Melbourne Business School

From the SelectedWorks of Amanda Sinclair

2014

On knees, breasts and being fully human in leadership

Amanda Sinclair

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/amanda_sinclair/18/
ON KNEES, BREASTS AND BEING FULLY HUMAN IN LEADERSHIP

Amanda Sinclair

ABSTRACT

While physical reactions and experiences are pervasive in the experiences of leaders and followers, most writing and theorising about leadership fails to register physicality’s significance. Consequently, this chapter relies primarily on a creative narrative, ‘The Interview’, to make visible the physicality in leadership. ‘The Interview’ records the experiences of three leaders in ConstructCo as they prepare for and reflect on the interview for a new CEO. Though fictional, the narrative interweaves real experiences from the lives of leaders with whom I have worked. The narrative form and allowing characters to speak give licence to the physical to appear and take its proper place as a crucial dimension of the leadership experience. The second half of the chapter explores the implications of the physical in leadership, beginning by mapping some of the dimensions of physicality experienced by the three characters in the narrative. The following discussion argues that those of us who research, teach and work with leaders should be open to seeing the way conventional norms mask the physical. I explore what new means and approaches are needed in research and writing to bring physicality into development work with leaders. This chapter, including the narrative and subsequent discussion,
argues that being aware of physical selves, with the humanness, vulnerability and connection with others that physicality brings, offers new possibilities to our ways of being in leadership.

**Keywords:** Bodies; discourse; leader development; leadership; narrative; physicality

In this chapter I explore the physicality of leadership through a creative narrative entitled ‘The Interview’. I use the narrative as a ‘jumping off’ point to capture and convey — rather than describe or theorise — the rich, multifaceted and often fleeting, simultaneously also powerful and compelling, physical world of leadership. Included as part of the physical world are, for example, the senses and the role they play in what leaders notice; how leaders feel about physical selves and how they are experienced by others via physically manifested signals such as tone of voice, stance, eye contact and posture and the space between leader and follower (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010). The narrative also explores interactions with physical ‘objects’, such as a boardroom table, shoes, a car, suggesting that these objects are active physical agents in the production or diminution of leadership (Latour, 1996, 2000). Finally, the narrative traverses some gender norms about ‘appropriate’ physical leadership performances, including stereotypes of masculine and feminine physicality which often underpin leaders’ experiences of themselves and others.

The second part of this chapter then teases out the implications of the narrative and broader questions of how we should write, teach and advise leaders on the role and significance of physicality. In the conclusion I argue that having a deeper understanding of physicality in leadership has the potential to contribute substantially to the effectiveness and sustainability of leadership practices. However, to realise this contribution, we need to find innovative ways to value the physical in leadership and to impart that significance in our scholarship, our teaching and work in leadership development, and in the leadership we ourselves enact.

While this introduction may read like the chapter was a logical, planned-from-the-start account of physicality in leadership, it didn’t unfold like that. I started with the narratives and the characters, allowing their physical characteristics, experiences and musings to come forth — which they obligingly did in vivid, endearing, frustrating and recognisable ways. I chose to do this to show that the way one writes — the discourses and norms we choose and reproduce — influences the insights and knowledge
that are permitted to appear, to be registered as ‘knowledge’ and to be allowable on the page (Sinclair, 2010, 2013a, 2013b). Because I wanted physicality to emerge and speak, it seemed more likely to do so via a narrative than through an ‘arms-length’, theorised voice. I also hoped to engage the reader at a physical, rather than cognitive level. Because the chapter is in roughly two parts — narrative and discussion — feel free to read it in whatever way is interesting and pleasurable to you.

As noted by Phillips, Pullen and Rhodes, there is always a tension between writing which conforms sufficiently to academic norms and expectations to be read and taken seriously, while at the same time seeking to critique and disrupt those norms (Phillips, Pullen, & Rhodes, 2014). This chapter, commencing with the narrative, is my effort to steer through that tension. Writing this chapter has, then, been a less straightforward and, in some ways more physical, process than my other writing tasks. There is in the chapter, as well as this introduction, the eruption of different authorial voices from me: from more conventional academic, to personal and anecdotal. Through various iterations of the narrative writing, I have felt embarrassed. My self-critical voice abuses me with ‘you’re not a novelist! Why would people want to read this?’ Yet given this collection is about physicality, it seems important not to flee these physically anchored feelings or to take refuge in what might be a ‘safer’, more cerebral piece of writing.

‘THE INTERVIEW’

Andy

He had felt confident about the outcome of the interview. Looking back, it had been the highpoint of that week during which his life took its most unexpected turn. He’d clocked his best time ever with the 70 km ‘Hell Ride’ the previous Saturday morning. Even though Genevieve had complained when he yet again lurched himself out of bed at 4.45 a.m., he knew that riding with his team mates gave him an adrenalin rush that lasted for days. He felt powerful. Like anything was possible for him. He used to get that after sex too but it was a while since things had been that simple with Gen. He couldn’t remember the last time she’d looked at him with lust, or even with that sparkle of playfulness and humour that had drawn them together. She could see through people could Gen, see their core. He’d loved her
frankness though it was withering — literally — when she turned it on him. When he thought about it, he couldn’t remember the last time they had sex. Could it be a month? Or more?

The regular cycling had certainly helped lose paunch and it had been a pretext to lose hair too. Most of the guys had got into waxing. No leg hair made graze recovery less painful. He’d also though been worried about the bald patch appearing on top, so he had shaved his head too. Gen was horrified. Said it was like sleeping with a porpoise, but he had been rather seduced by the slightly menacing, ‘take no prisoners’ look that baldness endowed. People cowered a bit more. Trouble was every Tom, Dick and Harry was doing it now, like the forearm tattoos pointedly shown off when they rolled up shirtsleeves.

Now his sense of confidence, of potency, had deserted him. It had begun to ebb at the interview when the subject was raised about one of his team who’d had a nervous breakdown. The HR director fixed him with her dark brown eyes which in other settings he had fantasised about. ‘How could you have let it get to that point Andy?’ The others shifted uneasily. This was the one blot on his otherwise outstanding record: a steady rise through GM operations, international, finance. He faltered but only for a moment. ‘John was my appointment and I stuffed up. I take full responsibility for that mistake and what it’s cost the company’. Rosa persisted. She was normally not that tenacious and why wasn’t Jim shutting down this line of questioning. ‘I’m not talking about costs to the company here Andy. I’m talking about a man who is so unhappy at work that he is suicidal. You work closely with him. You are his immediate manager. How could you not know? Not care a f**k?’ The word hung in the air. It was unusual for Rosa to use it, especially in this final formal interview situation. And she wasn’t really a member of the panel, she was supposed to be sitting in.

The head hunter broke in with some more predictable questions: his strategy for the business; how he was going to handle the likelihood of a change in government and regulation. All questions he responded to with his usual mix of steely intelligence, self-deprecating humour and schoolboy charm. But coming out, he felt deflated, a bit short of breath, pleased the interview was over.

At one end of the table had sat Harry, his mentor, his big frame spilling over the steel rods of the uber-cool minimalist chairs. Harry was used to being centre stage and running the show but Andy nevertheless registered the momentary eye contact between them as a sign. The job was his. He understood that they also had to interview Simone, but it was his. As he unfolded his taut frame from the chair, he felt a frisson of satisfaction
knowing the late afternoon light coming through the windows bounced off his suit and ultra-white shirt, lending him a kind of aura.

When he had finally arrived home the house was quiet. No sign of Gen or the kids. Maybe she said they were going to her mother’s for dinner and he wasn’t listening. He tried to comb back through their distracted exchange that morning. He had been particularly preoccupied with the job interview, but most weekdays it was the same. He and his family inhabited parallel universes, but he reassured himself that it would get better, now that he could put aside the anxiety about the job.

No time to hang about. It was Thursday — squash night. Grabbing his gear, he had headed straight back out, relishing the prospect of whipping his mates. Not long into the second game, he felt an odd sensation. Seconds later an intense pain charged up his right arm. Next moment, black …

Now here he was, connected up to serious monitors, tubing in more orifices than he knew he had. A young Asian registrar — who looked 19 at most — wagged her finger at him as she announced no work for 6 weeks. The head hunter had left a message which didn’t sound congratulatory. Even more upsetting was that he hadn’t heard from or been able to contact Gen. She seemed to have vanished. His eyes filled with tears.

Simone

The nightmares after the interview had been the usual ones involving nakedness and humiliation. The one where too late, she realised her skirt had been hooked into her knickers at the back. Because the interview was being held off-site, at the head hunters offices, she got lost, was panting, with visible sweat marks under the arms of her new, pale grey suit. The suit was the misguided choice after several weeks of agonising, taking advice from her trusted mates who — she thought — knew the tricky image path she was trying to tread. Until now she had hid in navy trouser suits and high necked shirts, partially to take the focus off her breasts, which were still a D despite breast reduction surgery in her late 20s to make them less in everyone’s face, or given she was short, across from everyone’s belt-buckle. But they still attracted a lot of attention, more than they wanted.

As a teenager her breasts had grown late and initially there was scepticism when she started to look fantastic in a sweater. Was it just padding? They had been a much welcomed passport to a belated transition to teenage popularity. But they grew and grew, though her height paused when it
saw five foot coming. She consoled herself. Kylie Minogue wasn’t five foot and it hadn’t stopped her going places. Though perhaps height was less important in getting to be ‘top of the pops’ than CEO.

It had all come back to her as she was ushered into the boardroom. Harry, the previous Chairman rose to his feet, his gaze locked on her chest — what was he doing here? Immediately the scene from three years ago came back to her. It was late, 9 p.m. on a Tuesday. She’d flown in from Sydney and decided on the plane home to tackle him about the firm’s board. She knew he’d be there because he liked to hang around late. To see who was still there. There were no women on ConstructCo’s board and the blokes that were had been chosen because they were largely acquiescent to Harry, who’d been the firm’s driving founder, CEO and then Chairman. Simone was sick of being wheeled out as the senior long-serving woman, hard evidence that the firm wasn’t a bastion of misogyny. He was pouring himself a whisky as she knocked on the half-open door and walked in. ‘Got a minute?’ she said. His yellowy eyes lit up. Part of him got off on her feistiness. She knew that. He looked forward to their confrontations, with the supreme confidence that they ended with her back in her place. As he got older, with the glimmer of his irrelevancy on the horizon, he enjoyed these moments of brutal dominance all the more.

‘Harry, we need to do something about the board. Many of them are non-contributors, you know that. Clients are asking questions. We are well placed for that huge public sector job but they are scrutinising our governance and board processes. I can only defend us so far … How about I sound out that woman who was president of the Institution of Engineers …’ Harry burst in, ‘I don’t want that f*****g Julianne. She’s been nothing but trouble for me.’ He came around the table and stood so close to her that she had to angle herself backwards, the chair almost horizontal. The burst blood veins around his nose seemed to light up and she felt whisky flavoured spittle as he spat down at her. ‘The only way women are getting into this boardroom is flat on their backs with their legs apart.’ She wriggled sideways determined not to show her fear. ‘You’re an idiot Harry. You are going to come unstuck on this one. I’m sick of being the poster girl for the firm and hiding its women-hating practices’.

Now, as she took her place opposite the interviewing panel, she mentally patted herself on the back. It was b****y amazing that she’d survived in this firm. Not only survived, but now here she was, being interviewed for the top job. Harry glowered at her. Simone knew that Andy was his chosen boy. If, or when, Andy got the job, she would be out of here quick smart. Perhaps she should have already left instead of
subjecting herself to yet another humiliating ritual of the firm going through the motions.

Her whole career at ConstructCo had come at a cost. She thought back to the conversation that she’d had with Marco this morning when he’d reached over to stroke her back. Part of her mind went into mental calculation. This probably meant he was interested in having sex. Did she have time? Could she afford to knock him back? They’d only just got back together after a trial separation that Marco had initiated but had just about destroyed her. A musician, she couldn’t believe her luck when Marco singled her out at a gig. She’d taken up dancing again, on the advice of a coach who warned she’d burn out if she continued to work all weekends. As a child she’d loved the experience of dance, her mind emptying, her body stretched out, sensuous, powerful. When she danced to his music her body felt easy and free, not trussed up like a turkey, waist band too tight, buttons straining. Work, email, it all disappeared …

No-one at ConstructCo knew anything about the trial separation between her and Marco though her heart felt like it was leaden in the cavernous emptiness of her chest … not to mention the juggling with the kids … the looks from the other school mums who noticed the changes in who was picking up.

Jim, the new Chairman of ConstructCo got the interview under way. Simone, still thinking about Marco and what single parenting life was like without him, reorganised her face in Harry’s direction. On those first dates with Marco, he’d told her how beautiful and sexy she was. No-one had ever said that to her before …

Her attention snapped back. The Chairman and other members of the interviewing panel were actually sitting up looking alert and interested. She wondered if she’d inadvertently sighed with longing. With nothing to lose, Simone decided to ditch the careful answers she’d rehearsed and say it as she saw it. Her trademark, slightly cantankerous, ‘call a spade a b****y shovel’, as her father described it. Despite the sensation familiar from schooldays that her feet did not reach the floor, she straightened her spine and looked directly at the panel members one by one. She led off with her concerns about, and the evidence against, the planned deeper expansion into Chinese building markets. Several of the panel members blanched. A few held their breath waiting to see how this challenge would go down.

It wasn’t the Chairman who rang her several days later on her mobile when she running for the train, cursing as the doors closed in front of her face. It was the head hunter. She knew that she was not his preferred choice
for the role and when she saw his name come up on her mobile she almost
didn’t answer. ‘Guess what’ he simpered ‘you’ve got the nod’. He rattled on, seamlessly transitioning allegiances to now being her greatest fan.

Day One as CEO she woke at 4 a.m., with a pit of fear in her stomach. By the time she arrived at the office she was wondering what manifestation of masochism had prompted her to accept the job. What pretext could she manufacture to get out of it — a death in the family, a bout of life-threatening illness? Chronic fatigue? Sitting down at the expanse of mahogany desk, she placed the photos that had travelled with her from her early days. They had been a statement of rebellion then. There had been so much pressure to hide her pregnancies, to put the job first and treat her kids and husband as things she fitted in around the edges.

‘OK’ she thought to herself. The fear was there but now was overlaid with a tingle of excitement. What to tackle first? Instead of reaching for her iPad and the 250 emails that had come in overnight, she walked out into the office. Her French counterparts in ConstructCo’s European offices started every day with greetings to each other: ‘Bonjour!’ and a handshake. Maybe saying hello and that she was pleased to be there with her colleagues was a good place to begin.

Harry

The interview over, Harry’s focus went to his left knee. He lengthened his leg gingerly and felt that familiar disabling twang as the joints and what little cartilage he had left, rearranged themselves. Playing State rugby had been good for his business contacts but not his body. He willed the dribble of fluid that he had been advised was part of the problem to warm up and start oiling the joint so he could actually get up out of the chair, the chair which in its spartan design minimalism was unequal to the task of accommodating, let alone supporting him, to get upright. The possibility of ever getting on the tennis court again, never mind wiping the opposition, had gone out the window.

‘Harry, thanks for your contribution. We’ve made the right choice’. Jim’s right hand was extended to shake Harry’s, his puppy-like bonhomie palpable. Still desperate for my approval, observed Harry to himself, despite manoeuvring me out of the role of Chairman six months ago. Harry lurched himself up, his bullish bulk rearranging itself into its remembered demeanour of dominance: a bit too close, a very direct gaze. ‘I hope we b****y well have’ he growled.
Harry made small talk and wondered how he was going to fill in the half hour till he had an interview set up about the history of the company, his company. He’d started it almost 45 years ago with Eddie. Eddie was the accountant, the numbers guy, and Harry the builder, the practical one. The team was small but they quickly started to have an impact. Harry loved the building, the making things. His hands-on attitude and omnipresence on site, usually from 5 a.m. till 8 p.m. was appealing to clients. Within a few years their turnover was in the millions and ConstructCo had a respected name for interesting buildings, delivered on time (that was Harry) and on budget (Eddie’s patch).

Life was simple then. It was about the concrete and the steel and looking after the blokes. Picking the best people, mentoring them, helping them learn all the things he knew from a lifetime in the industry but not mentioned in any jumped-up construction diploma. Now it seemed to be all about finance. But the human element had also become the big stress of the job. He recalled his daily drive to work — dark with the city still waking, trams and buses mostly empty except their drivers — knowing that he and his firm were responsible. His people devoted their lives to the job, sometimes with their health and their marriages as the casualties. Harry could deal with just about anything that was thrown at him — that was his strength. But he dreaded the call. The one that informed him someone had been killed on site.

He reflected on the interview. Simone had eyeballed him when she came into the room. They had a long, painful history. He’d labelled her a troublemaker right from the start and felt she wouldn’t last a year. But she’d called him on that and on many other of his gut decisions and eventually she’d earned his reluctant respect. By the end of it and completely against his predictions, Harry grudgingly acknowledged she was the better hands to leave his company, his baby, in. Andy, his preferred candidate, had delivered his usual glossy performance. It was the way he sat back, one foot draped elegantly across the other knee in those b****y silk socks and Italian pointy-toe jobs. Harry cursed, ‘why can’t blokes wear proper shoes’. An image of his father came to mind, creating a mirror-like finish on his school shoes using the magic ingredient of his spit directed skilfully to the centre of the opened tin of black nugget boot polish.

Thank God he’d held onto his reserved spot in the car park. The interview over, it was not too far for him to hobble. He gingerly lowered his generous hips into the car: the bucket seat of the Audi an interminably long way down. Momentarily, he regretted giving in to vanity and going for the sports model.
Annie definitely wouldn’t want him home any earlier than 4 p.m. and she was out tonight anyway with choir practice. She’d tried to drag him along to that after he retired. But it just wasn’t him. But then again neither were the other usual options — golf, bridge, rotary. He wanted big challenges to pit himself against, not piddling ones. Never much good at blokey chit chat, he preferred barking orders and keeping to himself for the rest.

The brochure was on the passenger seat. It had come from his physio — the one who looked 16 but who he had belatedly started listening to after she had got him walking again post-surgery. ‘Sufi dancing’ she’d said. ‘It is definitely the best therapy for knees and luckily there is a class starting up close by’. What do I wear to Sufi dancing he wondered?

**DISCUSSION**

The following discussion begins by teasing out those aspects of physicality revealed through the narrative. Leadership, I suggest, is always being constructed through physical experiences and interactions with the physical world. I then turn to a discussion of the implications of the physical in leadership. What should scholars, teachers and those who work with leaders ‘do’ with their knowledge and insights about physicality? Given the emerging evidence that physicality is an important component in the quality and effectiveness of leadership, how should we write, teach and work with leaders, drawing attention to the way physicality matters? I conclude suggesting that being attuned to one’s physical self and paying attention to the physical cues offered by others and the material world are ingredients in sustainable and effective leadership.

**THE NARRATIVE: HOW DOES PHYSICALITY MATTER IN LEADERSHIP?**

As described previously, this chapter did not start out with a plan to illustrate the role of certain pre-defined dimensions of physicality, nor to use the characters to tell some ‘truths’ about physicality’s significance. Rather I started with the characters and their stories to discover what aspects of their physicality would surface as important. I also sought to use a language and way of writing that would allow their physical experiences to
‘speak’. So what are some dimensions of physicality that emerge as important influences on Andy’s, Simone’s and Harry’s leadership?

1. **Observable physicality, such as body shape, stature and attractiveness and the physical strategies leaders adopt (consciously and less consciously) to cope with the demands of the role and to project a requisite credible leadership persona.** Harry’s bulk is a tried and true mechanism through which he assembles and conveys power, including intimidating Simone. Andy’s physical fitness enables him to feel great — on a natural high — to compete and win. His cycling and squash triumphs reinforce to others his credentials for leadership such as capabilities of endurance and toughness.

2. **Subjectively experienced physicality or the ways these individuals see themselves physically and the trade-offs, mindsets and routines they have habitually developed to accommodate their physical selves.** These include the non-obvious but niggling and sometimes debilitating ailments which are rarely discussed, such as Harry’s dodgy knee. This category also includes the physical sensations which bring with them emotional feelings and are often anchored in memory, history and identities. One example is Simone’s feelings about her breasts, her decision to have breast reduction surgery and, in a larger sense, her sexuality. These shifting and conflicting feelings bubble into her mind as she reflects back on her journey as a leader: her need to conceal and reduce the impact of her breasts when others look at her, and her more recent recognition of the importance of her relationship including its sex life, in her ongoing happiness and sense of confidence to take on the challenges of leadership.

3. **The physical and material context, including desks, offices, chairs and so on which become active ‘players’, themselves actors, with relationships to other human actors in the social construction and undermining of leadership.** In elaborations of Actor Network Theory and particularly the work of Bruno Latour, is the argument that supposedly inert features can be active or compliant in outcomes, in this case individual efforts towards presenting a leaderly persona (Latour, 1996, 2000). Rather than the traditional understanding that humans are at the helm of their physical environments, this view articulates that the material and the physical may change people more than the other way around. The narrative highlights the active way in which ‘objects’ participate in the construction of leadership. For example, there is Harry’s indulgence, the low slung Audi that is so very hard for him to get into and out of, he is best
4. **The physically experienced spaces between and around leaders as they interact.** As Ladkin (2013) points out leadership needs to be understood as a phenomena that arises from between bodies. The narrative records these often undiscussed but powerfully experienced sensations: Simone feeling Harry’s spittle land on her; the impact on the interview panel of Andy’s charm and confidence oozing upwards from his Italian shoes; Harry’s humiliation at being down the end of the boardroom table and being humoured by his replacement: the patronising new Chairman.

5. **Gender and age issues in how physicality is experienced and ‘managed’**.

   For example, Andy is accustomed to being physically fit and using training routines like bike rides to feel good about himself. It is possible for him to have an early wake up regime because his wife handles mornings and getting their kids to school. Despite Andy’s ‘privileges’ around these routines, there is a hovering vulnerability: the premature balding, the demise of his sex life and sense of being lost, as the myths of an illusory perfect masculinity are punctured. Andy experiences moments of loss: when he comes home to an empty house, and when he allows himself to linger on the parallel worlds he and his wife have come to inhabit. In contrast, Simone has endured high levels of physical visibility throughout her time at ConstructCo and has done her best to ignore comments and camouflage her womanliness. Many of Harry’s efforts to put her in her place as a woman have taken physical form, such as relying on his bulk and overbearing manner. However, increasingly she has also relied on a physically anchored tenacity to ‘get in his face’ about the lack of women in the company and on its board.

The narrative, including these interwoven examples, illustrates the importance of physical experiences and responses to others in the doing of leadership. Through its different language and intent, the discourse of the narrative highlights how much the physical mediates leader and follower sense-making in leadership.

The narrative also foreshadows an argument I make in the discussion section of this chapter, that is, that being attuned to the physical makes for better leadership. For example, Harry’s success in building his company has been partially a matter of his love of the concrete and steel, the material of engineering. This clear preference for the material components of building had been constantly unsettled by his recognition of the physical dangers...
faced by his workers. He has potentially been a better leader because he has tamed his driving obsessions to build at any cost and come to care about the physical well-being of people. Connecting to his own physical ailments are also part of him letting go of a gruff persona and being able to see people like Simone and his physiotherapist with new eyes. Sufi dancing is not so absurd as it once would have seemed.

Simone’s leadership provides a different example, where her sense of herself as a woman in a very male-dominated environment has come under pressure. Her breasts have attracted too much attention. A mark of her success has been her capacity to shift this dynamic, to push back on the men above her and demand a better deal for women, which also, she believes, is in the firm’s long-term interests. She has had to have physical courage to do this, and her own relationship with her partner is one of the supports for her confidence. For women, as well as men, I want to suggest, the capacity to push back and exercise autonomy and leadership, at least partially grows out of individuals’ physical and sexual identities (see also Sinclair, 1995, 1998). Among her first actions as CEO is Simone’s decision not to stay behind her desk but to physically connect with the staff in her office, on whom she will depend. Her recognition of the importance of her physical self in her relationship with her partner helps her to ground herself and to start her new leadership job in a less driven, more caring way towards both herself and the people who will be working for her.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP RESEARCH, WRITING AND TEACHING

All leaders are increasingly drawn into a world where image matters. How should we as scholars, teachers, leadership development practitioners and leaders ourselves respond to and incorporate emerging insights about the significance of physicality? Further, how should we do so to appreciate the significance of the physical, without subordinating physicality as just another instrument of unproblematised leadership? The following discussion offers a mixture of research findings and personal reflections to explore these questions.

I first began to notice that leadership often seemed to include an important, but ignored, physical dimension in the early 1990s when I was doing research — interviews with Australian corporate CEOs — for my book Doing Leadership Differently. The research involved talking to, and also
watching leaders, as they went about their work of trying to influence. One of the earliest things I noticed is that, certainly among the male leaders I was observing, leadership seemed to require a particular performance of tough, ‘manly’ physicality. Physical prowess and endurance, a disdain for shows of weakness, height and the capacity to ‘stand above other men’, were all implicit in the job description of many CEO roles. Physical attractiveness was also helpful in getting senior roles especially in certain consulting and similar industries, and particularly for men (see also Sinclair, 2011).

Further, it seemed that masculine leadership was not without sexuality (Calas & Smircich, 1991). Building on my own and other research, doing leadership for many men was affirmed and reinforced by a heterosexual identity as a man (Sinclair, 1995). In contrast, women in leadership and management often felt forced to camouflage themselves, including their bodies, their children, their relationships or lack of them, conforming to masculine norms. I concluded the need to develop a woman-centred discourse of sexuality in leading, one which recognises the multiple and different meanings of sexuality for women.

There is ample evidence that physicality in leadership is gendered, that is, women are subject to more pressures to ‘manage’ or camouflage their bodies towards masculine or other ideals, that their physicality and physical performances are more tightly regulated, through heightened visibility and scrutiny (Kenny & Bell, 2011; Sinclair, 2013a, 2013b; Trethewey, 1999). Women’s capacity to lead is judged on their bodies and their appearance. Scholars have also theorised how pointing to body shortcomings is a way of gendering leadership: of making some leaders first and foremost women, therefore flawed or weak. Public commentary about appearance thus ‘clears the path for sexism to come marching through’, not so subtly masked in speculation about dress, hair-dos, weight, sexuality and so on (Hall & Donaghue, 2013). Recent research has also mapped the effects of social media on the physicality of young women (Coleman, 2008) and in leadership development (Kelan, 2012). While this research confirms the ongoing ways in which leaders, and especially women leaders, are disciplined by images of appropriate physicality, it also indicates that women are not passive recipients of those images. Rather, the process is more likely to be one whereby leaders become and adapt their physical selves through interaction and experimentation with, reflection and repudiation of the images and models of physicality to which they are exposed.

A common response to these pressures around physicality has been to argue that the physical shouldn’t matter, it’s the quality of the mind that
counts. Banishing physicality is the argument of many who, very understandably, want women and others not to be judged as less deserving of leadership because of perceptions of their weaker, ‘leaky’ or problematic physicality. I can understand and sympathise with this response, which I encounter among some women leaders, of seeking to play down and camouflage their physical selves.

The argument for physicality’s irrelevance is also a traditional academic claim, enshrined in the enlightenment philosophy of Descartes and many others since. According to this view, the body is the necessary vehicle, allowing the mind’s brilliance its expression. This philosophical position has also been subject to substantial critique for its implied dichotomy between mind and body, often applied in a gendered fashion to privilege men’s minds, while attributing (often flawed) embodiment to women. Feminists and philosophers such as Luce Irigaray maintain that conventional philosophy has perpetuated assumptions that the body and physicality play no role in knowledge acquisition and learning (Irigaray, 2002a, 2002b). The role of researchers and teachers is surely to contest such dichotomies, and to experiment with ways of studying and writing about leadership phenomena that promote recognition of phenomena like physicality.

Further, to respond to gendered scrutiny of women’s physicality by denying the physical in leadership, seems the wrong response. In recent research with Emma Bell, we have argued that eroticism defined to encompass the love and pleasure in teaching and learning deserves to be ‘reclaimed’ in academic life (Bell & Sinclair, 2014). Using the increasingly factory-like context of universities as the example, we seek to show that traditional norms which privilege the mind and often operate in a gendered fashion encourage a de-valuing of the potential erotic pleasures in teaching and learning among academics. Following the arguments of feminists writers and educators, we suggest that physically anchored pleasures and experiences, such as the thrill of great teaching, the closeness of relationships with graduate students, the love of writing, all deserve renewed attention in academic life (Cixous, Cohen, & Cohen, 1976; Hooks, 2003; Irigaray, 2002b; McWilliam, 1999).

Many of the most powerful learning experiences we have, as teachers, students and leaders, in the academic context are powerful because they have an aesthetic, sensual or pleasurable component, registered and valuable in our physical lives, not just in the mind. Such experiences help us be resilient, cope with stress and find fulfilment in our work. While it is important to recognise the gendered quality of pressures around physicality in...
leadership, many of the emerging insights are not just relevant for women. Long-term scholars of masculinity and management have documented how stultifying and ineffective it is for many men who feel in their management and professional lives that they must enact a compulsory kind of heroic invincibility which treats their bodies like instruments or machines (early management scholars documenting this include Collinson & Hearn, 1996; Connell, 1995; Roper, 1994).

Around 2003, my own research into physicality took a new turn, prompted by my experiences of yoga and undertaking training to be a yoga and meditation teacher. While these experiences might have initiated a redirection away from bodies towards the mind, in fact they prompted me to explore the connection between body and mind from different perspectives.

In areas of Eastern and Buddhist philosophy, one’s physicality, such as ways of breathing and access to the senses through the body, is viewed as a gateway to important forms of intelligence, to wisdom and mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 2006). They provide us with ways of noticing and revaluing the present, of experiencing the full richness of the people and situations around us. As described by Thich Nhat Hanh, consciousness is not much use to us if we are ‘tossed around mindlessly like a bottle slapped here and there on the waves’ (1991, p. 4). Rather our efforts to take hold of consciousness are made possible through the physical; most commonly through a focus on the breath. He instructs, ‘Whenever mind becomes scattered, use breath as the means to take hold of mind’ (Hanh, 1991, p. 15). In this view, physicality is not something to be ignored, suppressed or overcome, but a means of helping us live more fully. Similarly, in yoga philosophy one begins the preparation of training the mind by supporting the body to be flexible and strong enough to be still and focused for meditation.

At the same time, my experience introducing yoga to leaders has revealed the very ambivalent feeling people have about their bodies and physical sense of themselves. They often feel, and say, they can’t do yoga! Yet when I work with them on gently stretching and feeling their breath and their bodies, they almost always experience the connection to their physicality, such as remembering their capacity to let go and relax, positively. Individuals often re-discover focus, perspective and compassion for themselves through their yoga practice. They will leave feeling more settled, able to accept and embrace whatever life is presenting them.

Building on these insights I have introduced a focus on the physical in some diverse leadership development contexts. There are two approaches that seem to ‘work’, in the sense of opening up a productive and lively
space for discussion of physicality. The first is to point to examples of where leadership has been more effective through paying attention to the physical. Two Australian examples from my research are former Victorian Chief Commissioner of Police, Christine Nixon, and Indigenous leader and school principal, Chris Sarra (Sinclair, 2005). Their leadership was, I argued, more effective because of the ways they were attuned to the importance of physicality in their roles. This included, for example, the significance to followers and communities of being physically present and paying attention to the physical identities and well-being of those they were seeking to lead. This took practical forms. For Christine Nixon it meant going out and talking to ‘the troops’ and communities in remote parts of Victoria. It meant ensuring uniforms were comfortable and fitted an increasingly diverse range of police bodies. It meant being part of gay pride marches which recognised lesbian and gay police officers. Chris Sarra’s leadership as school principal emphasised and rewarded children for coming to school (absenteeism had been a big problem at the School). The motto developed was to aim for kids who were ‘strong and smart’.

A second approach in leadership development is to put a value on, and model, a care and concern about well-being in leadership, including physical well-being. In my experience, many people working in leadership roles ‘get’ that leadership is physical. They are able to see that some of their physical habits and ways of working are unsustainable, putting stress on themselves and their families. They recognise that the effective and inspiring leaders around them are those who are present, perceived as being grounded and genuine, not just because of what they say but because of how they are in the space between themselves and others. Leaders know that the important conversations they have are those where what’s really going on is discussed, where they feel heard and held by others. A discussion about physicality can in these circumstances become a wide ranging exploration of the limitations of conventional leadership accounts.

Some of these explorations of physicality with leaders and managers function as a prompt to pay more attention to looking after oneself, and to looking after those with whom one works’. There is value in this as an end in itself. People who work in physically very demanding occupations, such as police and correctional officers are often working in cultures that are punishing and abusive. It is valuable to help them find ways of delivering leadership and what they need to do physically without mirroring abusive and self-punishing norms. In this view, good leadership is not about physically disciplining ourselves to get through the work, or even to
deliver pre-specified outcomes. Rather it is about finding ways to do the work which enable others to be effective, flourish and develop, including their whole selves.

Finally it is important to recognise that our customary ways of researching and writing often collude in de-physicalising leadership. As Joanne Martin has argued, dominant forms of research and research norms determine what is seen to be worth noticing, studying and writing about (2000). Pointing to the inherent conservatism in research, she suggests that insights and findings that lie outside research norms — like experiences of physicality — ‘may surface only as hard to study thoughts and feelings’ (1992, p. 236). Women’s physical experiences and desires in leadership, for example, their bodies being made visible and scrutinised and responses of denying or suppressing physicality, are demonstrations of Martin’s point. From my experience working with senior managers and leaders, I know that physical experiences, such as being looked at in a demeaning way, are frequently ‘in your face’, yet are felt to be taboo. Such experiences are often treated as non-legitimate aspects of leadership, something to be ashamed of mentioning. Women sometimes apologise for ‘wasting’ time on questions such as ‘what should I wear?’

Turning to writing about physicality in leadership, the genre of conventional leadership article writing can often reproduce the abstruse and disembodied theorising that is being critiqued (Sinclair, 2005). As described earlier, the language and discourses seem to require a kind of observation and instrumental analysis which is antipathetic to the expression of what is lurking or tender. In my own writing I have felt — and it is quite possibly my own permission that was required — I couldn’t fully explore the vulnerable, tactile and intimate physical sensations that I thought were often part of being a leader and follower. For example, the feelings of being ‘held’ by a community that Michelle Evans and I found to be an important part of providing Indigenous leadership can really only be conveyed in the language and context of that community (Evans & Sinclair, forthcoming). Such physical experiences are not amenable to capture in leadership surveys, though they can sometimes be conveyed in artistic forms, such as opera and dance.

In our article ‘Writing Differently’, Chris Grey and I offered some reasons for incorporating fiction and other non-conventional forms in academic writing: to reveal phenomena which current discourses either mask or have no language for; to critique the politics and manners of research writing; to disrupt and shift the power and focus from author to reader; to broaden audiences; to do something different with writing than inform
or add to knowledge, perhaps to add to reader enjoyment (Grey & Sinclair, 2006). Referring to some other benefits from experiments in writing differently, Jermier refers to Sartre’s view that readers appreciate being given from authors freedom to interpret and ‘co-produce’ the text (Jermier, 1992). Jermier goes on to note that ‘all forms of representation are, in part, rhetorical devices promoting the interests of their class of creators’ (1992, p. 225). There is little doubt that as a ‘class of creators’, academics have historically sought to privilege minds and de-emphasise the physical. If we are interested in foregrounding physical experiences, we should pay attention to the way different kinds of writing might open up different physical responses and different ways of knowing in the reader (Fotaki, Metcalfe, & Harding, 2014; Phillips et al., 2014). Researching physicality in leadership then demands that researchers be reflexive about their own habits and open to experimentation. The contributors to this volume provide examples of challenging such conventions of writing physicality.

CONCLUSION

To deny physicality in leadership is both infeasible and undesirable. Using the vehicle of ‘The Interview’, I have sought to demonstrate and affirm the value of being connected to the physical in leadership. When individuals are connected to their physical selves in a generous and nurturing fashion; when they are open to their senses with all the data that this brings; when they are present to others in a wholehearted way (not with their minds in one place and their bodies in another); they are more likely to provide leadership that is meaningful to themselves and others, satisfying and effective.

Pursuing this awareness of physicality is not a simple process – in research, writing, teaching or leadership. Very often the first place people will go is to talk about body language or image management. I am not advocating regimes of physical mastery – perhaps the opposite. I am suggesting that being aware of one’s full being as human, with the physically anchored frailties and vulnerabilities, desires and capabilities this brings, offers new and important possibilities for being in leadership. In turn, leaders who do their leadership work with an awareness of their own and others physicality offer those around them something precious and of potentially lasting value.
REFERENCES


On Knees, Breasts and Being Fully Human in Leadership


This article has been cited by:

1. Mary Phillips, Leadership, Eroticism and Abjection: Star Trek and the Borg Queen 155-175. [Abstract] [Full Text] [PDF] [PDF]