concerning the idea of female managers possessing specific skills and orientations regards the possibility of using so-called feminine talents in exploitative ways in working life. Now we are not, as above, talking about the chance of feminine leadership legitimizing the traditional gender of labour through celebrating the skills of women developed in household work and childrearing. Women could very well come to provide the necessary oil to make the organizational machinery work better; and/or the beliefs of their motivational and persuasive

skills could be exploited as a potential tool for carrying out unpopular rationalizations more smoothly, with women acting as mediators between the top management and the workers (Calás and Smircich 1993). This is not a matter of whether women 'objectively' possess these skills and orientations or not, it is rather a matter of utilizing the self-understanding of the female managers and the expectations of others that the case is so.

Holmquist (1997) refers to women managers in the public sector as 'executioners' with a soft touch. Cutbacks in the Swedish public sector combined with increasing social problems make it something of an unpleasant post to be a manager where the main option is to make cutbacks on services within the area. Many of the women managers seem to internalize the problem of making the ends meet, thus blaming themselves if they do not succeed. Kolb (1992) shows how women may be inclined to work with conflicts behind the scene, doing important work, but remaining invisible and potentially preventing conflicts surfacing also in cases where airing these may be positive.

Of course, putting women — and women putting themselves — into conflict-solving positions may be the case, irrespective of a specific conception of women's orientations associated with feminine leadership. This conception does, however, reinforce the use of women in roles dealing with relations, feelings, climate and conflict resolution — while more substantial economic and technological issues remain within male spheres.

Counterpoint: some positive aspects

Having delivered all this critique, some more positive evaluations are called for. We certainly do not view the idea of feminine leadership as altogether bad, but want primarily here to draw attention to some problems as the critical-sceptical literature on the subject is very limited compared to the vast and often unnuanced literature preaching the virtues of women as managers and the idea of feminine leadership.

A positive feature is that it challenges traditional notions of organization, hierarchy, management and leadership. It has also the virtue of putting gender on the leadership agenda in a, for many, appealing and pedagogical manner, thus problematizing male domination. It may contribute to the de-masculinization of management. As a critique of dominating ideas and practices it is rather mild, it may even be described as a 'castrated' version of feminism (Fletcher

1994), but it probably has some appeal. In particular, the idea may facilitate the expansion of the number of women into senior positions in organizations. It may make more women consider managerial careers and jobs, strengthen their self-confidence, encourage more positive attitudes to females and make it easier for those in managerial jobs to consider styles other than the traditional ones. These positive aspects are, however, mainly restricted to certain types of managerial jobs, e.g. personnel management and those women (people) perceived as feminine and therefore fitting the notion of feminine leadership.

Beyond gender differences

Having pointed out some basic problems with the use of the notion of feminine leadership and the corresponding idea of the distinctiveness of female managers, we will go on by arguing for care and restraint in the use of the concepts of masculinities and femininities. Instead of tying the concepts to the bodies of men and women, one could treat them as traits or forms of subjectivities (orientations in thinking, feeling and valuing) that are potentially present in all persons, men as well as women although to different degrees. Masculinities and femininities, then, are not seen as essences, contained in the bodies of men and women, respectively. Women, when biologically defined, are thus typically seen as more characterized by femininities than masculinities, even though there is great variation in terms of the composition of the two (sets of) qualities. Some women may be described as masculine in orientations and priorities, some men as more feminine. This is in accordance with Marshall (1993) who suggests that we see

male and female values as qualities to which both sexes have access, rather than the exclusive properties of men and women, respectively. I believe that through biological and physical makeup, socialization, and social role, contemporary women are more often grounded in the female pole and men in the male pole. This patterning may well be contradicted or unclear for women with a strong patriarchal education. (p. 125)

One may add here that such contradictions or lack of clarity may be a result of gender-equal upbringing rather than an effect of strongly asymmetrical power relations in the family. Instead of seeing women's and men's traits and abilities as oppositions, it is possible to see them as complementary or loosely grouped,

men as well as women are capable of acting in what may be labelled masculine and feminine ways, based on instrumentality as well as on feelings, dependent upon the situation. According to Eagly and Johnson (1990), women in women-dominated work settings, e.g. nursing, manage in a more masculine way than their male colleagues. Being able to show what may be described as feminine as well as masculine behaviour means a broader spectrum of possible ways of acting than a person caught in sex-role stereotypes, and perhaps it is possible to be more effective because of the ability to cooperate and listen to the subordinates as well as, occasionally, being more directive, task-oriented and making unpopular decisions. Competitiveness is supplemented by cooperation and intuition. Rather than being stuck in a particular orientation, the transcendence of gender standards for acting opens up orientations that are experienced as most relevant and meaningful. (Gender clues for being/acting would then be weak and non-repressive.)

The social construction processes of gender are complex, multifaceted, and heterogeneous. Masculinity and femininity are not static traits but change over time and over the lifetime of the individuals and vary with class, race, occupation, organization, age, and individual conditions. Hence there is no automatic relationship between the body, specific processes of social constructions and a set of characteristics/orientations. Linking masculinity closely with males and femininity with females is unfortunate as it gives priority to biological sex, and the enormous variation in the constructions of men and women is disregarded. As Coser (1989) says, there is little reason to assume a uniform set of experiences and orientations contingent upon biology. The situatedness of managerial work and the specific demands of leadership may then motivate a transcendence of strict masculine or feminine meanings as providing guidelines for coping. In this sense not only traditionally dominating masculine ideals for leadership, but also efforts to launch a feminine alternative may work in a constraining way.

There are considerable problems when talking about and identifying masculinity/masculinities as well as femininity/femininities. How do they reflect — or at least say something about — social reality? Are the definitions cited above valid across cultures and history or do they reflect contemporary Western or only contemporary gender researchers' ideas on what is masculine and feminine? Or do they perhaps reflect different religious ideas and traditions? The Western, Christian religious traditions have focused on

the differences between women and men while Eastern and Native American philosophies have focused on the overlap between masculinity and femininity and the similarities between them (Gagné and Tewksbury 1996). In some non-Western cultures those persons who express a mix of feminine and masculine elements are not stigmatized but 'believed to be of a higher spiritual order' (Gagné and Tewksbury 1996, p. 124). Why and how did yin values (to use a different and well-known concept in Chinese philosophy where yin is associated with the feminine and yang with the masculine) in Western countries (and other parts of the world) become repressed and dominated by the yang norms and how and why did these values become gendered? In Chinese philosophy 'the art of life is not seen as holding to yang and banishing yin, but as keeping the two in balance because there cannot be one without the other' (Watts, in Hines 1992). Many students of gender argue that 'caring, and sharing; the prioritizing of feelings; the reality and value of the non-marketable and non-material; the importance of the imaginative, intuitive and creative; a vision of the wholeness and interdependence of the world, and a knowledge of and faith in the creative potential of stillness, rest and silence' (Hines 1992, p. 314) are not valued on an equal footing with 'masculine' values. Value systems are cultural constructions, and therefore it is possible to change 'perceptions' so that something, which was previously regarded as negative, can be re-valued and regarded as positive.

As a social phenomenon gender does not just exist, but is created and recreated in ongoing processes of development of meaning and social interaction. The creation is grounded in the division of labour, in the household (including primary caretaking), in the labour market and in organizational practices. Gender is created through women being constructed as mothers and family-oriented, being located in 'female' jobs, in particular service jobs and in subordinated positions. It is also created in upbringing, but primary socialization is very much an effect of the gender division of labour and the fact that it is still mainly women's work. If fathers were equally central in childcare ('mothering' would become 'parenting'), subjectivity formation would probably be very different than has traditionally been the case.

It is important to get rid of the present division of labour (in the home and at work outside the home) if we want to get rid of the accompanying gender differences, as this division maintains inequalities. The importance of this is shown by Coltrane (1996). He

found that there were significantly fewer displays of manliness, less wifely deference, less husband dominance, and that less ideological female inferiority was evident in societies, where men participated in childrearing and women controlled property. The celebration of specific feminine skills and talents, when associated with women, runs against this ideal of abolished sex division of labour. As we have said, the notion of feminine leadership as a female speciality relies on women doing most of the household and family work.

The concepts of masculinities and femininities may reflect one's own (group) cultural idiosyncrasies (what is masculine for one person or group or culture may not be for another) and may easily be overused (almost everything in organizations may be seen as expressing masculine meanings) and therefore other vocabularies for labelling what is conventionally, but unreflectively and in a manner that reinforces stereotypes, ascribed to man and woman may be worth trying.

It is far from original, but still useful to suggest that Weber's concept of value rational actions and purposive rational actions might be used instead of the concepts of masculine/feminine. Value rationality 'is a characteristic of social action, of interaction, of communication' (Heller 1984, p. 77) whereas the sole criterion for purposive rationality is the realization of a given aim. The problem is not only that the purposive rational actions have absorbed the value rationality, 'the problem is far more that this type of activity is preferred even when it is unnecessary, indeed even when it is unacceptable'. This dominance of the purposive rationality should be seen in connection with people's material orientation and the contemporary belief that a capitalist market economy is best capable of achieving what people want. This may well be the major constraint to radical transformations of gender relations. Competition between companies means strong incentives for employers and managers to prefer employees who can give priority to work performances. Someone who has responsibility for small children will not be as advantaged as somebody who does not have this constraint. This is not necessarily a matter of prejudice or bad will on the part of an employer but is inherent in a market economy. The sex of the employer may here be of little significance. Productivity and the ability to compete are the criteria by which the worth of employees including managers is being measured, not the ability to share, to show kindness, to be empathetic.

Women's ability to give birth and the general (although historically changeable) tendency for them to be the primary

childcarers might lead many to develop or appreciate the latter values, but this may not affect their behaviour in leadership situations. In these, all kinds of contingencies and constraints affect the subject. The link between the subject positions of mother and manager is not self-evident. All kinds of constructions are possible. A loving mother may well be a demanding and result-oriented manager. Celebrating the feminine in contexts outside corporate work does not guarantee its experienced appropriateness under conditions of hard competition. The dominant cultural (masculine) values in large sectors of business marginalize the feminine, which is very often understood negatively. Instead of setting up an idealized picture of women in management in opposition to a (misleading) homogeneous picture of male managers, we could advance the values which we care for and be careful about sex-labelling them. Still, pointing out how specific forms of masculinities put their imprints on corporate cultures is an important task for gender studies (Alvesson and Billing 1997; Calás and Smircich 1992; Mills 1988).

Transformations going beyond getting more women into positions of management in organizations governed by the same goals and technologies under the performance pressures of a market economy, may well call for a radical change in which qualitative (feminine) values such as a balance between family and work life and ecological sustainable development and ethical and social responsibility are up-graded at the expense of, for example, productivity and affluent consumption. These values do not seem to have been promoted by female managers. (In terms of work values, female and male managers, at least in USA, do not seem to differ, according to Jacobs (1992), although this study did not address 'altruistic' values.) They also fall outside of most formulations of feminine leadership, seldom if ever challenging basic goals and values of corporations (Calás and Smircich 1993). Rather, they are on the agenda as a result of changed consumer consciousness and pressure from different political groups, e.g. the ecological movement. Sustainability and ethics in relation to people, nature and animals are important code words. They are not unique to or shared by women, but distributed in ways that sex cannot account for. Still, there is an element of gender here, as male domination is intertwined with the operations of technological-capitalist institutions. These values call for ideas about leadership/management and managers who are not just purposive-rational (which is often labelled masculine) but who are also

intelligent at a more emotional level (value-rational). We also need theories about organizing that are less leader-centred. A great deal of literature on feminine leadership views the world from the manager's point of view. Qualities — like being able to be empathetic, to think emotionally, to let our hearts guide us more — we may label soft, and some would probably label them as feminine. Doing so is unfortunate as they immediately will be regarded as something more or less exclusive for women — and therefore perhaps less important. For that reason and in order to point out wider issues than just promoting a group of future female managers we suggest we should be careful about the gender labelling of values and leadership. We should neither overuse nor neglect this dimension. One possibility is to alternate between gendered and other kinds of vocabularies in addressing these complex issues (Alvesson and Billing 1997).

Conclusion

In this article we have reviewed and discussed ideas about feminine leadership. Our position is primarily critical. This may be seen in the context of a rather large and expanding literature celebrating the distinctiveness, unity and moral qualities of feminine leadership. Arguably, there is a stronger need for a critical evaluation than for additional promotion of feminine leadership as a regulatory ideal.

An evaluation of feminine leadership may productively distinguish between three aspects: as reflecting empirical reality, as a normative-ideological construct and as a concept of critique. Feminine leadership as an *empirical phenomenon* means that it is viewed as a distinct leadership style expressed by many female managers or, if external conditions prevent its manifestation, at least preferred by the majority of women. Female managers and women in general are then seen as differing from men. That there is little empirical support for the idea does not necessarily rule out the chance of female managers having another potential for feminine leadership than men, but this appears rather speculative and relies on a static view of female nature just waiting for a chance to be authentically expressed.

There are good reasons to be sceptical with regard to the idea that the same characteristics (feminine orientations) which earlier on could be used to disqualify women now should be the characteristics facilitating the entrance of women to, and functioning in, managerial jobs. The reversal of argumentation in the women in management literature from

10–20 years ago saying that women are similar to men and therefore should become managers to now claiming that women are different from men and therefore are better managers creates the impression that women are constructed and reconstructed in order to make them appear suitable candidates for managerial labour.

As an *ideological-normative construct* feminine leadership does not pretend to be firmly anchored in the orientations or actions of most women as compared to most men, but describes rather an ideal, deduced from feminist thinking and abstracted from some of the experiences and conditions seen as being typical for the life of women (see Fletcher 1994). As an ideal it is seen as being in the interest of women. A part of this interest is the option of promoting the chances of women in relationship to managerial positions. Inherent in the concept lies the potential of upgrading the self-esteem of many women and of facilitating their careers as well as possibly exercising leadership in other ways than the traditionally dominating ones. This may be seen as positive, but more in the contexts of political change, confidence-training and marketing than in an academic context. The theoretical value or empirical relevance (grasping people's orientations) of the concept is then highly limited. In terms of politics the idea of feminine leadership also has some advantages.

To summarize the critique expressed in the article, there are basic problems with the notion of feminine leadership. It is as follows:

- lacking support or grounding in the ways the majority of women actually being in positions of (formal) leadership operate;
- contingent upon, and celebrating, experiences of women associated with them being located in the division of labour of patriarchy;
- reinforcing gender stereotypes;
- overvaluing the relevance and transferability of skills and orientations following from family work to corporate contexts;
- offering a standard of being for female managers that may work as not only a positive model but also as a constraint on their possibilities, through indicating what they should (normally) be like;
- constructing women mainly as managers of feelings and relations and thereby exploiting them as emotional labourers easily getting into manipulative positions and smoothing over conflicts.

Having said this, and insisting on a sceptical view of feminine leadership, we must also

recognize some progressive ways of using the notion. This would call for viewing feminine leadership as a *critical concept* offering a counterpoint to dominant ways of conceptualizing leadership. Feminine leadership would then contribute to a de-masculinization of leadership, not necessarily meaning a feminization of it, but loosening up management being culturally connected to men and, in particular, masculine men and given a masculine meaning. As a critique, feminine leadership would support a move *away* from conventional ideas on management, not so much a move to celebrating a feminine model intimately coupled to a stereotypical, idealized and essentialistic view on talents and orientations contingent upon the female sex.

This kind of understanding of feminine leadership may stir up some debate and questioning through offering a model clearly different from conventional ideas about the exercise of leadership. It may also provide some guidelines and reinforce identity and self-esteem amongst those female and male workers and managers who are open to perceiving themselves as carrying feminine orientations, as described by the literature on feminine leadership. As suggested here, we are not convinced that too much emphasis should be given to the gender vocabulary. Feminine leadership is tricky to disconnect from stereotypes and can easily restrain both women and men. Using other critical vocabularies or at least alternating between gender and other kinds of language is thus recommended.

Notes

1. A US study from the 1970s showed that men as well as women regarded the masculine traits as the best for leadership; 65% described the good manager in masculine terms, while less than 25% described the good manager as androgynous (Powell and Butterfield 1979). The consequence of this is that women will develop masculine traits in order to become managers, according to the authors, and thus reinforce the belief that masculine is best in management. Of course, the result is not necessarily valid 20 years later, nor in other cultural settings than the one studied.
2. The concept of hegemonic masculinity is rather tricky, as it tends to cloud variety and difficulties in assessing what forms of masculinity are culturally dominant (if there are any). 'Rambo masculinity' may be hegemonic in cinemas for very young men, but hardly in other settings or for other groups. The Danish army in their advertisements for new recruits use the slogan 'we don't want any rambos'. Corporate life typically favours rather compliant and socially sensitive kinds of behaviour and provides

- limited space for rugged individualism or heroic acts or other kinds of masculinities visible in parts of the mass media (Jackall 1988).
3. Most of the literature on women in management emphasizes the virtues of feminine values; very rarely does it mention *feminist* values or practices. For this reason the discussion here is not about feminist visions (based on a politically consciously chosen standpoint from which everything which disadvantages or oppresses women is challenged).
 4. The specific orientations of women are also claimed to be a result of their being nurtured primarily by women (in a different way than males) during early childhood. This is also an outcome of the sex division of labour, although during the time of the subject's childhood.
 5. The idea that skills being developed in childcare and family work are transferable to an organizational context seems to imply also the reversal: that managerial skills facilitate parenting. But few would argue that experiences as finance or production manager would make a person a better parent than other people. Perhaps in 'family-like' work contexts where family work-related skills are particularly relevant one might expect that caring skills might be used and that there is a transferability between family and work/organizational contexts.

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