Leading with Body

Amanda Sinclair

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AMANDA SINCLAIR
Melbourne Business School

To swim the notoriously windy stretch of ocean that separates the sandy beaches of Cottesloe in Western Australia from the eastern coves of Rottnest Island demands extraordinary strength, stamina and a certain daring. Speed is not important: even the best open-water freestylers take 7½ hours . . . what is essential is a doggedly rhythmic kick, and an ability to kick harder when trailed by sharks.

Funnily enough, it’s the same suite of skills that could be damned handy just now for anyone trying to navigate the perilously stormy waters of global financial markets. Someone like Cameron Clyne, for example . . . Ah yes, Cameron who?

But now that Cameron Clyne, a strapping 1.98-metre former state-level rugby player and competitive marathon ocean-swimmer, has been confirmed as the next chief executive of NAB (National Australia Bank), he can expect to become a household name . . .

Wood, 2008

One of Queensland’s youngest pollies has admitted spending nine months in Russia for bone-breaking growth surgery because of insecurities about her size. Logan councillor Hajnal Ban, 31 had each of her legs broken in four places for the leg-lengthening procedure, remaining in hospital as she grew about 1mm a day to increase her 154cm frame to 162cm.

Sandy, 2009

How do physical bodies operate in leadership? Building on broader research of gender, work and organisation, this chapter explores the neglected area of bodies in leadership. My focus includes bodily stature, shape, demeanour, physical performance and voice, how they are experienced (by leaders and followers) and represented to audiences.
The examples above from Australian newspapers show that bodies and physical performances often play central roles in establishing power and credentials for leadership. In the first excerpt, bank Chief Executive Officer Cameron Clyne is portrayed as a Ulysses, a giant of a man who will ‘steady the ship’ of the bank in ‘treacherous’ world market waters. The article occupied a full page of the news section of an Australian daily and the article was dominated by a facial profile of Clyne taking up two thirds of the right hand side of the page. Offered as a new breed of leader, it is Clyne’s physical characteristics that are critical in this construction. The second excerpt provides an example of the ‘lengths’ to which one woman local councillor went to make herself fit for leadership and the photograph accompanying the article, pictures Han from the ground up, her legs as the focus.

As these examples illustrate, the bodies of men and women are often experienced and represented very differently in leadership. Bodies activate unconscious processes and gendered societal archetypes that reinforce or undermine authority, power and socially-constructed credibility (Sinclair, 1998). Despite the pervasiveness and significance of leaders and their images (Guthey and Jackson, 2008), there has been little serious analysis of the role of bodies in leadership and my aim here is to draw on gender and organisational theorising to deepen that analysis.

The first part of this chapter reviews research on bodies in organisations and management and offers some explanations as to why so little attention has been paid to the bodies of leaders. I then examine specifically how bodies are portrayed in leadership, drawing on studies of media representations of bodies. In the second part, I explore how bodies and an awareness of physical selves might be brought differently into researching and practising leadership. Acknowledging the powerful and gendered regimes which govern how women and men’s bodies in leadership are seen and represented, there is also evidence that some leaders are destabilising norms on image and bodily self-management as they embody leadership differently.

**Research on Bodies in Organisations and Society**

In the following overview of literature I look first at theorising about bodies and seek to understand why the physical production of leadership and management in organisations has been understudied. The exceptions come from gender and organisational, rather than leadership research (Acker, 1990; Kerfoot and Knights, 1996; Brewis and Linstead, 2000; Hassard et al., 2000; Harding, 2002; Hansen et al., 2007; Ropo and Sauer, 2008; Höpfl, 2008 and this volume).

Theorising about the role of the body in culture, organisations and society began several decades ago with the work of sociologists (Turner, 1984; Scott and Morgan, 1993). Feminists and gender scholars have written extensively on bodies and their significance in culture, organisations and everyday life (for example Bordo, 1993; Butler, 1993; Gatens, 1996; Grosz, 1994), including those with a particular interest in bodies in pedagogy (Luke and Gore, 1992; Gallop, 1995; McWilliam, 1996). Mapping the social and historical ways gender has been constructed, this work also shows that while often men have been represented as having neither gender nor bodies, women have been definable by their bodies and reproductive capacities that are
then labelled as flawed and ‘troublesome’ (Butler, 1993; Sheppard, 1989). Societies and organisations have been shown to have rules about how women’s bodies should be: what should be worn, what mannerisms, demeanour, voice, size and shape are appropriate. These rules function in complex but powerful ways – it isn’t a matter of individual choice – and researchers have documented how ‘women’s bodies are disciplined and made docile and productive in culturally and historically specific ways’ (Trethewey, 1999). According to Trethewey’s field work with women managers and leaders the ideal is to be ‘fit’, not fat. Yet the band of acceptable bodily ‘fitness’ and behaviour for women is narrow. Those judged too fit are deemed likely to be driven, competitive or lesbian. The corporate mould requires navigation along a trip wire: feminine movement and posture in organizations must physically embody professionalism, endurance and control ‘finely balanced against the eroticised but grateful self’ (Hatcher, 2008: 162, see also Bell and Kenny and Wolkowitz, this volume).

Research focusing on the practice and performance of gender helps to elucidate the finely orchestrated ways in which the bodies of women are recruited to the project of gendering management. Women in management roles – despite their seniority – are expected to answer phones, take minutes and embody nurturance through their tone of voice and demeanour (Martin, 2003; Mathieu, 2009). They are counselled to go to extreme measures such as taking the Pill to time menstruation for weekends, in order to minimise the offence their bodies may cause to male colleagues (Bell and Kenny, this volume).

Researchers in emotional labour beginning with the pioneering work of Hochschild (1983) have also shown how jobs – particularly those carried out by women and at the lower ends of organisations – demand highly regulated emotional and physical performances including smiling, shows of caring, enthusiasm and ‘bubbliness’, that bring with them an equally regulated body regime described by Hancock and Tyler as ‘an aesthetic economy’ (2008). Attempts to ‘actively manage structures of feeling’ are interwoven with bodily performances to evoke desire and recognition, not in the interests of art but to align consumers’ hopes and aspirations with organisational economic ambitions (2008: 214). In the corporate context, Hatcher has also demonstrated the pressures to produce oneself as ‘a work of art’ that must meet ‘aesthetic values and stylistic criteria’ (2008: 153). Taken together, this research shows that underneath the rational labour market for skills and competencies is another market in emotional, bodily and aesthetic labour where women’s performances are highly regulated according to narrow societal and organisational norms.

Where have the bodies of men been in these analyses? Early gender scholars undertaking studies of men in organisations and management revealed how constructions of the male body permeate and perpetuate conditions of men’s dominance and oppression in organisational settings (Cockburn, 1985; Collinson, 1992; Roper, 1994, 1996; Connell, 1995; Collinson and Hearn, 1996; Kerfoot and Knights, 1996; McDowell, 1997; Sinclair, 1998). Dominance is thus often accomplished via hierarchies of body masculinities where the bodies at the top are so superior they enjoy relative invisibility, while men lower down must often bodily verify their masculinity. For example, Barrett’s (1996) research of naval cultures show an intricate but well understood hierarchy of masculine norms around embodiment. At the top are extremes of physical risk-taking among ‘fly-boys’, to a technical rationality
expressed via capabilities, habits and physical demeanours among supply officers at the bottom. While the hierarchy seems to put those men at the bottom at a disadvantage, each masculine bodily subculture finds its position and legitimacy in opposition to the feminine. Each is not-female, which is what matters.

In many military and quasi-military institutional environments, such as among police officers, physical ways of being and talking have often been central to doing the job. In their research Davies and Thomas document a policing culture which, despite policy changes towards diversity and equal opportunity, is rampantly, physically masculine. Police officers describe a ‘virility culture’, where the ‘testosterone is “in your face”’. Physical presence is demanded in the ‘breakfast meetings’, ‘working every single weekend’, ‘sitting here doing all this rubbish’ and ‘getting buried in stuff’ (2003: 692–694). Demonstrations of competitive masculinity demand scatological humour, scathing contempt towards others and physical prowess in a ‘live, eat and breath policing’ culture (2003: 693). The fear underpinning the most strenuously maintained aspects of the culture is that ‘we have gone too soft’ (2003: 691): a final and most terrible phallic humiliation (see also Eveline, 1996; and Höpfl, this volume).

Over the last decade, interest in the aesthetics of organisations has elicited new accounts of how bodies mediate and act as a sensual barometer for experiences of management and organisation. For example, drawing on both Marxist and postmodern perspectives, Harding explores the managerial body which, in its flesh-concealing state, still functions as an aesthetic code, inserted into the minds of employees ‘to achieve conformity, rigidity and obedience’ (2002: 68). She suggests that the managers themselves are a primary recipient of this code, both objectified and subjectified by the body they are required to produce. Importantly Harding ventures that managerial bodies of both genders, in different ways, oppress managers themselves.

Finally, organisational and marketing research increasingly highlights the centrality of bodies to the production of brands and aesthetic consumption. Bodies become sites in the competition for designation as ‘cool’ (Heaphy and Dutton, 2008). Research also documents the spread of ‘Lookism’, a form of discrimination where employees are selected or rejected on the basis of their physical attractiveness (Warhurst et al., 2009). Much of this attention has been to bodies lower down the organisational hierarchy and to women. How do bodies figure in the production of leadership?

THE APPARENT ABSENCE OF BODIES IN LEADERSHIP

Very little of this rich gender and organisational scholarship on bodies has made its way into our understanding of leadership and the different pressures on men and women leaders to produce a convincing physical embodiment. The body has been ‘missing’ (Ropo and Sauer, 2008). Is this because bodies don’t matter? Rather, I argue that men’s leadership is, and has historically been, accomplished in physical and self-consciously aesthetic ways (Höpfl, 2000). It’s not that men’s bodies are not important in leadership, it’s that they have been made invisible for particular ideological purposes. Meanwhile, female leader bodies are highlighted and made available for judgement, potentially undermining their claim to leadership.

There are at least two discernible manoeuvres in the removal of male bodies from leadership. The first has been where male bodies are actively denied and suppressed
in the accomplishment of the mental mastery of leadership. Bodies suggest weakness and mortality. Many commentators and leaders alike have an active interest in pretending they don’t have bodies or at least, are not subject to them. In his study of transnational masculinities, Connell (2000) notes how what was once the uniform of the American executive has now become virtually mandatory for leaders from most cultures. The way male leaders are clothed and photographed may be powerful symbolic vehicles for the disembodiment of men’s leadership.

The second, more recent phase, might be characterised as being the ‘super body’ in leadership. Here the emphasis is on explicit mastery of a body being an ingredient of fitness to lead. The example at the start of this chapter shows how designation as a super-body – usually implied rather than unveiled in photographs – can assist in constructing the credentials for leadership. For men the emphasis on endurance, stamina and capacities for heightened arousal and attention reinforces images of leader virility and potency.

Several studies of media photographs of leaders provide insight into how the bodies of leaders are used to tell a story about leadership. Sheridan and O’Sullivan analyse the photographs of male leaders on the covers of *The Australian Financial Review’s Boss* magazine, arguing that these covers accomplish ‘ideological work . . . constructing and reinforcing a mutually affirming relationship between heroic leadership and hegemonic masculinity’ (2006: 287). Six of the photographs are of CEOs, the others academics. Sheridan and O’Sullivan argue that ‘a reader purchases the CEO subject position . . . as an extension of his/her own identity’ (200: 289). With one exception all the photos are close-up head shots, with the leader gazing straight at the camera reinforcing an impression of an individual in charge. In a number of cases due to camera angle, the brow (and seemingly brains) of the leader is enlarged, the bold lettering of *BOSS* branded across it like a tattoo. Bodies are rarely included and if so, are shrouded in genteel shadow.

My colleague Pat Seybolt and I undertook another analysis of how leaders’ bodies were photographed and represented in a selection of Australian newspapers and business magazine (see Sinclair, 2008). There are marked differences in how male and female leaders are photographed along two main dimensions: body composition and skin exposed. Men are predominantly photographed as heads or head and shoulders. Ninety-three percent of male leaders had no skin apart from face exposed, while only 34% of women were in this category and a third of women were portrayed with two or more of arms, legs or upper chest visible. For men, clothing functions to conceal skin, groins and hips are shielded and bodies reduced to a silhouette. For women, non-facial skin, clothing, jewellery and backgrounds are more likely to be included and give more away about the character of the leader, sometimes with a general sense of clutter that is rarely part of a male leader’s photograph. The overall effect for men is to render the body invisible or irrelevant and reinforce an image of cerebral mastery (Harding, 2002; Sinclair, 2005a). In contrast, women leaders and their bodies are portrayed as frail (not stable or sound); elderly (cranky or ‘past it’ – this occurs particularly in photographs of Indigenous women leaders); surrounded by distractions (not focused on the job) or full-figured (suggesting a failure of bodily self-discipline). Bodies are ways to draw attention to idiosyncrasy, frailty or sexuality which in turn undermines women’s eligibility for leadership (Bell and Kenny, this volume).
Guthey and Jackson (2005; 2008) draw on broader research on image, gaze and framing, to explore the dynamic and complex role of photographic images in the production of leadership. They examine examples of images of leaders, including several of former Hewlett Packard CEO Carly Fiorina, to show how leadership is constructed and contested visually and as ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ for women. Guthey and Jackson also encourage us to take a complex view of image-making as sites ‘where gazes intersect’ and ‘where power and gender relations play themselves out in visual form’ (2008: 88).

What can we conclude from this research about how bodies figure in the production and representation of leaders? When I present our research on media images there is usually immediate recognition among audiences, followed by awkward silence. Some people immediately jump to the ‘solution’ that women and others whose bodies are experienced as incongruous, should work harder to ‘downplay’ their bodies, to dress more innocuously or to cover up. For others, including many women, there is a sense of depressed resignation. Here is one more way that women’s authority and potential leadership is undermined. However, I want to suggest a further possibility to be explored next: that leadership bodies are a site of experimentation and innovation.

**Embodying Leadership**

While I was writing this chapter, I was invited to be featured in a column called ‘Other Passions’ in the *Australian Financial Review Magazine*. The reporter was interested in profiling my interest in yoga and meditation in a business school environment. A photograph of me in a seated yoga pose with foot behind head, accompanied the column (Figure 7.1). To me, both photograph and accompanying text

![FIGURE 7.1](source: Photograph by Anthony Browell)
conveyed a slightly disruptive order. I don’t look ‘good’: there are freckles, crooked teeth and wispy hair. Body, though central, is also played with in juxtaposition of face and foot.

However, my co-researcher in the Bodies Study reported earlier was perplexed that I’d allowed myself to be photographed in that way. For her, this was one more example of the many we had collected showing how the media reduce women to their bodies. Her reaction, and our conversation that followed, challenged me to think harder about how leaders might be in their bodies differently in the face of what often seem implacably gendered body regimes.

As individuals, we are never free to choreograph our own bodies or to insist that they be represented and experienced by others in particular ways. Women and men confront different sets of regulatory norms about bodies, with women facing more scrutiny and coercion partially because their bodies are consistently socially constituted as a highly visible (dis)qualification to their leadership.

Yet neither is it a useful path to accept and adapt to gendered norms of embodiment in leadership: either for women leaders to conform to conventions and seek to be disembodied, or for men to strive towards ideals of having a super-body. The solution is not for men or women to pretend to be bodiless or collude with the view of leadership as a disembodied phenomenon. Referring back to my own experience, seeking to have my power stakes improved by insisting on a head and shoulders photograph, we know from gender research, wouldn’t guarantee anything.

So if we are interested in exposing the way traditional gendered constructions operate in work, organisations and leadership, how might we seek to change the way leadership is understood and to embody leadership differently ourselves? In the following I suggest three broad ‘fronts’: how we theorise leadership; how we observe and research the practices of leaders; and how we embody leadership ourselves.

**Theorising**

Leadership as a field of study is an ideology. In the production of the ‘truth’ about what leadership is and how it is done, key aspects are left out. It seems remarkable that the role of leader and follower bodies is left out of most research into charismatic and transformational leadership, in particular. Even the much discussed ingredient of leadership ‘presence’ is often portrayed in ethereal terms. A pioneer in the field of organisational aesthetics, Strati lays the blame squarely on ‘the deliberate and collective blindness of organizational scholars’ by which the people studied are ‘purged of corporeality, so that only his or her mind remains’ (1999: 3). Similarly in leadership, Hansen et al. lament that researchers have ‘hammered’ the rich and vibrant phenomena of leadership ‘into a shapeless, hapless, colorless, lifeless condition’ (2007: 545). If, in our research of leadership, gender and organisations, we were to pay greater attention to bodies what concepts and approaches might be helpful?

Arising out of critical and feminist scholarship such as the work of Judith Butler (1993), has been interest in ‘performativity’ in management and leadership (Ford et al., 2008). In emphasising performativity, scholars seek to show how phenomena like
leadership are not natural or essential but always being established and reconstituted through repeated performances. It is through performance that the category—leadership—is created. Leadership is not a stable set of objective skills, but a dynamic accomplishment where the very performance of it is understood as an effort to establish it. The more leadership is talked about, invoked and seen, in connection with certain people, positions, and we could argue bodies, the more that leadership in those forms assumes the status of truth. Some scholars are also interested in the spaces in and between bodies that establish a leadership ‘presence’. Leadership is not in one body but coheres in a ‘network of human and non-human entities’, discursively being produced and negotiated (Fairhurst and Cooren, 2009: 470).

Ideas of performativity and its emphasis on embodiment help us to focus in closely on the doing and the acting out of leadership, asking what body rules apply. The bodies of leaders are rendered visible (usually in the case of women) and invisible (usually in the case of men) via a pre-existing socially defined body order. Scholarship has also convincingly demonstrated how creating ‘otherness’ enables the norm to go unseen (Benjamin, 1998). Thus the ‘naturalness’ of men’s bodies in leadership is reinforced every time a woman’s different body is made noticeable. Dichotomies like mind/body function alongside gender dichotomies of male/female to ensure that women are more likely to be defined and judged as bodies, without mind. Further, the location of all that is sexual on women leaders obscures the way sexualities are threaded through our appetites for male leadership (Calás and Smircich, 1991; Sinclair, 1995). Being physically attractive and handsome in a male leader is powerfully appealing for both male and female audiences, as the media coverage and analyses of Barack Obama’s presidential campaign reveal. Conversely, the sexualities of women leaders are more likely to be viewed as disruptive with women coming under intense pressure to minimise sexuality through dress and demeanour.

Research of creative and arts leaders helps us see the roles of bodies, creativity and aesthetics and their impact in leadership in new ways (see Schroeder and Fillis, forthcoming, for a review). Hansen et al. (2007) and Ropo and Sauer (2008) offer frameworks for exploring corporeality and the more sensuous dimensions of shared leadership, reminding us that all learning is mediated through the senses. Using the case study of Pina Bausch, MacNeill (2009) shows that while creative leadership often starts with the materiality of body, the bodily experiences of dancers, choreographers and audiences are pushed aside by concerns such as commercialism (money) and intellectual property claims (legal minds). Ladkin (2008) also elaborates the impacts of attending a concert conducted by the ‘beautiful’ embodied leadership of Bobby McFerrin.

**Observing and researching leaders and their practices**

Despite these rich perspectives on bodies, the research cited in this chapter and this volume shows just how little choice many women feel about how to embody themselves in their managerial and leadership jobs (Brewis; Bell and Kenny; Wolkowitz, this volume). Many, including those at very senior levels, feel under intense pressure to manage their bodies and mitigate its impacts on others. Such efforts are rarely experienced as completely or lastingly successful. Their subjective experience
is one of continuing self-consciousness, embarrassment, even shame. If they decide to wear bold or non-normative clothing, women often feel they have to steel themselves to do so, preparing for the inevitable judgements. First, it may simply be important to notice and name how this bodily labour and toll accrues, as a means of reducing its oppressive effects.

In the wider society, bodies are increasingly being commodified and commercialised, for example, people sell the rights to tattoo their body like a billboard. Emerging evidence also suggests that as frontiers of bodily labour and commodification keep moving, they do so in historically determined, gendered and racialised ways. Some bodies are made freer in this process, others are more oppressed. Extra tasks of bodily effort, management, suppression and camouflage are imposed on women, non-Whites and men who do not fit a hyper-masculine heterosexual mould as they go about their leadership work (Thanem, this volume). These leaders are not just doing leadership they are engaged in the ongoing negotiation of their legitimacy, rendered more problematic by the body they inhabit and perform.

A small amount of emerging research provides examples of leaders consciously inhabiting bodies and paying attention to others’ bodies. These leaders demonstrate a capacity to be reflective about their physical selves in leadership in the midst of deeply gendered regimes of body expectations. What forms does such body reflexivity take?

Leaders evidence a capacity to understand and make conscious choices in how they inhabit and embody their own leadership and, perhaps more importantly, how they respond to the inevitable ways they are embodied by others, via the public and media gaze. Former Chief Commissioner of Police in Victoria, Christine Nixon, chose to physically go and visit many small police stations and community organisations in isolated places in the State – a very unusual thing to do (Sinclair, 2005a). She also gave priority to visiting those police stations with the toughest jobs in the most difficult areas. She stood up in front of often hard-bitten cops to hear what it was like for them and she also talked openly about her own experiences as a police officer, including the times she has got things wrong and been scared. She physically embodied the kind of openness and preparedness to learn that she was asking police to consider. Nixon also paid attention to uniforms, including her own very ill-fitting one. She formed a team to redesign uniforms to suit an increasingly diverse police force.

A second example is Chris Sarra, a former school principal who is now Director of an Australian Institute of Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander Education. Chris is Indigenous and one of the ways that Aboriginals have been marginalised in the Australian context is to treat them as bodies. Chris himself is deeply aware of the way this dichotomy has functioned to devalue the contribution of Aboriginal leaders and discourage young people from having high intellectual aspirations. Yet his leadership as a school principal was not about denying his own Aboriginality or the importance of the physicality of the children. A vision of being ‘Strong and Smart’ was collaboratively developed with the school and local communities. Physical presence and wellbeing was co-located with intellectual ability and potential: both were consistently emphasised (Sinclair, 2005a).

There are strong taboos about bringing an awareness of bodies into leadership. Many leaders I’ve worked with shrink from the topic of bodies because they believe
that paying them attention will get them into trouble. Sexual harassment, gender and racial discrimination laws function in important ways to ensure workers do not get exploited or rejected because of their bodies. However, the solution to these legal prohibitions is surely not to act as if bodies don’t exist. Further, my work with many leaders suggests that they know bodies are not irrelevant. They are open to new discourses which might encourage explorations of leadership embodiment.

There is now a growing amount of research material that advises leaders on how to manage their bodies. Some of this has an instrumental intent: it is designed to convert the body into a more reliable and effective vehicle of ‘successful’ leadership, for example by managing cycles of arousal and attention. I am ambivalent about this literature. On the one hand, it seems a good development to encourage leaders to take care of themselves, to recognise vulnerability and not inflect assumptions of the necessity of physical suffering and stoicism on their followers. Bodies are a means to help men open up a different way of thinking about who they are and might be in leadership. On the other hand, much of the literature advising this body awareness does not invite questioning of who or what that leadership is for. There is a danger that new body awareness is recruited to the project of becoming a ‘corporate athlete’: a leader who can work harder and longer towards ends that are exploitative.

**Being in body ourselves**

The most successful teachers I have observed, especially in a Business School setting, are often tall and physically confident, sometimes handsome and attractive (Sinclair, 2009). In contrast, my body seems to have been a source of disappointment. When people who know of me meet me for the first time, a few have said: ‘You don’t look like a professor, but never mind . . .’ My short stature has often meant that I find myself peering over lecterns. I have experimented with clothing and watched others do so: female colleagues wearing stilettos or flat shoes and everything in between as ways of inhabiting and asserting an embodied self in the gendered terrain of institutional life. While it seems inevitable that the bodies and clothing of women leaders are statements that are ‘read’ and judged, the ways that many men embody leadership remains invisible or unscrutinised.

Educational researcher and teacher bell hooks writes powerfully about being embodied in the classroom. In her view conventions of knowing and teaching often enact domination and encourage a ‘systematic disconnection of self from the world, self from others’ (2003: 179–180). Her innovative efforts are directed towards enhancing students’ ‘journey to wholeness’, in which passion, desire, eroticism, love and happiness may be activated. For hooks, passionate pedagogy in any area is likely to spark erotic energy and rather than shy away from such energy, she sees it as a ‘space for transgression that can undermine domination’ (2003: 151). In contrast ‘critique on its own can become merely an expression of profound cynicism, which then works to sustain dominator culture’ (2003: xiv).

As I have written about elsewhere (Sinclair 2005b; 2007), my own relationship to my body changed significantly when I started to do more yoga, and particularly after I became a yoga teacher. Initially I simply enjoyed feeling physically stronger and
more relaxed. Over time, I began experimenting with being more embodied in my work, such as noticing how my own body felt and the impact of bodily postures and demeanours of others in the classroom.

Yoga teaches a non-dichotomous understanding of the place of the body alongside the mind. A further possibility is that bodily mediated experience and knowledge provide a welcome interruption to the hegemony of mind (Casey, 2000). Drawing on her own yoga practice, philosopher Luce Irigaray (2002) has described the effects of neglecting the body in knowledge and teaching. Her observation is that philosophic traditions have become dogmatic and authoritarian, ‘have substituted words for life without carrying out the necessary links between the two’ (2002: 51). Irigaray also argues that bodies play a central role in understanding difference and maintains ‘it is not true that knowledge is indifferent to sex or gender’ (2002: 59).

For me, finding a way of being in my body, accepting and allowing it rather than denying it, has opened up a different quality in my teaching and research. Being in my body has been part of my identity work. It has allowed me to understand how I collude with a privileging mind – I am what I think. Together these changes have enabled me to experiment, to be more open and appreciative, and paradoxically perhaps, less driven by fears of what people think of me. I also teach differently by paying attention to what others’ bodies seem to indicate, suggesting we break or move if there’s a lot of tension or tiredness in the room. I encourage people to acknowledge bodies rather than fight against or try to override them. These emphases are sometimes experienced by my students as inappropriate, even oppressive. Part of aiming for embodiment in leadership has included me being open to such responses.

Substantial research has helped us understand the relations between bodies and sex, work and organisations. Yet the domain and study of leadership seems to have resisted such exploration. As discussed, the whole modern myth of leadership seems to have resisted such exploration. As discussed, the whole modern myth of leadership seems ill at ease with the nitty gritty of bodies. The ever-expanding field of leadership studies continues to be largely captured in cycles of cognitive observation and analyses, yet fails to offer a compelling view of how leadership works at a visceral level; how powerful dimensions of women and women’s subjective experiences routinely get left out of leadership; and how ways of doing leadership continue to oppress. My hope is that critical analyses of the central role of bodies will open up new ways of understanding leadership and new ways of doing it.

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