Navigating with a feminist compass:  
Exploring leadership perspectives in small firms

*Nicola Patterson, Graduate Tutor,  
Prof. Sharon Mavin, Associate Dean – Research and Consultancy,  
Jane Turner, Associate Dean - Executive Development Portfolio.

All at Newcastle Business School, Northumbria University, UK

Paper stream: Gendered Issues in HRD
Submission type: Working paper
Word Count: 2,385

*Please direct all correspondence to:  
Nicola Patterson  
Newcastle Business School  
City Campus East  
Northumbria University  
Newcastle upon Tyne  
NE1 8ST  
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 191 2274643  
Email: Nicola.patterson@northumbria.ac.uk
Introduction

The aim of this paper is to further understandings of HRD by taking a Feminist Standpoint, providing an alternative to conventional malestream HRD theory by challenging the ‘gender we think’ and the ‘gender we do’ (Gherardi, 1994) within the HRD community. There are few studies that examine gender within HRD theory and practice which Metcalfe (2008) highlights as poignant given the significant number of organisations that label themselves diversity and equality driven firms. This paper argues that by disrupting male norms and navigating the complexities of leadership and leadership development with a feminist compass, HRD theorists are able to create new knowledge, offering practitioners a renewed vision.

The leadership perspectives of women entrepreneurs and their employees are explored highlighting the gender blind, gender neutral and gender defensiveness of the authentic leadership construct guided by my feminist compass. I refer to the metaphor of a feminist compass to describe the feminist values I identify with which have guided my research choices. The compass metaphor also aligns with the self-awareness component of the authentic leadership development framework offered by Gardner et al (2005) explored within this paper. A key requirement of the framework is that leaders build self-understanding by learning who they are and what they value providing a firm anchor rooting the decisions and actions they take. My identification with feminism provides my anchor and therefore it is with my feminist compass that I navigate my research journey.

The study integrates literature from HRD, gender and leadership. Firstly, the importance of foregrounding gender within HRD is outlined before introducing authentic leadership development. Feminist standpoint research (FSR hereafter) is then explored offering my approach as an alternative to dominant conventional epistemologies.

HRD and gender

Before moving to discuss gender within the HRD field, it is imperative to introduce and provide an understanding of the concept. Gender is socially constructed (Fonow and Cook, 2005). Despite masculinities and femininities being in constant social flux, society has positioned them in opposition. Masculinities have been tied to the bodies of men, and femininities to the bodies of women creating a gender binary trapping men and women in gender stereotypes and establishing the social order whereby man is reproduced as the norm and woman as the outsider (Kantola, 2008). This binary thinking prohibits fluidity (Bryans and Mavin, 2003) as social constructions of gender rules create truth effects determining what are legitimate performances for both sexes and removing the possibility for women and men to legitimately enter cross gender experiences (Gherardi, 1994). Due Billing and Alvesson (2000) call for cultural notions of femininity and masculinity to be questioned, as they highlight that masculinities and femininities are not determined by ones sex, but are social constructions. With this understanding the paper moves to discuss gender in relation to the HRD discipline.
Defining the boundaries within HRD has and continues to be a contested area among scholars (Metcalf, 2008; Metcalfe and Rees, 2005; Lee, 2001). Its origins are rooted in organisational and individual training and development; however, as an evolving discipline this definition has developed, incorporating a diverse array of activities including “individual responsibility for learning, team learning, organizational learning, knowledge management, adult education and nurturing of intellectual capital” (Metcalf, 2008: 449). Despite HRD developing into a multi-faceted discipline of activities, and the significant number of organisations that label themselves diversity and equality driven firms, dominant epistemologies have served to keep concerns of diversity at the margins (Metcalf, 2008). Consequently there is a significant lack of feminist research in HRD.

Recent HRD studies have started to acknowledge gender and diversity as an analytical category of analysis (Bierema and Cseh, 2003), but these remain in the minority with only a few conducting feminist research (Metcalf, 2008). Bierema and Cseh’s (2003) critical review of 670 papers from AFHRD proceedings from 1996 to 2000 highlighted that only 10% of papers used gender or diversity as an analytical category, with just 8% of proceedings advocating social activism and change. Bierema and Cseh (2003) contend that this highlights the need for the discipline “to further develop a social conscience” (2003: 22). Greater attention is required to readdress the dominant epistemology within HRD (Metcalf, 2008), that is relevant to women and other diverse groups which have previously been ignored and kept at the margins (Bierema and Cseh, 2003). Bierema and Cseh (2003) suggest that it is apt at a time of such evolution and debate within the field, for HRD scholars to take advantage and challenge dominant theoretical practice before it becomes further ingrained within the bedrock of the discipline. Metcalf’e’s (2008) recent paper offers a framework from a feminist post structuralist perspective to develop understandings of gendered nature of HRD theory. She focuses her analysis on three elements; the importance of language in forming HRD, the body in HRD and how performance scripts are written differently onto men’s and women’s bodies, and reflexivity and gender highlighting the significance of questioning our own values and assumptions. She encourages scholars to consider the value of post structuralist inquiry to challenge epistemological frames of thinking and doing gender and difference in everyday HRD practice (2008: 459). It is therefore the intention of this paper to extend Metcalf’e’s challenge to dominant masculine epistemologies by offering FSR as an alternative to this challenge of conventional HRD theory and practice. Whilst I agree that changing the language game is essential through post structuralist analysis (Metcalf, 2008) oppression is not a game and requires political action through which FSR is aligned (Collins, 1997). The next section highlights Authentic Leadership Development as an appropriate framework to be explored within HRD.

**Authentic Leadership Development**

As highlighted by Metcalf (2008), HRD is a multi-faceted discipline that has drawn attention to the increased emphasis on individuals’ responsibility for their own learning, which the emerging authentic leadership literature (Shamir and Eilam, 2005; Sparrowe, 2005) is well placed to address. Gardener et al’s (2005) conceptual framework for fostering Authentic Leader- Follower development is unlike many
traditional leadership constructs (traits, behaviour, situational, contingency and transformational) which can leave leaders feeling labelled or 'done to'. The Authentic Leadership Development approach engages leaders on a journey of self-discovery. Exploring five key components: self-awareness, self-acceptance, authentic actions, relationships and recognition of their vulnerabilities, the framework facilitates exploration of leaders identity, motives and goals, life history, values and emotions, to understand how they shape their leadership. By applying the Authentic Leadership Development Framework, leaders move beyond leadership descriptions to deeper understandings of how and why they ‘do leadership’, enabling them to relate more transparently with their employees to build trust and alleviate current misgivings. As Mavin (2009: 83) notes, the “management learning literature is now looking at authentic leadership as a way to combat all ills of organisations”. However, as Eagly suggests (2005: 470) it is “bad advice” for women to simply transparently show themselves, as they risk followers failing to identify with their values and beliefs and consequently lack leadership legitimacy. Men have traditionally dominated leadership roles, with women positioned in subordinate, therefore society is unaccustomed to women possessing positions of authority, and they feel uncomfortable with a change of hierarchal relations between the sexes (Eagly, 2005). Women are cast as the ‘outsider’ and must contend with performing under the leadership mantle whilst also convincing others that they are conforming “to expectations concerning appropriate female behaviour” (Eagly, 2005: 469).

Although this contemporary leadership theory has progressed from traditional masculine constructs to draw upon femininities through for example self awareness, it fails to help move beyond dualistic thinking leaving women leaders trapped within their sex role stereotype. It serves to highlight that leadership theorizing remains gender neutral, gender blind and gender defensiveness. Consequently, women entrepreneur-leaders are presented with role incongruity as they face the challenge of performing to societal expectations of being a woman, leader and entrepreneur. In order to understand the leadership experiences within the context of small business FSR is adopted and explained in the next section.

**Overview of study**

The study compromises five case studies of small businesses led by women entrepreneurs in IT, law, construction, beauty, and childcare sectors. I delineate how the research design was guided by my feminist compass; my moral commitment to women’s purposes, the belief that women should not be subordinate to men and the need for women to be given space to ‘voice’ their contextual experiences (Nicolson, 1996). From each case the women entrepreneur and one employee-follower participated in the study. Each research participant kept a research diary and two semi-structured interviews were conducted with each. Discourse Analysis was applied to understand how language continues to perpetuate dualistic thinking - trapping women.

**Feminist Standpoint Theory**
Before outlining FSR, first I must address what I understand by feminism. Feminism is a movement towards social and political change (Crasnow, 2008; Brooks, 2007; Fonow and Cook, 2005; Hurley 1999). Women have inherited perceptions of “what it means to be a woman and how women ought to live and act” (Crotty, 1998: 179). It rejects biological determinism and highlights gender as a social construction (Fonow and Cook, 2005). It seeks to give women power denied by patriarchal society, to enable them to “contextualise [their] lives and explain the constraints” (Nicolson, 1996: 23). Harding (1991) argues that understanding women views of their lives is what grounds FSR. As Brooks (2007) compounds, only by placing women at the heart research, can you provide them with the space to reflect and articulate their “concrete experiences” (Collins, 1990: 209), to uncover aspects of the social order that have been ignored and overlooked (Buzzanell, 2003) to achieve greater awareness and understanding of their oppression. Consequently, a central tenant of FSR is that dominant groups are unable to recognize oppressive characteristics of their own beliefs and practices (Harding and Norberg, 2005). Brooks (2007) further suggests that by engaging in feminist practice we can apply new knowledge towards cultivating social change. Therefore as a research philosophy, FSR provides an alternative to conventional research, which has simply served to privilege and discriminate different social groups to sustain political arrangements (Harding and Norberg, 2005).

However, FSR has received some significant criticism. Hekman (1997) critiqued FSR for two core elements; its epistemological privileging of women’s’ views, failing to disrupt the social order by creating a new social order; and it’s essentialisation of women. Fonow and Cook (2005) highlight the need to acknowledge the diversity among women and men. Although Hekman (1997) highlights essentialisation as an issue she similarly problematizes acknowledging the fluidity of women’s positions as the multiplicity of standpoints makes any kind of conclusion impossible. Buzzanell (2003) also recognises the difficulty in attempting to devise an activist position based on diverse standpoints but suggests that the aim is to develop feminist agendas by making sense of the commonalities of women’s lives without denying the differences between and amongst women (Stanley and Wise, 1993). Collins (1997) follows up Hekmans critique by suggesting that women can share historically based experiences which have permanence over time which go beyond individual experiences. Her argument stands that fluidity does mean that groups disappear and highlights the commonality of women across power differentials through sharing of institutional structures. Commonality is required in order “to preserve the analytical and political force of feminist theory” (O’Brien Hallstein, 2000: 4). A commitment to theorizing from a common standpoint is critical to enable political change (Buzzanell, 2003).

A key challenge for FSR is also how they make their knowledge claims legitimate and believable whilst ensuring their study is differentiated as feminist. Reflexivity is an extremely potent part of legitimating feminist research. McCorkel and Myers (2003) refer to the need of the researcher to understand the extent to which their positionality, the context and location, shapes the research. They use the metaphor of a stage when they call for researchers to make transparent their front and backstage. Only by engaging in this reflexivity of the performance and backstage are they able to legitimate their knowledge claims.
Harding (2007) proposes four ways considerations that feminist standpoint theorists should consider when being reflexive to ensure their knowledge claims are believable; how knowledge has been produced, why the chosen methods were selected, the power differentials between research participants and the researcher, and providing guidelines for future research. Feminists need to explore analytically the nature of the research process because of criticisms about how women’s voices are to be represented, who has authority and what form these representations should taken (Fonow and Cook, 2005). Consequently as a researcher I consciously write myself into the research (Fonow and Cook, 2005) as it becomes difficult to separate the research from the researcher.

As a feminist researcher I am also politically and ethically more accountable (Harding and Norberg, 2005) as I have ‘double responsibility’ (Wolf, 1992), to ensure that no ‘harm’ is caused to my participants and the wider female community whose lives the research intends to improve through social and political change. It is therefore imperative that my retellings do not label the women in ways that could prove damaging to individuals and its community members (Fine, 1994). Consequently all transcripts were offered back to participants to review and edit as they wished to enable them to make their own decisions as to what could be shared and included participants in the analysis stage to ensure that my research would serve women’s purposes (Preissle, 2007).

**Implications**

By sharing the research journey which I have navigated with my feminist compass I offer FSR as an alternative research approach that can further develop HRD by highlighting how the field reproduces gendered relations at an organisational and individual level. By being cognizant of gender, scholars can critically analyse how they continue to perpetuate established social order. FSR acknowledges the diversity and subjectivity of women’s experiences (Stanley and Wise, 1993) whilst retaining the commonality required to enable social and political change (Hurley, 1999) encouraging HRD scholars to create new ways of viewing leadership and leadership development to help break down gendered traditions inherent within the academy. Analysis of the women entrepreneur leaders and followers leadership experiences will be presented at the conference to further illustrate how FSR is a legitimate alternative to the dominant masculine approaches traditionally applied within HRD.

HRD practitioners have a key central role in fostering a renewed vision for the community through the change and leadership development programmes they implement (Metcalfe, 2008), helping to place ‘gender on the agenda’.

**Key words:** HRD, gender, feminist standpoint research, leadership, small business
References


