

LANCASTER  
UNIVERSITY



# Department of Educational Research

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# **Silent and strange voices:**

## **Why are there so few women Vice Chancellors?**

**I think there's still quite a stigma around women in Higher Education. We pretend there isn't. We pretend actually that everything's equal and everything's fine but the reality is you are often the only women and it's in an environment where nobody talks about that. Whereas (in other sectors) they would have talked about it. They would have said. The men couldn't help themselves but say, well how are you finding things and what's it like for you. But nobody will have those conversations because supposedly everything's equal (7)**

# The missing women

- around 160 HEI's;
  - in 2000, there were fewer than 5 women VC's;
  - this increased until 2010;
  - now 13% of the total (ECU, 2009).
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- 51% population are women;
  - ~50% early career academics are women;
  - average of 19% professors are women;
  - ~60% HE students are women.
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- 5,400 'missing women' in top jobs across the UK (EHR Commission, 2011).

# My contribution to the discourse

How I am situated in my research

Social justice

Context across other sectors

Role of Higher Education

**Higher Education is a pivotal institution in society and the consequences of women's under-representation in positions of authority have wider and more serious resonances for issues of equity and social justice and participation in public life. Currently Higher Education functions as a structure for reproducing power relations rather than challenging them (Morley,1999:4)**

# My Research Questions

How well might the gendered leadership culture within Higher Education be interpreted in terms of *Communities of Practice of Masculinities*? (Paechter, 2003)

How can women survive and thrive within UK Higher Education leadership *Communities of Practice of Masculinities*?

# What did I do? Why? And How?

18 interviews with women 'at the top' of Institutions.

Interpretive lens on gendered Higher Education culture (Acker, 2010; Bagilhole, 2011; Morley, 2011; O'Connor, 2011; Saunderson, 2002).

Feminist methodology (Brannen, 1993; Kelly, 1994; Maynard, 1994; Meyerson, 2000; Oakley, 2000; Reay, 1996).

Researching the Powerful (Puwar, 1997; Walford, 2011; Williams, 1989; Whyte, 2012).

Political, democracy and diversity motivations: The Silent, The Strange, The Other (Haraway, 1991; Harding, 1991; Houle, 2010 ).

# Findings so far.....

## **The negotiation and navigation of gendered leadership cultures**

How they negotiated and navigated gendered leadership cultures, often by 'fitting in' and only finding their leadership voice upon becoming Vice Chancellor

How they observed that men attract much more sponsorship and support from those in seniority compared with that received by women, and that sponsorship and support is essential for maintaining communities of practice of masculinities

# Findings so far.....

## The value of masculinities and femininities behaviours

How they experienced leadership behaviours in others, both male and female colleagues, which they defined as 'masculinities' which, although often unimpressive, go unchallenged; also, how they have witnessed and practised alternative, more effective, 'femininities' leadership behaviours

# Findings so far.....

## **Career planning and development for women and their wider private space**

How they benefitted by far the most, in career development terms, from mentoring and networking (both within and out with the sector) and are ambivalent about women-only development

How they say they have never given serious consideration to planning their career at any stage

How they have a complex and diverse private space which impacts upon their academic career

How they learned 'confidence' and 'resilience' (and identified these as the key traits needed for success) whilst at the same time were lacking in ambition

# Findings so far.....

## **Achieving a *critical mass* of women at the top**

How they have strong views about the need for more women, a critical mass, in senior leadership roles and about the positive impact more women will have upon the Sector

# The 'silent and strange' voices revealed...

# How they negotiated and navigated gendered leadership cultures, often by 'fitting in' and only finding their leadership voice upon becoming Vice Chancellor

When you are group of leaders together leading a university there's a fair amount of banter and social stuff that's going on and that's severely gendered, endless football and cricket discussions, partly I'm not interested in sport but they are male sports I can't imagine them getting excited about women's hockey or something, there's a lot of being comfortable with each other that's to do with gender, that's not leadership but it's part of bonding as a team that maybe you have to find ways that you can interact with them on a social level, to make the leadership bit work well rather than make yourself always look slightly odd (1)

# How they negotiated and navigated gendered leadership cultures, often by 'fitting in' and only finding their leadership voice upon becoming Vice Chancellor

I look at my own personal growth I think personally in trying to establish how I am comfortable operating. In early days it was power suit dressing time and there was a lot of emulating of what men would have done. I was not immune to that. I think nurture versus nature. You are influenced by what's going on and what you are about (7)

# How they negotiated and navigated gendered leadership cultures, often by 'fitting in' and only finding their leadership voice upon becoming Vice Chancellor

So there are different ways in which they play out. Especially at Pro Vice Chancellor and Vice Chancellor levels it's quite male. Like in the actual ways that you have to perform. You can choose to do that or you can choose not to do that, you make your own choices. But I see a number of women trying to be like men. Playing their games, laughing alongside things which I know they don't agree with (16)

# **How they have strong views about the need for more women, a critical mass, in senior leadership roles and about the positive impact more women will have upon the Sector**

**You will walk into a room and there will be quite a high probability you are the only woman in the room. There will be quite a high probability that a woman will be interviewed by a predominately male panel. Once you get around 30% it will be easier to make sure that doesn't happen. It becomes also I think, once you have a minority of critical mass they feel confident enough to say no, to not agree, and not feel everybody will remember them because they were the only person not wearing a grey suit in the meeting (11)**

# **How they have strong views about the need for more women, a critical mass, in senior leadership roles and about the positive impact more women will have upon the Sector**

**And again until you get to that critical mass, 25 - 30 %, because then you've never walked into a room and felt you were the only woman there. Once you get to those sorts of percentages. Once it stops feeling that when the chaps go to the loo they are continuing the meeting and you are the one person stood outside the door wondering what they are talking about (8)**

# How they have strong views about the need for more women, a critical mass, in senior leadership roles and about the positive impact more women will have upon the Sector

Enough means that there's a critical mass, but I'm not sure where that is, but so that it isn't odd (6)

# Moving forward

Still a work in progress....

Using hitherto *silent and strange voices* to inform the conversation about *the missing women*

Further work on the *critical mass* of women and the quota/positive action debate

Explore how leadership cultures can embrace women

*Knowledge Exchange Fellowship* project

# Thank you

## Any questions please?