

Learning about Leading with Embodied Care

How might we understand - and (re)instate - the significance of embodiment, embodied care and self-care in leadership? What are the challenges, risks and costs for leaders, especially women leaders, seeking to practice care as part of effective leadership?

Each of us – Donna and Amanda - has come to these questions with our personal and professional histories, our own hang-ups and fascinations. Looking back, we have both written explorations of different aspects of the questions above. For example, Amanda has advocated that leadership studies should recognise the role of physicality - how bodies can offer presence and support to people being led. Amanda has drawn on case studies such as that of former Victorian Chief Commissioner of Police, Christine Nixon, and Principal of an Indigenous school and Indigenous leadership advocate, Chris Sarra (Sinclair 2005a, 2011). She has also suggested care of bodies be present in our teaching and pedagogy (2005b) and advocated the role of eros and love in academia (Bell and Sinclair 2014). Donna has..

For this chapter, we wanted to draw on and build connections between our separate journeys around bodies, ethics and leadership. We embark on a shared exploration of the diverse forms embodied care and self-care might take in leadership, as well as the risks and hazards leaders may encounter in seeking to lead with care. We begin with an overview of the extensive research done by women and feminist scholars positioning care, empathy and concern for others as central to moral reflection, and in the construction and enactment of moral identities (Meyers 1994). Drawing on this theorising, we explore possibilities and diversities of practice in embodied care in leadership. We identify some features of embodied care in leadership then provide some short vignettes and case studies to exemplify such care in practice, including the risks to the leader and those around them.

Care in ethical theorising

There is a long, distinguished and multi-stranded tradition of feminist thinking about care and its importance in ethics, which has informed philosophy, ecology and economics, psychoanalysis, psychology, politics and the law. Feminist thinkers have been at the forefront of critiquing moral and ethical frameworks which privilege impartial reason.

Taking as an example, theories of moral development, traditional models have devalued women's moral experiences and development of moral knowledge (Gilligan 1982; Gilligan 2011; Waring 1988; Belenky et.al. 1986; Harding 1987; Held 2006). Indeed a key prompt for Carol Gilligan and others' work in the early 1980s was the unproblematised use of male populations to codify levels of moral thinking, for example in the influential studies by psychologist, Lawrence Kohlberg. One result were the development of frameworks that categorised women's moral thinking as inferior when they put a higher value on caring for and preserving particular relationships, rather than applying universal and abstract reasoning. As Rosalyn Diprose shows '(i)n Gilligan's revision of stages of moral development the ability to consider context, the details of relationships and the viewpoint of the particular other is seen not as moral failure but as essential to moral maturity' (1994: 11).

Inevitably, Gilligan's work has been controversial, including among feminists. Our point is though, that any understanding of the ethics of embodied care needs to recognise feminism's rich and diverse contribution in areas such as relations between self and other (Benjamin 1988); the emotions, love and empathy (Nussbaum 1990); on bodies, embodiment and materialism as vital dimensions in navigating ethical ways forward (Barad 2003).

This thinking and writing has been undervalued in many parts of philosophy, but Amanda remembers how vital and powerful it was for her when she began reading it more than 30 years ago.

Vignette 1: Teaching Care in a Business Ethics Subject

When I fell into teaching Management and Ethics as an MBA subject, I spent a lot of time scouring Business Ethics texts. Most were/are weighty tomes with extended case studies seeking to corral postgraduate students briskly through a quick tutorial in utilitarianism and deontology with some cultural relativism thrown in. Philosophical theories were tilted at and turned into decision trees and tools for resolving ethical dilemmas: 'If encountering a culture where bribes are accepted and offered a substantial gift then a. consider the consequences' and so on.

Even though the students appeared to have an appetite for these models, I had none. They extolled calculation and cognitive notions of virtue and good. They lacked any recognition of the viscosity experienced by leaders and managers of being in the middle of an ethical dilemma. They ignored the push and pull, the tug of conscience versus the seduction of going with the flow. The inadequacy of what was on offer led me to women philosophers and feminist theorists. My first point of call was Carol Gilligan's work and also Belenky et.al.'s Women's ways of knowing (1986), both of which I was reading in recognition of the ways MBA culture, curriculum and pedagogy was deeply gendered. They seemed to assign to women's approaches to learning, a lower order (Sinclair 1995a).

I developed several classes and provoked discussion offering a critique of business ethics, its grounding in conventional philosophical models, and the possibility of adding calculations of care and context, employing criteria of preserving relationships and reducing particular suffering as legitimate considerations in moral deliberation and ethical decision-making. These ideas became key and helpful tensions guiding my students and my own learning beyond the immediate subjects I was teaching. I noticed that it was women and particularly feminist scholars who were courageous to articulate critiques of the sacred postulates of ethics. Their scholarship offered a different way not just of thinking but of living and being for me, putting an overarching value on relationships and tending the spaces and connections between people. Thus it began to percolate into my research of leaders and leadership.

Ethics cannot be understood as a disembodied individual property or a virtue earned independently of relationships. Ethical relations but are always produced in relationship where the value and rights of sexed bodies are assumed and being constituted. Feminist philosophers – and other theorists - have argued that the quality of relations, not the characteristics of the person, are the test of ethics.

In her work over some decades, Australian philosopher Rosalyn Diprose argues that inherited and long cherished societal moral philosophies and codes have clear and demonstrable downsides for women. While applied moral thinking has contributed to social order, Diprose and others such as Benhabib argue that this order is a colonising and patriarchal one which 'is at the expense of justice for women and ...the usual approaches to ethics perpetuate and/or remain blind to such miscarriages of justice' (Diprose 1994: vi). Diprose's remedy, which draws on the work of male philosophers as well as women such as Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, is the recognition of embodied differences in our moral understandings.

This is no simple task. For one reason, history has shown that accounts of sexual and cultural difference serve the interests of those defining people not like themselves as 'different' or 'other'

(de Beauvoir). The language and legal, industrial and interpersonal processes by which difference is allocated and evaluated, is, according to Diprose 'productive: it produces the modes of sexed embodiment it regulates' (1994: viii). Indeed, feminists have critiqued and thoroughly investigated the way that views of care become hijacked by simplistic or essentialised views of feminisation, maternalism (Phillips), sentimentalism (Plumwood). Anyone seriously interested in how care operates in leadership needs to sit above these stereotypical invocations. We need to recognise the ways in which care, especially embodied and women's care and care of nature and non-human species, are labelled as indulgent or 'soft' and relegated to lower moral value in many ethical schema.

Second, feminist ethics generally insist that identities can't be understood independently of bodies. 'Sexed bodies are constituted within an economy of representation of sexual difference which limits possibilities for women (Diprose, 1994: xi). The remedy that Diprose advocates is 'corporeal generosity': including bodies and affective sensibilities in understandings of generosity and care. Diprose differentiates herself and her philosophy from those who see generosity as an individual mental virtue or intention. Rather her interest is in the 'giving of corporeality to and through the bodies of others' which *constitutes* identity and difference (2002: 10). She puts a spotlight on the gendered norms of conventional thinking which memorialize the generosity of the privileged, while not registering or devaluing the generosity of others. Her analysis focuses on the connection between understandings of generosity and social justice and her intent is to work toward reformulations that promote justice and 'ways to foster social relations that generate rather than close off sexual, cultural and stylistic differences' (2002:15). It is a theme of feminist philosophers to explore analyses that, they hope, will throw light on inequalities and suffering, that give tools for living together ourselves and with non-human species in open, generous and respectful ways.

In addition it has often been feminists, including feminist ecologists have critiqued dualisms which see the source of all moral value on one side of mind/body; man/nature; male/female dichotomies. Traditional moral philosophies largely ignore materiality and the value of the natural world independently of its use to humans (Macy, Plumwood 1993; 2002). For example, Australian Val Plumwood critiqued the view that the self can exist independently of the natural order and relations with material things. Industrialising societies came to view nature and materiality as dead or inert matter, only brought to life and value through the application of human intelligence. Plumwood identified this a useful fiction, not the truth of things. Human identity can only be known, in and because of its context, relationships and embeddedness. She also argued for the abandonment of the Western notion of a rational, unitary self, in favour of an ecological ethic based on empathy for the other. In doing so, she advocates a view that recognizes and grounds ethical responsibility in the continuities and divisions between subject and object, and between people and the environment.

Coming from an ostensibly utterly different direction and building on her work in quantum physics, Karen Barad's New Materialism advocates that 'matter matters'. Apparently objective, material objects are part of a complex and dynamic web of experience. Nothing is inherently separate from anything else. Once separations between things are enacted, some things become available and marked for knowledge-making and others not.

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Feminists who have argued for self-care and care for others have been criticised from most sides of ideological spectrums. They have been critiqued by the left, by other feminists, by critical theorists, for having an individual focus and advocating individual remedies, failing to emphasise the structural causes of suffering and oppression. Advocates of care have been criticised for condemning women to essentialising models of maternalism (Phillips 2016). Or they have been charged with capitulating to neoliberal agendas, defining self-care as something individuals seek selfishly and the antithesis of collective responsibility.

But foregrounding care, on the one hand, and understanding the structural causes of oppression, on the other, are not mutually exclusive. As Sara Ahmed argues, drawing on Audre Lord's *A Burst of Light*, self-care may not be self-indulgence but may be essential self-preservation and survival. Ahmed re-frames self-care as, often, warfare. Ahmed says 'As feminism teaches us: talking about personal feelings is not necessarily about deflecting attention from structures'. For example, self-care that involves speaking out about individual suffering, about 'histories that hurt, histories that get to the bone, how we are affected by what we come up against' is critical to changing structures.

Embodied care in leadership

What does all this mean for understanding care, ethics and leadership?

Much of the 'women in leadership' and 'feminine leadership' literature has been falsely characterised as advocating the opposite of the rules, rationality and masculine reason seen as the *sine qua non* of good ethics (Pullen and Vachhani 2017). Yet already within the philosophies of

women and feminist writers are well-articulated ideas not just about how to inscribe care into ethical thinking but how to inhabit in a bodily and inter-related with others way, a moral life. As Pullen and Vachhani advocate, a turn to ‘the origin of ethics in living, breathing bodies – a body both in and of the world.’

Building on the theorising above we thus suggest embodied care in leadership:

- occurs in relation, in a space co-created by people with varying levels of power; it is not a fixed identity or trait that belongs to an individual but is produced in the moment and is dynamically constituted
- involves an openness to difference, to learning and experiencing ‘other’
- requires ‘corporeal generosity’ - willingness to experience feelings of care and compassion towards others as well as oneself
- pays attention to bodies and embodied experiences in the here and now, for example is sensitive to embodied suffering and evidence of embodied transformations – goes beyond applications of cognitive frameworks
- allows that matter, nature and non-human species matter
- employs ethics to reduce oppression and suffering, fostering instead freedom

Embodied care in leading

Jacinda Adern

Jacinda Adern was elected New Zealand’s Prime Minister, in an unpredicted set of events shortly after the election in 2017. She seems to me to embody care in an astounding way for a leader and putting care into action at a series of levels: policy, political and ambassadorial, interpersonal and personal.

New Zealand governments have almost always worked by coalition. Moving between rooms for days after the election, keeping track of promises and deals. Making the (potentially troublesome) and opinionated Winston Peters her deputy and acting while she is pregnant. ‘She kept both parties in the tent and talking’ (Annette Peters former Deputy Labour leader)

The policies on which Adern initiated immediate action were tackling child poverty, increasing housing and housing affordability, making the first year of tertiary education free and lifting the minimum wage rate from \$15.75 per hour to \$16.50. Interviewers and economic doubters said ‘how can you afford it?’ and she responded courteously but briskly saying that they had done the numbers and could afford it. They were also not proceeding with the tax cuts that her opponents before the election had promised. Actions to fund these were taken without fuss, for example an \$890 million families package.

Adern’s own body is highly visible and commented on. She announced that she was pregnant in early 2018 and gave birth to a baby girl in late June 2018. Shortly after the birth she posted photos of herself – looking tired and like she’d just given birth - husband Clarke and baby Neve on social media. She thanked all the people who’d sent gifts and congratulations. There was a tenderness, vulnerability and openness that she offered at this time which few leaders would ever allow.

Adern brings a humour and lightness to owning and being in her body and with others as a leader. Some examples from various interviews

- ‘I’m sorry I’ve given you a nectarine hand (shake)’

- *'I value being able to do normal things, like driving myself and going to the department store to buy some maternity jeans... I was stopped by an older man in the lingerie department wanting to do a selfie with me. It's not something you'd want really, being photographed with the underwear...'*
- *'I'll be sitting in a meeting and working hard on something, then I'll get a kick. That's the beauty of children. It's easy to think the moment you're in is the most important but there is life beyond it'*
- *'People come up and say to me "Can I hug you?" I say "of course you can."'*

Adern was demonstrably embodied while attending the Commonwealth meeting of heads of government in London in April 2018. She was loaned by the local Maori and wore a Maori coat, beautifully decorated with feathers and a recognised symbol of her status. The symbolism spoke especially about respecting and celebrating Maori culture.

Perhaps most remarkably, she seems unbothered by doubters, critics and spin doctors who, no doubt, would advise her to manage her image. She doesn't appear to do this, rather the opposite. She gives a lot away – about herself, her life, her experiences. She trusts herself to respond in the moment to tricky questions (for example what she thinks of Donald Trump). She trusts interviewers to be open to her answers, to share in the jokes and not try to trick her.

We feel her leadership and its ups and downs in a grounded and material way. Her partner Clark Gayford says it's his job to make sure she's eaten and hasn't got lipstick on her teeth. He says 'there's three of us in the relationship now. Me, her and the cabinet papers'

Christine Nixon

There are many impactful examples of what happens when women have spoken up, voiced and embodied their differences on public stages. My colleague Christine Nixon did just that in her swearing-in ceremony when she took up her job as Victoria's Police Commissioner. She publicly declared that being a woman, a partner, a daughter, would influence how she went about her job – and it did. She was never intimidated into not being a determined advocate for women and for greater equality. Julia Gillard's famous misogyny speech to the Australian parliament when she was Prime Minister is another potent example of the power of literally standing up and speaking up about the damage done by sexist norms many regard as 'just the way things are'.

But the particular example of leading with embodied care I focus on here is how Christine went about her role as Chair of the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority (VBRR). Christine was shortly to retire as Chief Commissioner when the devastating February 2009 Victorian bushfires occurred, She was asked to fill this role by the Victorian Premier.

- Extensive visits to people and sites of devastation
- Talking and listening – lost her voice after particularly lengthy round of community meetings
- Empowering communities (see Diprose article of her approach to other examples where leaders 'parachute in' and apply bureaucratic templates in emergencies and crises) but not going with the self-appointed leaders

These stands take courage and the physical preparedness to stand up, to be there and be counted. They require particular bravery for women, who are more frequently shot down and subject to vilification. Physicality and a willingness to be wholly present is another under-rated source of power and effectiveness in leadership which we can all draw on, inspired by these and other women exemplars.

A further area of power that women particularly take up is their care and concern for the vulnerable. Recently I spoke at a conference for early childhood educators – an opportunity for people involved in teaching young children to come together, share experiences and support one another. The conference was opened, as is Australian custom, by a welcome to country by a senior elder of the Indigenous community – long custodians of the local lands. It is tempting on these occasions to tune out, thinking one knows what’s coming.

This Welcome to Country was a deeply powerful leadership act – an un-ignorable call to ensure all young children feel safe and cared for in their earliest institutional settings. The speaker drew on her presence and wisdom to ensure we, in the audience, felt in our bones and our hearts the responsibility of providing this safety and care. As respected Northern Territory elder, Miriam Rose Baumann describes this: ‘you need to look into yourself, and find that spirit, there’s a spring within you, within me.’

Risks of embodied care in leadership

Leadership occurs in the spaces between and around people. It occurs in relation. As Donna describes ‘in an energetic field through which leaders and followers move together for purposeful action’ (2012:8). These spaces bring the opportunity for care to be given and received. But those very spaces are also underpinned by deeper structural relations of power, class, gender, race. As we discussed earlier, the very notion of care and embodied care has gendered meanings. Women are more likely to be expected to offer in leadership, selfless devotion to a greater cause and care for others. If they exhibit behaviours or attitudes that go against this norm in leadership, they are punished (Campus 2013; Nixon and Sinclair 2017). In addition though, men also negotiate minefields in the expression of care in leadership. Care is seen as weakness.

Portrayals of the bodies and care of leaders has proliferated with the ‘marketization’ and ‘mediatization’ of leadership (Campus 2013). Popular culture has changed perceptions of leadership with the growth of social media and constant news cycles creating increasing personalization and even the ‘spectacularization’ of leadership. Leaders come under pressure to become celebrities, to entertain and engage, encouraging the establishment of ‘non-reciprocal intimacy’ or an illusion of intimacy which is unmediated by the realities of face-to-face interaction (Thompson 1995: 220). Women leaders are under particular pressures as they navigate this visible, politicized domain. Some, such as Angela Merkel, rise above it. Others who’ve gone around traditional media to communicate directly with followers, have benefitted from such personalization. Whichever way women leaders go, the media play a key role in their electability and popularity.

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