**Resisting discourses of fraudulence: female experiences of leadership in Higher Education**

***The context*:** educational leadership as practice and discourse has been presented in recent years as having undergone transformation. What was once regarded as a male dominated arena has been arguably reshaped into a more even terrain, where leadership is no longer predicated on masculine norms. Research on gender and leadership has moved towards a position where gender is not privileged and the construct of ‘hierarchical managerialism’ has been balanced by a different discourse, a discourse that respects qualities such as care and nurture. Leadership has been arguably re-framed by a more inclusive discourse that acts as a ‘reality definer’ for academic managers. And yet, is this new discourse of leadership experienced in the lived lives of female academic managers? Is this new discourse authentic or fraudulent?

***The questions*:** the catalyst for this study were stories of rejection, of “crushing failure’’, experienced by female leaders that caused us to question whether the discourse of leadership in higher education truly reflects the different ways in which leadership is enacted by women. If this discourse is not inclusive what are the implications for women as leaders within higher education? In this research we explore the experiences of female leaders in three European universities.

***Conceptual framework*:** Foucault’s interpretation of discourse is helpful to us in our research. The question of whether there is truly a new discourse of leadership - or whether there are simply new phrases added to the leadership lexicon - is at the heart of our work. Without a new discourse of leadership there is no possibility of thinking about leadership differently: there are at best only empty phrases and at worst, organizational dishonesty that marginalizes female academic leaders.

***Methodology:*** We sought to capture the lived experiences of three female leaders in European universities. How did they enact and experience their professional roles? By capturing their real life narratives we were seeking to understand whether the commonly held discourse around leadership was authentic or fraudulent – or somewhere in between. An ‘emancipatory interview approach’ was adopted ensuring that the voice of the researched was afforded significant time and attention – that interpretation was approached with sensitivity. The emancipatory nature of this approach is based upon feminist theory, which ensures that the researcher is aware of their impact in the research and the power relations, including gender, under the surface. In this way the research is multi-layered, whereby the interviewers are both interested in power relations experienced by the participants, but are conscious of the power relations at play in the research process. Feminist theory characterises the approach required during interview as one of respect and care, enacted through dialogue.

***Emergent findings*:** our findings begin to suggest that the discourse of equality in leadership is in fact fraudulent. The lived experiences of our female participants suggest that whilst there is an attempt at constructing new norms of academic leadership, this is often mere rhetoric.

Foucault, M (1995) *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. London: Routledge