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### Original Article

# Women principals in South Africa: gender, mothering and leadership

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## Abstract

This paper draws on qualitative data from a mixed-method study that analysed women's access to the principal role and their leadership experiences. The paper draws on a subset of interviews with 54 female head teachers in the Gauteng and North West provinces of South Africa. Since a mothering style of leadership was self-reported by over half of the participants in our study, this paper aims to explore the diverse ways in which motherhood was constructed and the outcomes of these constructions on women.

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## The experience of women head teachers

This article draws on a study of the influence of gender on the experience of women school principals in South Africa. Consistent with international literature, we found that in South Africa women remain under-represented in educational leadership roles, even in those age phases where the large majority of the workforce is female. However, the article moves beyond concern with parity of representation to consider the impact of gender on leadership when gender is conceived as a social creation affected by the individual's history and choices and by the context of the workplace (Lumby & Azaola, 2011 ).

A striking finding was that a mothering style of leadership was self-reported by over half of the participants in our study. Consequently, the article aims to explore the diverse ways in which motherhood was constructed and the outcomes of these constructions on women's experience of leadership. It focuses on how women position themselves in a mothering role in the workplace and how this shapes their relationship with other members of staff, students and parents. Our premise is that mothering, like gender, is also a socially constructed phenomenon that is context-contingent and emotionally powerful.

South Africa presents a distinctive environment for the study of the relation of gender and motherhood to the leadership of schools. The new constitution that followed the demise of Apartheid in 1994 embedded a strong commitment to racial and gender equality. Consequently, a national gender policy was developed and structures were established that were intended to advocate gender equality (Chisholm, 2004 ). Despite national intentions, women's careers are still gendered (Moorosi, 2010 ). It is within this context, which holds in tension new commitments to equality with persistent discriminatory practice, that women principals' experience is explored. The paper challenges assumptions related to ideologies of what it is to be a woman, a mother and a female leader in education.

## Conceptualising gender and leadership

When appointed as principals, women's experience of leadership may differ from that of men, due in part to the gendered response they are likely to receive from staff, students and their families (Blackmore, 1999 ). Some also argue that women bring different values and qualities to the role of principal than do men (Brunner, 2002 ; Coleman, 2002 ). Such findings have often been presented as universal rather than contingent. An emphasis on gender as a persistently reshaped achievement, 'a routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment' (West & Zimmerman, 1987 , p. 126), instead of as a phenomenon that can be understood as stable and depicted with any assurance, implies the necessity to locate the impact of gender much more strongly in relation to context. Nevertheless, there is some agreement that, whilst definitive universal differences cannot be drawn between the expected attitudes and behaviours of men and women, the socially approved parameters within which each functions may represent different 'bandwidths' (Nentwich, 2006 , p. 513), with wider opportunities open to men than to women globally.

The gendering of family roles is an example of different bandwidths and of a social location where the

expectations of what it is to be a mother or a father are generally different and have implications for the individual that reach far beyond the family milieu. For example, Kugelburg ( 2006 , p. 153) notes that in western countries:

... the length of the working day defines the character of an employee... This applies especially to leadership, which is characterized by long working hours and by giving priority to work before other commitments, such as the family.

Parenting is more closely associated with mothers than fathers, and is assumed to prevent the long hours which indicate appropriate effort and loyalty. Therefore women, as actual or putative mothers, may be perceived as less of a match to the prototype of an ideal employee and particularly to that of a leader. Women who wish to achieve and enact leadership roles must therefore contend with stepping outside the acceptable notion of what it is to be a woman in order to match the leadership prototype. In doing so, they draw down disapproval for transgressing the boundaries of being a woman. As Krefting ( 2003 , p. 269) suggests:

Where groups are interdependent, stereotypes become prescriptive and do not change even with substantial contrary evidence. With the inherent interdependence of heterosexual men and women, gender stereotypes function prescriptively, serving an ideological function. All women *should* be like women in traditional private-sphere wife/mother roles: cooperative and likeable—empathetic, deferent, and nurturing—but not necessarily competent.

Women taking up a school principal role may therefore face persistent and prescriptive stereotypes which mean, whether competent or not, nurturing or not, they will be transgressing one prescription or another, as woman or leader. Swann *et al.* ( 1999 , p. 6) conclude that, as a consequence, women struggle to dent the negative assessment of themselves as leaders. They either fail to match the stereotype of motherhood by displaying the masculine qualities associated with leadership, or fail as leaders by displaying female nurturing qualities; this, despite recent analysis of more androgynous styles of leading (Appelbaum *et al.*, 2003 ). To effect change, therefore, the stereotypes themselves or the value assigned to the stereotypes must mutate.

Corsun and Costen ( 2001 ) suggest that those who are dominant attempt to control the boundaries of the field on which power is contested and the rules of the game, and that women, as the subordinate group, do not have much power to change either. Nevertheless, that is what they are forced to attempt if they do not wish to accept discriminatory practices. Consequently, Khelan ( 2010 , p. 190) suggests that 'the idea would be to create gender trouble and to displace gender. This would mean enacting gender in a way that goes beyond conventional parameters'. In behaving in ways that challenge the boundaries of gender, women may establish a different playing field with a more extensive field of play. Additionally, the rules may be challenged by attaching more value or different value to that previously held to be of limited worth, according to the rules. It is accepted by some that women do hold certain

power, or social capital, for example the erotic power that uses sexual allure as a trade for rewards (Hakim, 2011). As motherhood is a fundamental role that contributes to the creation of gender boundaries, a key question is if it can be converted to social capital in order to strengthen women's social networks, secure their position or advance their social mobility within the context of a leadership role. In Khelan's terms, can gender be troubled by reconstituting motherhood as an asset to leadership?

A self-assessed mothering style of leadership was found in 29 cases out of the 54 participants interviewed in our study. This paper explores the diverse ways in which motherhood was constructed and the motives underpinning participants' adoption of a mothering style to leadership. It does not focus on participants' mothering experiences at home, but how women positioned their perceived mothering skills at the workplace, and particularly as leaders. Our premise is that mothering, as gender, is a social artefact; an identity that, in common with all identities, is intended to position the individual to their benefit and is subject to manipulation that may increase or decrease its status.

## The concepts of mother and mothering

The discourse of motherhood is bound up with ideas of womanhood and female gender identity (Nakano, 1994; Walker, 1995). The latter is socially and emotionally constructed, an inextricable intertwining of personal and cultural meaning (Goldner, 2002). Feminist theory has succeeded in problematising gender and also motherhood (Walker, 1995) but, as Chodorow (2002) asserts, it has done so politically rather than individually, subordinating the realm of personal emotional meaning to the domain of language and power. Mothering has often been discussed within a dominant ideology that focuses on the nurture and protective practices of mothers. Scholars have labelled this dominant ideology in varied ways: unitary model (Arendell, 2000); intensive mothering (Maher & Saugeres, 2007); and idealised model (Nakano, 1994). This ideology depicts a totalising vision of what women are for, including their exclusive responsibility for children (Hollway, 2001). It usually portrays and normalises the experiences and possibilities of idealised white, married and middle-class women (Vincent *et al.*, 2010). As Nakano (1994) argues, it also prevents mothers from developing alternate woman-centred desires and goals and denies them interests and activities outside the family.

The concepts of agency and emotional capital relate to the construction of motherhood. Emotional capital refers to the emotional resources passed on from mother to child through processes of parental involvement (Reay, 2000). This type of capital is invested in others rather than the self (*ibid.*). On the other hand, agency is enacted by individuals' actions to achieve advantages for the individual herself (Nakano, 1994). Barlow and Chapin (2010) understand mothers as actors who build meaning and try out different strategies in their interaction with children both to pass on capital and to build it for themselves. Women's actions, emotions and experiences, including the project of mothering, are shaped by external factors, thus agency and emotional capital are context and resource constrained. Women's race and culture also affects their agency and the choices they make (Miller, 2007). Consequently, motherhood cannot be analysed in isolation from its context (Collins, 1994).

Assumptions about nurture and care are culturally and historically bound to the notion of mothering. The boundaries of mothering may be more expansive than is assumed by the dominant ideology that

advocates an intensive mothering approach, where women are required to be unconditionally available (Maher & Saugeres, 2007 ; Nakano, 1994 ). In the western societies on which the normative position is predicated, despite the idealised notion of a mother caring for her children, women with sufficient resources have always had agency to delegate mothering to paid others. In non-western societies, maternal work is often conducted not only for children to whom the mother has given birth, but for others in the larger social group (Arendell, 2000 ). For example, in some African cultures women share the aspects of mothering that qualify as maternal work and everyday care (Hollway, 2001 ). In the particular case of South Africa, the physical care of children is often assumed by other family members (Walker, 1995 ). Nakano ( 1994 ) suggests that, more than other aspects of gender, mothering has been regarded as natural and unchanging. However, she asserts that differences among women are as important as commonalities and urges attention to the variation, rather than searching for the universal characteristics of mothering. We adopt the view that theorising about motherhood needs to be perceived as contingent (Collins, 1994 ) in order to look at the experiences and challenges that motherhood can elicit in different contexts. As Collins ( 1994 , p. 48) argues, 'we must distinguish between what has been said about subordinated groups in the dominant discourse, and what such groups might say about themselves if given the opportunity'. Hence, by analysing how mothering is placed by women in leadership roles in a variety of schools in South Africa, this paper aims to shed light on the workplace experiences of individuals who come from a historically divided society (Walker, 1995 ) and who do not necessarily conform to the dominant ideology of mothering. The participants in our study challenged three assumptions usually linked to the dominant ideologies, both of mothering and leadership: (a) that women only mother their own children; (b) that through motherhood women may gain status but not power; and (c) that women in positions of power necessarily adopt masculine ways of leadership.

## Methodology

This paper draws on qualitative data from a mixed-method study that analysed women's experience as principals in South Africa. The study explored how gender and other related factors such as language, culture, religion and ethnicity positively or negatively influenced women's access to the principal role and their leadership experiences. The research was carried out in the Gauteng and North West provinces. Gauteng is the smallest, most densely populated and highly urbanised province of South Africa. The North West province is larger, rural and relatively sparsely populated.

The interviews were undertaken in both urban and rural settings and in a full range of school types within the South African education system. Data from the Education Department of each province were used in order to construct a sampling matrix of schools led by female principals. The socioeconomic background of each school was taken into account using South Africa's categorisation of schools by level of socioeconomic disadvantage into five quintiles, quintile 1 being the most disadvantaged and quintile 5 the least disadvantaged. Four pilot interviews in each province were carried out, followed by 27 semi-structured interviews in each province (54 in total). Interviews were recorded in .mp3 format and, in addition to the interviews, demographic information was collected, for instance type of school, size and geographic location, participants' age, highest qualification, number of years in post, number of children and whether they had other dependents. As a legacy of Apartheid, ethnicity is a sensitive

topic in South Africa and carries a legacy of high stakes questions about racial classification. Some participants disclosed their ethnicity, but not all. Known details are given for each principal to whom we refer.

Interviews were analysed through a series of alphanumeric codes that covered a variety of issues such as participants' career trajectory, domestic responsibilities, confidence and esteem, their approach to leadership, training and mentoring experiences, their perceived causes of success, succession planning, whether they saw gender as an advantage or as a disadvantage to their career, and issues about sexism at the workplace. The codes were based on international literature on women's participation in educational leadership and enabled an identification of recurrent factors and themes within data.

The data on which this paper draws are a subset of the interview data, comprising all those instances where a woman principal mentioned using a mothering style in their approach to leadership (29 cases out of 54). It is important to note that in the other cases we could find instances where female principals claimed that gender had no impact on their career or considered gender irrelevant to them and their career.

In this subsample, 59% were married; 86% had children and 59% had the responsibility for the care of other dependents such as elderly relatives or grandchildren. The largest age group (31%) was 56- to 60-years-old; (49%) were working in a secondary and 31% in primary schools. 34.5% had from one to five years in their current post at the time of fieldwork. Qualifications ranged from a teaching diploma to a PhD, in one case. More detailed information is given in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Demographic profile of principals adopting a mothering style

Age	Count	%	Marital status	Count	%	Children	Count	%
40–45	4	13.8	Single	6	20.7	No	4	13.8
46–50	6	20.7	Widowed	3	10.3	Yes	25	86.2
56–60	9	31.0	Married	17	58.6			
51–55	8	27.6	Divorced	3	10.3	Other dependants	Count	%
61+	2	6.9				No	12	41.4
						Yes	17	58.6
Years in post	Count	%	Highest qualification	Count	%			
<1	1	3.4	Teacher Training Diploma	5	17.2	Type of school	Count	%
1–5	10	34.5	Bachelor's degree	8	27.6	Secondary	13	44.8
6–10	7	24.1	Honours Bachelor's	12	41.4	Intermediate	3	10.3
11–15	8	27.6	Master's degree	3	10.3	Combined	4	13.8

Age	n	Mean	Qualification	n	Mean	Level	n	Mean
16–20	2	6.9	PhD	1	3.4	Primary	9	31.0

Specific patterns are difficult to discern amongst this subset of 29. One might expect them all to have children or other dependants but, of the four who had no children, two had no dependants either. Data on ethnicity was too incomplete to draw conclusions, but it is clear that the reference to mothering in leadership crossed ethnic, religious and cultural boundaries as well as those of marital status, educational attainment, age range and socioeconomic category of school, and was evident in women relatively new to the principal role as much as in those who had been in the role many years. All the women were above 40 years of age, but one would expect this in those who were appointed principals. It would seem that espousal of a mothering style was not related to any particular demographic characteristic. In itself this is an interesting finding, that a mothering approach to leadership is adopted by women with a wide range of characteristics.

As white academics from different contexts, England and Mexico, the authors are outsiders to South Africa, and inescapably observe from a cultural perspective steeped in assumptions about gender. Other aspects of our identity may also colour our perspective, one being towards the end of a career and the other at the beginning, one being close and the other now more distant from the role of mother. The analysis and discussion attempt to present not only the interpretation that emerges from the authors' background but also alternative ways of constructing meaning if different cultural conceptions of motherhood and gender equality are adopted. Attempts to step outside accultured perspectives are always challenging. Ontologies relate not just to intellectual positioning but to a value base influenced by culture. Adopting an accepting or sceptical stance in relation to the witness of women is a political and axiological act. In offering alternative readings of the analysis, the authors hope to provoke readers to question their own cultural assumptions and relationship to gender theory.

## Data analysis

Our analysis identified three orientations to the relevance of mothering to the individual in their leadership role: (a) female principals reflecting upon their mothering skills as a means of self-improvement; (b) female principals utilising their mothering skills in order to try to overcome social problems relevant to their pupils and communities; and (c) female principals utilising their mothering skills to trouble gender, gaining capital from employing their mothering skills at the workplace. These three orientations are not necessarily displayed by discrete groups; some women may have demonstrated more than one orientation.

### Reflecting on motherhood

The first group of female principals consists of those who reflect upon their gender identity as mother as personal development. Their accounts reflect their belief that being a mother has enabled them to develop their affective skills as relevant to leading:

A person that is a mother is just... you are softer, you are... you can see that the child

also has a point and um... has a right to express themselves, has a... because you experienced sometimes that your own children were disadvantaged by a certain teacher or being treated unfairly. (White principal, North West; married with three children; secondary school)

After my first baby... I got to understand more about raising a child and then being more compassionate towards other children. I think being more compassionate helps; more, more caring about other children... and seeing them as mine... wanting the best for them. (Black principal, Gauteng; divorced with two children; township primary school)

Above all, these participants value the cultural and historical assumptions of nurture and care bound to the notion of mothering. Hence, their mothering gender identity at work is culturally constructed (Chodorow, 2002). They centre their reflection on how motherhood has changed their vision of the world and how becoming a mother themselves has moderated relationships with learners:

Having her really really made me more receptive and I don't know how to put it now, more understanding towards the ways of children, their ways and means of accepting things and I would say I was rather, I was not flexible, then after I had my daughter I really became I think a bit more understanding and a softer approach. (White principal, North West; married with one child; low quintile primary school)

It has also changed how they relate to parents:

If you are the woman, you know, um, you, you, you, you are, you are a mother, so you talk from that point of caring... even if you address parents, when you say 'Take care of your children', you're talking from what you do also. (White principal, Gauteng; widowed, two children; intermediate school)

Their 'mother identity' develops skills even in areas where they report there is considerable doubt about their competence, for example in disciplining boys. Some argue that, as a mother, they are better able than men to discipline boys:

Every single male in this world had a mother and she was probably the most important disciplinarian in that boy's life. (White principal, Gauteng; single, one child; secondary school)

The relationship is different... I can fight them and I can shout at them or I can sit and talk to them very nicely. And sometimes it's just as if it works much better than it would have with, if you were a male. I think there, and I think I use it very well, to be able to control my boys. It's being a woman, being 'a mother' in inverted commas to them as well. (White principal, Gauteng; single, no children; secondary school)

It is claimed to enable better people management of teachers, particularly in understanding and accommodating the demands of staff families. Overall, this stance is summarised by one principal: 'Women are born to be leaders. We lead from home' (Black principal, Gauteng; married with two children; primary school).

## Utilising motherhood to overcome social problems

The second group consists of female principals who, being aware of the affective and practical skills acquired through motherhood, use them in order to try to cope with the difficulties of their particular local context including poverty, AIDS and parental absence through death or work demands:

Yeah, as a female principal, I have young children here; the children that do not have parents, children that are sick... there are children that are sick in here that have these virus and as a female principal, I have... I have that love for children because I am a mother, I have children. So I always assist them in so many things in many ways. (Black principal, Gauteng; married with one child; low quintile primary school)

The majority of our children are from single parents or from homes and um... their parents, if it's mothers, they are out of work just trying to put food on the table and I am very much a mother figure... they need love and they need softness because their lives are harsh and I think that that's a great advantage to them. (White principal, Gauteng; widowed with one foster daughter; inner-city intermediate school)

These boys regard us as their mothers. As their mothers, that is how they treat us. And then even when they are, when they are running short of, let me say, running short of something, let me say at home, they are not afraid to come to us and tell us that, look ma'am I don't have something to eat at home, how can you help us. So we, we help them. (Black principal, North West; single with four children; technical high school)

These female principals claim that, because they are mothers themselves, they are willing to address and equipped to deal with the difficult social problems they face at work. They emphasise the nurturing and caring aspects of their role as school principals and are proud of being able to provide leadership that includes love and care to those students who need it, as well as practical help such as with food, clothes and healthcare. Through their emotional involvement they do not intend to act as a substitute for their students' mothers, if they have mothers at home, but to complement what cannot be provided at home: mothering therefore becomes a community rather than a family effort.

## Utilising motherhood to trouble gender

The final group consists of female principals who attempt to trouble gender by creating capital from gender in the workplace. They aim to distinguish female and male approaches to leadership, portraying the latter as less appropriate and less effective. They depict the 'other', their male

counterparts, as lacking mothering experience and, as a result, lacking knowledge and skills necessary to lead a school:

Men run schools and they leave their heart somewhere in the forest. My success, I want to be honest with you, my, all my success comes from my attitude, I'm assertive, I'm objective, and I have my heart here, right here. And when I say here I'm not talking the school only, the school and its community, teachers, the learners, that's where your success is. You cannot be successful if you can't reach out to people. (Principal, ethnicity not disclosed, North West; married with three children; technical secondary school)

This principal often takes home vulnerable children from school to look after them during exams or school holidays. Others also claimed superiority:

For males things like dirty water is not a big deal. Things like a child who is hungry coming to school hungry, it is not a big deal; there, there are points that they don't touch to the child; unlike you as a mother. (Principal, ethnicity not disclosed, Gauteng; widowed with two children, caring for one grandchild; secondary school)

I mean that is... that is how a female... can try to assist as compared to a male because we reared children, we know the problems of different families... and we can always assist. We are thinking for them [children] also we are not here to work only, we are here to take care of them also: socially, intellectually and other ways. We are not only concentrating on teaching them. (Black principal, Gauteng; married with one child; low quintile primary school)

Some participants claimed in particular that it is most effective to be a biological mother; being only a woman was not sufficient. Childless colleagues of either gender were seen as deficient:

If you don't have children, it's very difficult to have the empathy and the understanding of what parents go through... I think having had my own children it's made a, it is a tremendous advantage. (Principal, ethnicity not disclosed, North West; married with two children; college)

The teachers who don't have children, do have another approach towards learners; they are so strict, they are just seeing the straight and the narrow line, there is no deviations. Teachers and people with children do have deviations in the sense of you are more understanding. (White principal, Gauteng; married with three children; inner city secondary school)

For some therefore, having one's own children provided an advantage to the individual as a leader. For others, being a woman, even without children, invested them with the skills and attitudes of

motherhood. For example, a childless female principal claimed to use a mothering style to lead and believed that she was a 'natural' mother:

I love these little boys, I love the development in them and the impetus that they have and I watch the little girls growing from little girls into these emerging teenagers and you know watching their development... The interesting factor is that some of the younger members of staff call me 'mum'... It's naturally me you know, I care about every single member of staff... Not having given birth to any children doesn't mean I haven't had children in my life. (White principal, Gauteng; single; inner city primary school)

Equally, though most claimed that their mothering skills and attitudes were acquired from being used with their own children, some used mothering skills at school while not exercising them as much at home:

I love my children but I'm not good with kids so I wouldn't want to stay home and do stuff with the kids. Somebody has got to do it. (Principal, ethnicity not disclosed, North West, married with three children; technical secondary school)

This principal prioritised caring for her pupils and delegated care of her own to others. She applied mothering skills in the workplace, but set aside the stereotypical mothering role in the home.

Stated beliefs of the relationship between mothering and leadership varied. Some principals expressed mothering as an integral and essential element of leadership. Others saw it as a separate and complementary skill to 'management':

Women, how do I put it, we have got so many things in one, I can be a mother, I can alternate my roles, I can be a mother. I can be a manager. (Principal, North West, ethnicity not disclosed; married with two children, caring for her niece and unemployed brothers; secondary school)

## Doing and undoing gender

Interpreting the significance of this data depends in part on the researcher's stance to the voice of the respondents. Some argue that women are so socialised by a discriminatory society that their views cannot but be distorted by their experience (Robeyns, 2003). Nussbaum (2003, p. 34) claims that women display 'preferences that have adjusted to their second-class status'. Others counter that feminists are equally socialised into western, culturally-shaped preferences and that their response to women's views is constrained by western feminist predilections. Our analysis is consequently cautious

and ambivalent, raising questions about potential interpretation in a way that we intend to be thought-provoking for those who read this paper, whatever their historical, cultural or religious influences.

One way of interpreting the orientation of women in this study is by means of the concept of reference groups. Shibutani ( 1955 , p. 563), examining the usage of this concept, found three distinct allusions for it: '(1) groups which serve as comparison points; (2) groups to which men [sic] aspire; and (3) groups whose perspectives are assumed by the actor'. He suggests that reference groups arise through the internalisation of perceived group norms, though this usage has more to do with 'a psychological phenomenon than to an objectively existing group'. In this case a number of reference groups are potentially relevant; women, mothers, men and school leaders. Using Shibutani's analysis, that the group of which one is a member serves as a point of reference especially in forming judgments about one's self and forming an estimate of the situation, the women assessed the demands of their role from the perspective of mothers, particularly in dealing with the desperate poverty and health issues amongst many of their students. The solutions they found were those that mothers bring to bear in the family: providing physical and emotional care, predicated on a particular protective commitment to one's children. The priorities, skills and virtues of idealised mothers are espoused and translated to a school leadership context. The other reference groups that are relevant include men and school leaders. The women's criticism of men's approach to leadership relates to the attitudes and abilities they assumed men hold.

Women are often held by others and by themselves to be incapable of or unwilling to share the norms associated with men as a group. They are also criticised for adopting them in order to join a group, in this case 'leaders', where the norms are perceived as closely aligned to that of another group 'men'. The women here emphatically align themselves with the group 'mothers' and reject using men as a reference group of aspiration. They also colonise a third reference group, 'school leaders', importing their norms as mothers to reshape practice informed by stereotypical masculine attributes. Nias ( 1985 ) believes that reference groups are crucial in establishing and maintaining shared values within the group membership, although they may also frustrate the negotiation of shared collegial norms with other groups and, consequently, they can simultaneously promote and impede the development of professions and individuals. The issue here is the degree to which collegial norms of leadership are possible when the norms favour one gender over another. The women principals of our study make no attempt to aspire to men's values as a reference group of higher status, or to adopt that group's attributes. Rather, they select the professional domain of school leaders as the group to which they migrate their membership. In Gurin and Nagda's ( 2006 ) terms, they re-categorise themselves from the low status group of women to the higher status group of leaders. They position themselves as dominant in the group by replacing the previous stereotypical male attributes of this reference group with the stereotypical values and skills of mothers, a group to which they claim membership, whether they have given birth to a child or not. They create gender trouble.

The women in this study make claims for themselves as women and mothers that, inherently or through acquired experience, they have affective and practical skills that advantage them as leaders and, in some cases, advantage them over men as school leaders. Hence, our participants are manipulating reference groups to 'do gender', but not in conformance with gendered norms where women are perceived as subordinate and where motherhood is deemed to be deviant from the prototype of leadership competence. Over half of the participants of this study emphasise their

nurturing and rearing responsibilities whilst at the same time claiming assertiveness and determination. They do not conceal their femininity, but use it to attempt to undermine the ability of male principals or, in a minority of cases, childless colleagues. They do not comply with the dominant ideology of mothering as focused strongly on one's own family; they have interests and activities outside their family and some leave the everyday care of their own children to professionals or other family members. They 'do gender' at the workplace, in Corsun and Costen's ( 2001 ) terms, by attempting to change the boundaries and rules of the game, specifically by importing the values and norms of the reference group of their personal life into the reference group of their professional role. Instead of motherhood as a factor of gender deemed detrimental to leading an organisation, they depict it as an essential factor. The 29 principals in our sample have chosen a strategy to undo gender in a specific way. Khelan identifies two strategies:

Women identified more with being professional than with being a woman, and they presented themselves as gender neutral... Another way of undoing gender is to introduce multiplicity in relation to gender, broadening the parameters of how gender is enacted. (Khelan, 2010 , pp. 189–190)

Part of our data provides examples of Khelan's first strategy: women who insist that gender is not relevant to their role as leaders and has had no influence on their access to or enactment of the role. In answer to the question 'Have you been aware of particular attitudes towards you as a woman in applying for the job or for promotion?' one principal answered 'No, none whatsoever' and emphatically denied that she was viewed, assessed or treated in any way differently to men: 'No, I don't see it, no it's OK, I'm not being treated otherwise or whatever, no' (white principal, North West; married with one child; combined farm school).

They are attempting, consciously or otherwise, to subvert their gender by decategorising as women and recategorising in the professional role as head teacher (Gurin & Nagda, 2006 ), so avoiding its potential negative impact. They do not form the focus of this paper. Our focus is the 29 cases that adopt a different strategy, in Khelan's terms stretching the understanding of the nature, relevance and thereby the social capital of motherhood. Khelan ( 2010 ) goes on to argue that this may have the unintended effect of embedding further the belief that women's approach to leadership is limited by their propensity to adopt a nurturing rather than a more aggressive or strategic approach to leadership. The assessment of the impact of the strategy depends on the rules played by those who interpret their action. As Corsun and Costen ( 2001 ) suggest, it is the control of the rules that is the powerhouse of dominance. Who decides that motherhood is limiting or otherwise? Which reference group's norms are brought to bear? In their own view, the participants use their motherhood to gain power and deploy their agency (Barlow & Chapin, 2010 ).

The principals provided a variety of evidence for their claim that either innate mothering attitudes and skills or those acquired through becoming a mother, or both, advantage female principals in their relationships with learners, staff and parents. They did not talk about the disadvantages of such an approach, or the limitations this may have created. For example, how are female staff and learners to view the role model offered? The intention was certainly to offer a powerful and positive

reinterpretation of an aspect of gender that is widely seen as limiting and limited. However, in promoting mothering attitudes and attributes as a means of combating the current perceived superiority of male leaders, women who do not wish to adopt such an approach are potentially reassigned to the group containing the incompetent, men and those women who do not wish to adopt a mothering approach.

Almost as many respondents (25) did not relate motherhood to leadership as did (29). If it were accepted, as was argued in some cases, that motherhood is an essential attribute of effective educational leadership, the logical sequitur would be merely swapping the location of incompetence and inferiority from one group, women leaders, to another, men and childless women. This could hardly be seen as progress towards equality. It is a very different strategy to the recent promotion of androgynous styles of leadership which avoid essentialising each sex and widen the bandwidth of activity for both (Eagly, 2003). Assessing the possible gains from the strategy adopted by the 29 principals depends on whether one accepts the possibility for genuine equality in how men and women leaders are perceived, or whether a hierarchy is inevitable. If the predilection for sorting leaders into groups perceived as effective or ineffective is immovable, then female dominance in the hierarchy as a change from millennia of male dominance may be seen as progress by some, but not others. If stereotypical male attributes have been associated with effective leaders for millennia, would associating female attributes with effective leadership be seen as progress or merely moving the deckchairs around?

We have suggested possible interpretations of the data; others are feasible. The analysis relates to a western interpretation of motherhood. If the reference group of mothers is considered closely in a culturally nuanced way and universal interpretations rejected, meaning may change considerably. African parenting practices differ from those in the west and may distribute the mothering role amongst many blood relations and community members (Collins, 1994). Consequently, a head teacher may be viewed literally as mother within a mothering network, and not just a surrogate or quasi-mother to the pupils in the school. This embedded communal approach to parenting has received impetus not only from the absence of many biological parents who have no economic option to working at a distance from home, but from the considerable rise in the number of those orphaned by the AIDS epidemic in South Africa (CSA, 2005).

If this interpretation is accepted, then gender is still being done and undone, but the context makes a significant difference to understanding the processes at play. The mothering approach to leadership may be in part conformance to the expected community parenting role, or may be compelled by the poverty of learners, where water, food, clothing, medical care and some protection from violence and rape are demanded before any learning can take place. The norms of the group 'mothers' might be understood quite differently, as well as the contingent values of leadership in South Africa that may differ from those in more economically privileged sites. Viewed from this perspective, mothering is indeed a vital attribute of leadership, but in a quite different way from that understood in the west.

## Moving forward

This paper has analysed the under-explored topic of a mothering style in leadership of women school

principals in South Africa. It has done no more than select from a rich dataset and tentatively explore one theme that emerged from respondents' views on their school leadership experiences. The findings demonstrate the diverse ways in which participants utilise their reference group identification as nurturing leaders (Nias, 1985 ) as an attempt to reverse the 'deficit model' (Acker, 1983 ) commonly associated with women in positions of leadership. While one possible analysis might interpret this as merely doing gender, that is, reinforcing stereotypes of women as mother, the article suggests that in the ongoing struggle to achieve greater equality for women school leaders it is inappropriate to homogenise western interpretations of doing and undoing gender.

The paper further suggests that the interpretation of data in relation to gender may be coloured not just by the value base of the interpreter—so much is commonly asserted in relation to particularly qualitative research—but by the status of the interpreter, whether dominant or otherwise. It might be argued that the women's actions described in this paper potentially attempt simultaneously to do gender, to undo gender, and to increase gender role bandwidth. To escape the ambivalence of interpretation, one must either accept the self-professed empowerment that adopting a mothering role appeared to offer the principals, or reject it as self-delusion. On what value basis is such a choice to be made? Perhaps the most significant challenge in gender studies currently is not the collection of data related to gender, but the struggle to resolve ambivalence in the ontological and axiological position of the researcher.

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