

Paradoxes of Post-heroic Leadership: Why do Heroic Leadership and Gender Inequality Persist?

HSLU Conference: New Work – New Problems?

WS 7: Gender Roles and Leadership

Julia Nentwich, Harald Tuckermann & Nadine Steingruber



VUCA requires a new understanding of leadership

Changing Leadership in the World of New Work

Individual	>	Collective
Centralization	>	Shared Responsibilities
Hierarchical Organization	>	Network of Teams
Rules & Control	>	Trust & Autonomy
Profit	>	Purpose

→ Why do heroic leadership & inequality persist?

Leadership Research

Gender-neutral construct combining several leadership styles as “**both/and**”

Gender Research

Gendered construct considering two leadership styles as “**either/or**”

Opens reasons for persistence of gender inequality

Paradox lens leads to a shift from a binary towards a “both/and” perspective, aligned with leadership research

The Understanding of Leadership as a Tandem



Understanding of Leadership

Vertical Leadership

Inspirational supported by results-oriented leadership and exploitation

Horizontal Leadership

Inspirational supported by shared leadership and exploration



Implications

- Focus and efficiency
- Top-down, individual leader
- Established routines and processes
- Failure avoidance
- Demanding discipline in goal achievement
- Clear and direct feedback

- Space experimentation and innovation
- Distributed leadership responsibilities
- Encouraged creativity to find new solutions
- Failure tolerance
- Ensuring psychological safety
- Open feedback culture

Appreciative leaders as role models giving a clear orientation around purpose and goals remain crucial both in vertical and horizontal leadership. Context-dependent, both leadership styles (although contrary) need to be used in a hybrid manner.

Gender Dynamics in Leadership From Gender Research

	Heroic Leadership	Post-heroic Leadership
 Understanding of Leadership	Outdated, vertical leadership	Progressive, horizontal leadership
 Gender Dynamics	Connected to masculinity	Connected to femininity
 Implications	▪ Individualism, assertiveness, control ▪ Hegemonic masculinity functions as the ideal of a strong, independent leader ▪ Gender-exclusive practices confirm the outdatedness of heroic leadership	▪ Collaboration, empathy, vulnerability ▪ Interdependence due to shared responsibility ▪ Doing femininity = doing powerlessness ▪ Lies in the nature of women ▪ Men considered as heroes

(Post-)Heroic Leadership: From binary to paradox

- Categorizations of heroic in masculine and post-heroic in feminine leadership reinforces stereotyping and replicates power dynamics
- Heroic leadership increases aversion to any form of vertical leadership (incl. transformational leadership) and therefore excludes a combination
- Heroic and post-heroic leadership appear interdependent, contradictory and persistent, therefore is in a paradoxical relationship

Group discussions with 100 leaders (male and female)

Company	Discussions and participants
Transport	2 discussions with male leaders (8 and 6 men) 1 discussion with female leaders (5 women)
Retail	1 discussion with male leaders (7 men) 1 discussion with female leaders (7 women)
Medical engineering	2 discussions with male leaders (9 and 8 men) 1 discussion with female leaders (5 women)
Insurance	2 discussions with male leaders (6 and 6 men) 1 discussion with female leaders (5 women)
Electrical engineering	3 discussions with male leaders (13, 5 and 4 men) 1 discussion with female leaders (6 women)

Three Tensions

- **Change tension**
- **Gender tension**
- **Agency tension**

Three Tensions

- **Change tension: Heroic leadership as old-fashioned but still powerful**
 - ‘Definitely slowly dying out’: Heroic leadership as outdated
 - ‘Are you going home at 6pm?’ Culture of presence as a debated necessity
- **Gender tension:**
- **Agency tension:**

Change Tension

- *F5: That it still plays an extremely important role at the very top. ... So sayings like: Then **we'll do it like in the MILITARY!** There is a clear announcement and then it is carried downwards. So, REALLY! ... But there, but then I thought, that generation is definitely slowly dying out. (Discussion 4, women)*
- *M6: ...and you can also see with the bosses we have, or, sales group managers, that they are still in meetings in the evening until 8 o'clock and then there were cliques that went jogging at 8 o'clock together with the head of management, where you have to say yes, but somehow it is still an expectation. "**What, you're already going home at 6 o'clock?** Aha, we have nothing to do today." ... that's the thing that's in this role, or you just expect them to go the bit extra. And I think, yes, it takes courage to say I work 42 hours or 43 hours.. (Discussion 1, men)*

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- **Gender tension: Heroic leadership as masculine yet gender neutral**
 - ‘A law of nature’: Men have everything you need for a top management position
 - ‘Leadership is not about gender, it is about actually living for the job’: How gender is hidden behind seemingly neutral ideas of leadership
- **Agency tension:**

Gender Tension

- *M6: I also ask myself, is this now perhaps also a bit of an issue, when somewhere from top management is broken down into middle and lower management, any difficult, decisive or tough issues and you then also see someone grow up, that somewhere is also like a law of nature, those who shout the loudest, who fight the most, who fight the most, those are the ones who somehow get the furthest a bit Darwinistically. And here we are exactly at the point where we unconsciously perhaps simply say, ah, I have a problem in my department or in my area. I need a successor. Okay, well, who do we take? **Well, the guy always pops up like that, he's the strongest of the bunch.** That this is probably, I would say, quite deep, perhaps even genetic, that men perhaps stand out more and fight more and the women are actually much more competent or reserved. (Discussion 3, men)*
- *MX: I also believe that **it's a gender-independent question** which career image or person is in top management for the future. If that means that you actually only live for the job. Then it is, then it is just generally, yes. (Discussion 5, men)*

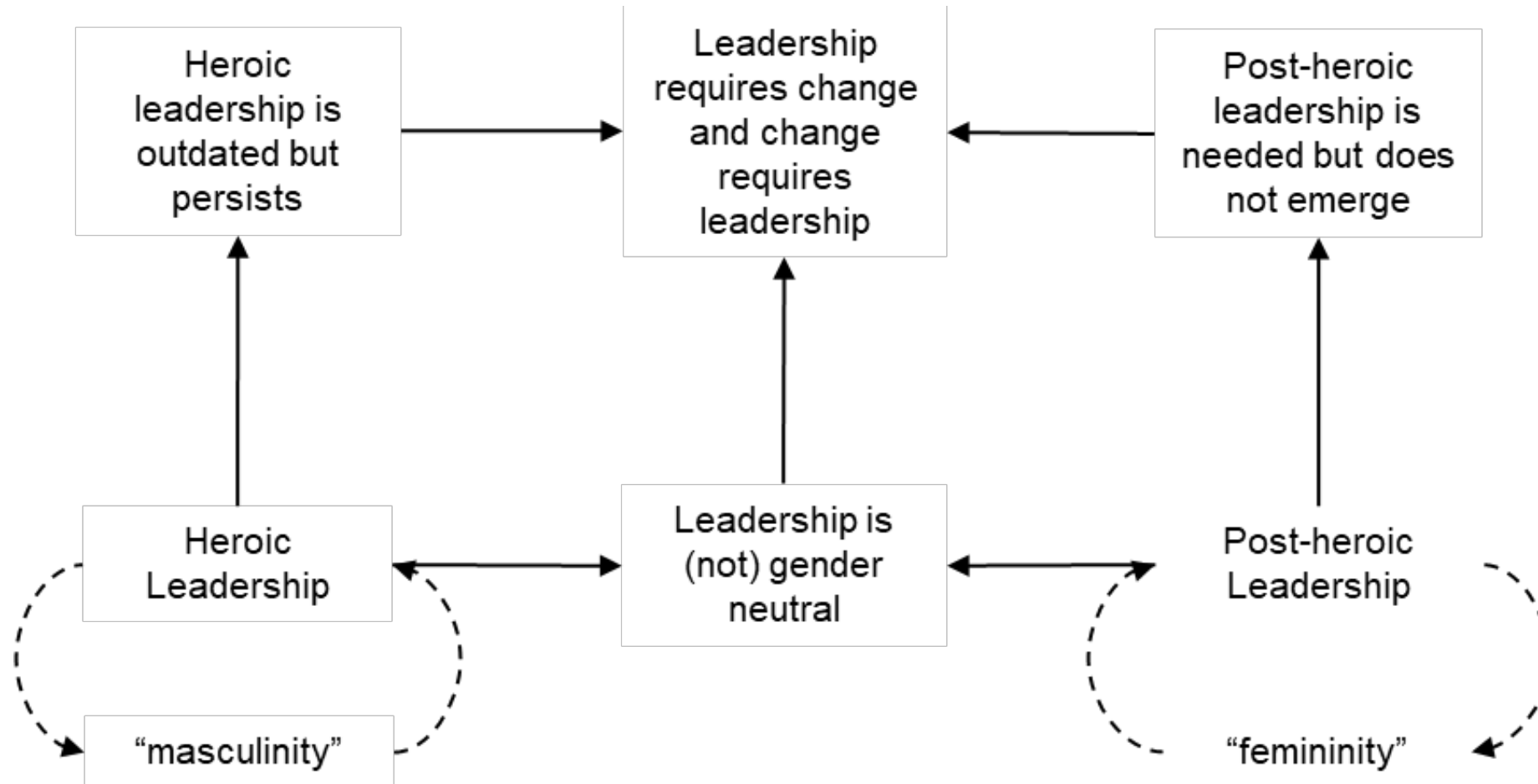
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 - ‘Leadership is not about gender, it is about actually living for the job’: How gender is hidden behind seemingly neutral ideas of leadership
- **Agency tension: New leadership as necessity, yet we need to do something about it**
 - ‘Leadership is changing because times are changing’: New leadership is not about gender equality
 - ‘Just do it!’: Change will only happen if we as leaders are taking charge

Agency Tension

- *M4: Leadership itself is changing and leadership itself is not changing because we have women's problems, **but leadership is changing because times are changing** and because we have to become much more flexible and quicker in decision-making and dealing with uncertainty and then it also takes other leadership guidelines. And the leadership guidelines can only be built on team elements such as trust. (Discussion 7, men)*
- *M2: When I think about it, of course I can blame society and culture and things like that, **but in the end it is actually exactly those of us sitting here at the table and our bosses who are responsible for the fact that there are not more women in leadership positions.** ... So, that means, actually, I am convinced that if we want to, we can. We can change that tomorrow. We can simply hire more women. And they won't all get pregnant tomorrow and want 60%. (Discussion 3, men)*

(Post-)Heroic leadership as paradox



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