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Unwanted Appearances and Self-Objectification: The Phenomenology of Alterity for Women in Leadership

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Abstract

This paper introduces the concept of dys-appearance (Leder, 1990) as a way of conceptualising the lived experience of alterity (or Otherness) of women's bodies in leadership. Drawing on an in-depth qualitative study (using interviews and photo-elicitation) it contributes towards growing bodies of literature that emphasise the corporeal and highlight the Othering of the female body in the masculine discourse of leadership. Ladkin (2010) employs Merleau-Pontian phenomenology to conceptualise the fundamental reversibility of embodied perception between the leader and the follower, but her analysis does not extend to a consideration of the sexed and gendered body. By focusing on the subjective experiences of women leaders this paper demonstrates the phenomenon of dys-appearance (Leder, 1990) in which the female body, which signifies a socially problematic presence in this context, appears to the subject in a disruptive or unwanted manner within their self-perception. The self-objectification and dys-appearance of the recalcitrant body exerts a telic demand upon the self to rectify its problematic presence and return it to a state of undisruptive normality. This analysis contributes novel insights on the unique or different experiences of leadership for women, and the impact of the problematizing of the female body on their self-perceptions.

Keywords: Leadership, Gender, Embodiment, Visibility, Dys-appearance, Reversibility, Merleau-Ponty, Leder, Alterity, Photo Elicitation.

Introduction

Leadership is predominantly conceptualised, in mainstream organisational discourse, as a phenomenon involving the actions and interactions of disembodied subjects. It is

treated as a product of rational minds rather than emotional, material, inherently visible bodies. This denial of the body has a number of implications for the way leadership knowledge is developed. Firstly, focusing on the cognitive aspects of a phenomenon that “is practised through and between bodies” (Pullen & Vachhani, 2013: 315) ignores the crucial role our lived bodies play in the perception and experience of leadership (Fisher & Robbins, 2015). Leadership is an embodied phenomenon, involving “subjective, tacit knowledge rooted in feeling and emotion” (Hansen, Ropo & Sauer, 2007: 544). Yet the bodies of leaders, in mainstream leadership discourse, are “denuded so far as is humanly possible, of all references to flesh and to nature” (Harding, 2002: 67). Leadership is not a quality that can be found *in* leaders but exists within the dynamic interactions of bodies (Ladkin, 2013).

Secondly, neglecting the body in conceptualisations of leadership causes the sexed body to be rendered invisible or insignificant. There is a considerable body of literature (for example, Bowring, 2004; Fletcher, 2004; Höpfl & Matilal, 2007; Katila & Eriksson, 2013; Muhr & Sullivan, 2013) that problematizes the supposed gender neutrality of the leader and exposes the implicit masculinity of leadership. This masculine ideal is culturally ascribed to the male form, resulting in women being regarded as troublesome or out of place. It has “rendered male organisational bodies invisible and cast women’s bodies as problems” (Sinclair, 2005a: 90).

The denial of the body in leadership sustains the notion of a universal, neutral subject; an ‘any-body’. Implicit in this abstract organisational body (particularly when in relation to managers and leaders) is the image of a man (Acker, 1990; Linstead, 2000; Brewis & Sinclair, 2000; Kerfoot, 2000; Sinclair, 2005a). This construction of male as neutral bestows upon the male body the advantage of invisibility (Simpson & Lewis, 2005). Leadership literature that rejects the body and theorises leadership as a rational cognitive pursuit within the dualist ontology of male/female, masculine/feminine, symbolically rejects the feminine. The leader becomes synonymous with the mind, or in other words, the masculine. Through this, women are constructed as Other to the masculine, male-bodied ideal of leadership (Kerfoot, 2000).

Drawing on Drew Leder’s theory of dys-appearance (1990), and qualitative research with women who self-identify as leaders, this paper explores the phenomenology of

alterity, or ‘Otherness’, for women in leadership. Dys-appearance contributes new understandings of the experience of the female body as Other in leadership, and the impact this has on one’s self-perception. It illustrates a phenomenon in which one’s body appears to oneself in a disruptive manner when it signifies a problematic or painful presence. Previous research has exposed the conceptualisation of women’s bodies in leadership as problems (Höpfl & Matilal, 2007; Katila & Eriksson, 2013; Kelan, 2013; Kenny & Bell, 2011), and has explored issues of visibility and invisibility in relation to gender and organisation (Lewis & Simpson, 2010; Binns, 2010; Simpson & Lewis, 2005). The theory of dys-appearance allows us to approach these topics from a phenomenological perspective, focusing on the lived experience of these phenomena for the simultaneously perceiving and perceived subject. It demonstrates that the alterity of women’s bodies in leadership is perceived and experienced by the subject, as well as by the Other, which results in the unwanted appearance of the body within their self-perception.

Leadership scholarship has joined the “corporeal turn” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2009, cited in Ladkin, 2012: 2) with an increasing appreciation of the role the body plays in leadership (for example, this journal’s special edition, *The Materiality of Leadership*; Pullen & Vachhani, 2013). This paper contributes to this growing body of work, with a specific emphasis on women’s experiences and perceptions of their lived bodies in leadership. I begin by discussing literature in the areas of gender and embodiment in leadership, and of (in)visibility. I then address leadership scholarship that adopts a phenomenological lens, specifically Ladkin’s work, which draws on Merleau-Pontian phenomenology. Leder’s theory of dys-appearance — which provides theoretical framing for the paper’s empirical contribution — is then described, followed by a section that details the methodology. The remainder of the paper presents the findings and analysis of empirical research that was conducted with eleven women, to explore their experiences and perceptions of their bodies in leadership. Through this, the significance of Leder’s theory of dys-appearance is exhibited. This demonstrates a fundamental contribution of this paper towards our understandings of the lived, phenomenological experience of embodied Otherness for female leaders.

(In)visibility and the Gendered Body in Leadership

Bodies have been a focus of analysis in organisation studies, particularly regarding gender, for a number of decades (Acker, 1990; Brewis & Sinclair, 2000; Brewis, 2000; Harding, 2002; Wolkowitz, 2006; Holliday & Hassard, 2001; Fotaki, 2013). But relatively little of this work has centred on leadership and “the different pressures on men and women leaders to produce a convincing physical embodiment” (Sinclair, 2011: 120). Leadership is, and always has been, accomplished through the physical body, regardless of sex or gender. Men’s bodies matter as much as women’s bodies in leadership, but they “have been made invisible for particular ideological purposes” (Sinclair, 2011: 120). Women’s bodies are not accorded the same invisibility; they are made available for display and appraisal. Norms around what constitutes the ideal leadership or professional body for women are not straightforward (Kelan, 2013). The uniformity of male suited bodies (Kupers, 2013) is contrasted with an array of appropriate appearances for women. The options seem never ending and each choice provides opportunity for judgement by those around them (Kelan, 2013).

The Otherness of the female body in leadership requires women to engage in body work (Wolkowitz, 2011), so as to “transform them from the ‘natural’ state to one that is more explicitly ‘cultural’.” (Gimlin, 2007: 355). The ‘natural’ female body is perceived as a threat to the logic, rationality, stability and order that men have supposedly achieved within organisational boundaries, and indeed within their own bodies (Linstead, 2000). Drawing on the theory of Abjection, Mavin and Grandy (2016a: 1096) explore how women elite leaders “experience a fascination with their own and other women’s bodies and appearance”. By “lurking on the boundaries” (ibid: 1098) of an acceptable manifestation of leadership women leaders’ bodies “provoke simultaneous distaste and intrigue” (ibid: 1099). Women leaders’ fascination with their own and others’ bodies, and the subsequent body work that is expected of self and other, is understood as a consequence of this abject, “in-between” (Tyler, 2011: 1490) status. The female body is consistently disciplined (Trethewey, 1999), open for judgement (Brewis & Sinclair, 2000), “managed”, corporeally and emotionally, (Hochschild, 1983), and is expected to perform within the narrow confines of “respectable business femininity” (Mavin & Grandy, 2016b).

The social construction of leadership as masculine, and a historical prevalence of men occupying positions of power, influence and authority, has resulted in the male body being established as the normal and natural subject of leadership (Bowring, 2004). The female leadership body is constructed in opposition to this: abnormal, unnatural and Other (Höpfl & Matilal, 2007). This Otherness grants the norm an absence, an allowance to “go unseen” (Sinclair, 2011: 124). Lewis and Simpson (2010) explore the power enjoyed by those who symbolise the norm: they are largely invisible, unproblematised and unscrutinised. White, middle-class men “occupy the normative position” and therefore “tend to go unnoticed” (Lewis & Simpson, 2010: 5). Women, conversely, do not “represent universal personhood”, they embody gender and so are highly visible as a marked category (ibid). The neutrality of the male body, through the relationship between invisibility and the norm (Simpson & Lewis, 2005), renders male bodies invisible and problematizes and makes visible the female body (Sinclair, 2005a). Visibility is to be seen as different, abnormal, to be outside of the dominant group and “subject to the controlling ‘gaze’ of the majority” (Simpson & Lewis, 2005: 1259).

The visible body highlights the futility of talking about gender as a purely abstracted concept, which exists beyond, above or before the material. The body plays a crucial role in the determination and perpetuation of gender discourses and power relations, and so is a crucial analytical focus in developing understanding of women’s experiences of leadership. Despite a recent appreciation of the body in leadership and organisation studies, this literature is lacking in explicit focus on the experiential, lived, felt aspects of embodiment for women leaders. A phenomenological lens brings these considerations to the fore and provides space for analysis of the lived experience of alterity, and visibility, for women in leadership.

The Leader as ‘Perceiver’ and ‘Perceived’

In *Rethinking Leadership* Ladkin proposes a phenomenological approach to understanding and analysing the embodied dynamics of leadership. Phenomenology allows us to return “to things and events themselves, and to their life-worldly

situatedness and meanings” (Kupers, 2013: 336). It provides the concept of the ‘Lifeworld’, which emphasises the need for understanding and visualising phenomena from an embodied, situated position rather than an objective, abstracted viewpoint as seen in scientific discourse (Moran, 2000: 12; Kupers, 2013). Ladkin argues that leadership, as a socially constructed, relational phenomenon, should be analysed from and within this engaged, situated ‘Lifeworld’. She draws on the work of Merleau-Ponty to highlight the importance of perceptions to the relational dynamics of leadership, but Ladkin’s analysis of leadership does not extend to a consideration of the sexed and gendered body.

Merleau-Ponty’s (1945; 1968) phenomenology highlights the importance of the physical body to the leadership experience, as the site of seeing and being seen. In adopting a Merleau-Pontian perspective on leadership, there is a rejection of the Cartesian dualism of mind and body, transcendence and immanence, which has been perpetuated in the rational, objective dimensions of scientific management and traditional leadership theorising. Merleau-Ponty’s work is centred on the notion of embodied perception: our bodies are the place from which we perceive the world, “to see is always to see from somewhere” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945: 95). His work “offers a phenomenological account of our ‘being-in-the-world’” (Moran, 2000: 391), which recognises the situated, subjective body as that which engages with the world, not an objective mind as perpetuated by a doctrine of Cartesian thought. The self and the world are inseparable, connected through an intermingling and co-constructing relationship. As Toadvine states, this “openness on to the world involves us in a perspective and a situation that are necessarily embodied and *visible from the outside*” (2008: 23, my emphasis). When we conceptualise the body as existing always within a perceived and perceiving world, we recognise that we are also visible and perceptible within that world as the objects of others’ gaze: as I perceive, I am also always being perceived.

Merleau-Ponty emphasises the reversible nature of perception and the fundamental instability of the distinction between the active and the passive subject: the active subject of perception is *simultaneously* the passive object. It is not a movement between states, but an intermingling, a breaking down of the dichotomy. The body is “both object (for others) and a lived reality (for the subject)” (Grosz, 1994: 87).

Critically, we are moving here towards an understanding of the meaningful impact of the perceiving world on our experience of self. Ladkin (2010: 65) argues that through this philosophy we see that “my entire self is created through my perceptual interaction with the world”. In this perspective lies one of Merleau-Ponty’s greatest contributions to my research, the notion that one’s sense of self is conditioned by how one senses itself as perceived by others: one’s self-perception is not constructed through “only my own views of myself” but also through “the other’s views of himself and of me” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 8).

The reversibility of perception reintroduces the critical role of the follower — the perceiving Other — to the experience of leadership, and shows us that the leader does not exist only as the active perceiver, but as the passive perceived also. Furthermore, we perceive from, and are perceived as, a lived, situated body, with its own specificities and social significances (Grosz, 1994). Sinclair (2005a: 92) states, “any discussion of bodies is also a discussion of sex and gender”. Thus, an exploration of the embodied lived experience of leadership is partial if it does not address the different or unique experience of the sexed and gendered body, and the implications of being Other to the norm to one’s perception of self.

If one’s embodied self-perception is informed or influenced by the perceptions of others, the self-perceptions of individuals whose bodies are a source of oppression require explicit understanding. Young argues that a woman experiences her body “as a *thing* at the same time that she experiences it as a capacity” (1980: 145, original emphasis). This does not come from an internal definition of oneself but from an experience of self in which she sees and feels herself as objectified in the perceiving world, a patriarchal world where women’s bodies are denied subjectivity and are seen as objects of desire and purpose. She does not have the “privilege of invisibility” (Sinclair, 2005b: 387) that a man possesses, through being of a body that is regarded as neutral, and deserving of his subjectivity. Although Merleau-Ponty’s concept of reversibility encourages us to consider the impact of the Other’s perception on our self-perception, his work does not provide empirical illustration of the experiential reality of this phenomenon for a body that is socially Othered, and therefore more overtly visible. Leder’s theory of dys-appearance, to which I now turn, allows us to

conceptualise this phenomenon, and has emerged as an effective illustration of findings in the empirical research discussed below.

Leder's Theory of Dys-appearance

Leder is a contemporary phenomenologist and psychologist whose work is heavily influenced by a Merleau-Pontian conception of the body. He argues that our bodies, as the site from which we view and perceive the world, are intrinsically absent within our sensory perception: "to be situated within a certain point of view necessarily involves not seeing that point of view itself." (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, cited in Leder, 1990: 13). When our body is not under explicit focus, when it is not the "thematic object of experience" (Leder, 1990: 1), it tends to fade into the "corporeal background" (Leder, 1990: 25). Leder focuses primarily on this phenomenon within the physical body: we are not permanently aware of our hearts beating, our diaphragm moving or of our leg muscles working as we walk. The routine functioning of our bodies allows it to take on an absence within our own perception and experience.

But when these normal processes and states of being are disrupted and we find ourselves in pain, our focus is suddenly drawn back to our bodies. This demonstrates that it is the *disruption* of bodily reticence that brings our body into awareness. In pain, the body, or some part of it, becomes an unwanted, alien presence, and becomes Other to the normal experience of our bodies. We separate ourselves from the affected area, regarding it as "thinglike". As Leder states "I no longer simply 'am' my body...Now I 'have' a body, a perceived object in the world" (Leder, 1990: 77). Leder looks to this dysfunctional condition as a source of bodily visibility, and uses the term *dys-appearance* to conceptualise the phenomenon. It is when our bodies experience a "problematic or disharmonious" sensation that they reappear (Leder, 1990: 70). We are not overtly aware of feelings of general neutrality, but once this feeling of well-being is disrupted "one's attention is summoned by the gnawing, distasteful quality of pain" (Leder, 1990: 73).

Although Leder's focus is primarily on the more visceral experience of pain and disease within the material body, this concept of dys-appearance can be applied to

social contexts also. The body “appears at such times when it confronts the hard or problematic, or *performs badly*” (Leder, 1990: 87, my emphasis). This ‘bad performance’ could refer either to the physical or the social body. As Leder states, “My awareness of my body is a profoundly social thing, arising out of experiences of the corporeality of other people and of their gaze directed back upon me” (1990: 92), and so the concept of dys-appearance too may account for inter-subjective modes of bodily awareness, and the dys-appearing effect of the objectifying Other.

When we are at rest, comfortable and confident in the company of others we do not experience ourselves as an object. This is comparable to the state of neutrality we experience when our body is not suffering from physical pain. However, when these feelings of ease are disrupted, our bodies take on an unwanted presence and visibility within our experience of self. If the Other’s stance is objectifying, distancing or antagonistic one becomes self-conscious, self-monitoring and sees oneself split between the “body I live out and my object-body” (Leder, 1990: 96). This phenomenon of social dys-appearance occurs when our bodies do not look and act “just like everyone else’s” (Leder, 1990: 97), when we are something other than the ideal. Consciousness is brought back to “the recalcitrant body”, which one senses as “separate from and opposed to the ‘I.’” (Leder, 1990: 88). The body is experienced as a rebellious force, an unruly and misbehaving companion that refuses to conform to the desired state of normality.

Dys-appearance coincides with the desire to manage or ‘deal with’ the body, so as to release it from its painful state, bring it back to a state of normality, and thereby, of desired absence or invisibility. As Leder states, “When the affected part of the body becomes ‘other’ to the ego, one becomes more ready to take whatever means are necessary to rid oneself of it” (1990: 77). The physical body in pain, or the social body that finds itself in a state of dys-appearance, exerts a “telic demand” upon us (Leder, 1990: 73) to free ourselves from this pain. The physical body may respond well to an analgesic, but this will achieve little in the social body. Other goals must be set, other projects devised, that allow the disruptive body to normalise, and to return to the privileged state of invisibility. The invisible body requires no action, its state of undisruptive generality does not pose a threat. But the dys-appearing body has the

effect of a *call to attention*: one's consciousness is drawn back to the self-objectified body, and the measures that might be taken to relieve it of its visibility

This theory provides generative ideas for the study of how women experience their sexed bodies in leadership. In a patriarchal society where women's bodies are constantly objectified it could be argued that women will always suffer a sense of visibility or dys-appearance that men can avoid. But as Leder's theory suggests, this is accentuated when women's bodies are seen to 'not fit' with the expectations of the role or position, when they seem out of place, or Other. The theory of dys-appearance allows us to understand how this Otherness is experienced and felt by women in leadership; it conceptualises a phenomenology of alterity. It suggests that not only are women's bodies visible, socially and discursively, through being marked as different to the norm, but also that they experience a bodily visibility within their own perception and sense of self. As Simpson and Lewis argue, "to be invisible is to have power" (Simpson & Lewis, 2005: 1259); invisibility is a privilege. Dys-appearance deepens our understanding of this by demonstrating that the visibility of one's body *to oneself* can be an unwanted, disruptive and disempowering phenomenon also. It is this subtle difference that contributes novelty to our understandings of the experience of alterity for women in leadership. We go beyond the discursive, poststructuralist account of the relationship between alterity and visibility considered (for example) by Simpson and Lewis (2005) towards a conceptualisation of the lived experience of alterity, and the unwanted appearance and objectification of one's body within their self-perception.

Methodology

Phenomenological research makes a commitment to exploring the subjective experiences and perceptions of one's participants. When phenomenology is applied to research it is "the study of phenomena: their nature and their meanings" (Finlay, 2008: 1). The researcher aims to create a "rich textured description of lived experience" (Finlay, 2008: 1) by focusing on the meaning and understanding we make through our own experience of and perspective on the world. This research adopts the methodology of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which is informed

by existentialist phenomenology, and aspects of hermeneutics and idiography (Smith et al, 2009). The aim of IPA is to gain insight into how participants make sense and make meaning out of experience (Smith & Osborn, 2007), and emphasises the role of the participant as “experiential expert” (Smith et al, 2009: 58).

Eleven women took part in the research. For phenomenological research, one must access “people who have directly experienced the phenomenon of interest; that is, they have ‘lived experience’” (Patton, 2002: 104, cited in Lewis, 2015: 667).

Therefore, the only criteria for selection for my project were that the participant self-identified as a woman, and self-identified as a leader. Participants were recruited from within my own networks and through snowball sampling. I approached some participants directly (friends, family and colleagues), and through them I accessed other relevant and interested respondents. They ranged in age from mid-twenties to sixties and came from diverse professional backgrounds (as outlined in the table below). However, the sample is notably homogeneous in other respects. All of the women are white, cisgender, heterosexual and well-educated, and this is likely to have had a significant impact on their experiences of self, and of alterity.

Pseudonym	Age range	Leadership role(s)
Grace	50-55	Development coordinator in commercial & voluntary sector
Penny	35-40	Senior management for a business support organisation
Carol	35-40	Hospital consultant and clinical academic
Emily	40-45	Tourism Management
Lydia	25-30	Freelance writer, filmmaker and media activist
Jessica	55-60	Director of an early years education centre
Ursula	35-40	Technical consultant/project manager
Sophie	45-50	Project management at HE institution
Beth	60-65	Social entrepreneur and facilitator in leadership and coaching
Nancy	35-40	Human resource management
Hayley	25-30	Senior marketing and communications manager

In the selection of data collection methods for IPA, it is crucial that the methods serve to “invite participants to offer a rich, detailed, first-person account of their experiences” (Smith et al, 2009: 56). Participants should be treated as “experiential experts” (Smith et al, 2009: 58) on the subject and granted the freedom to tell their

stories, express their thoughts and concerns, and think reflectively and creatively with a high level of autonomy and control over the process. To best achieve these aims methods were selected that engender a rapport with participants and elicit “detailed stories, thoughts and feelings” that are participant-led (Smith et al, 2009: 57). I conducted three in-depth interviews (one to two hours each, over several months) with each woman: two semi-structured and one photo-elicitation interview. All were recorded and transcribed in full. The first interview allowed us to get to know one another and to begin to explore their reflections and understandings of their bodies in leadership through the describing of episodes and experiences. It was a very sensitive subject for several participants, and these women in particular appreciated the ‘slowness’ of pace that repeat interviews offered.

A key method within the interviews was the use of photo elicitation. This is a qualitative method in which participants take or find photographs, which are then used in an interview “to stimulate a response” (Prosser, 2008: 19). The process of taking or selecting photos requires participants to reflect on the phenomenon under investigation beyond the research setting. Focusing on these images in interviews may provoke interpretations and insights that would not have emerged in a language only interview. It can generate “unknown unknowns” (Allen, 2011), where important aspects of the phenomenon, of which the researcher may have been ignorant, or had not regarded as significant, can be surfaced through the process. This method gave my participants the ability to guide the interview, and to bring me into their material world, without always having to rely on language.

I was highly aware of the sensitivity of the subject and the possibility that photography is a medium that some people may not relate to. In light of this, participants were encouraged to adapt the method to suit them. Several minutes was spent, at the end of the first interview, discussing the photo-elicitation method. I explained to participants that the purpose of the exercise was not to collect raw data for analysis but to facilitate reflection and to provide an opportunity for them to illustrate meaning through visual rather than just oral means, if, indeed, this appealed to them. The extent to which participants engaged with the method varied. Some found the process evocative and put a great deal of thought into the task. Others seemed less interested and came to the second interview with nothing. These

variations necessitated adaptability on my part and meant that these second interviews were largely unstructured and emergent.

Many participants did choose to bring photographs they took themselves, but other examples of what they produced were: old or existing photographs of themselves; photographs they took of objects; pictures or images that they found in magazines, newspapers, books or on the internet; and small physical objects (e.g. a hand mirror). A small number of these images are included in this paper. Many of the images were personal to the participants, may have allowed them to be identified, or the participants asked for the images not to be published, and so were excluded. In any case, these artefacts were not intended as raw data. The purpose of this method was to provide opportunity for reflection and preparation before the interview, and for the participant to guide the conversation.

To conclude the research, I conducted a third and final interview with each of my participants. This interview was an opportunity to reflect back on the process as a whole, to give them a chance to speak about their experience of the study, and to delve deeper into key issues that had emerged. By this stage the participants had become more open and comfortable in sharing, and many were keen to discuss their own reflections on and analysis of their contributions to the study.

To maintain the idiographic and phenomenological principles of the method data analysis is “developed around substantial verbatim excerpts from the data” (Reid et al, 2005: 22), and it is important that the final text retains the voice of the participant. Analysis was done in five stages. Each case (i.e. three participant interviews) was dealt with separately for the first four stages: immersive reading and initial note-taking; conceptual and interpretative analysis; development of emergent themes; developing connections across themes. Smith et al (2009: 100) stress the importance of treating each case in its own terms, to “do justice to its individuality”. The final step required looking for patterns across the cases. This allows the analysis to move to a “more theoretical level” (Smith et al, 2009: 101) and allows the researcher to consider the overarching results of the study as a whole. The data in this study are vast and diverse, and analysis could have taken many directions but throughout the process, the importance of visibility and self-objectification stood out distinctly and

consistently. This was evident from the initial note-taking phase, where reflections on the presence of the body within these women's descriptions of leadership and self-objectifying language (e.g. describing their body as 'it') were very prevalent, and these emerged as key themes in every case. Merleau-Ponty's theory of reversibility and Leder's theory of dys-appearance provided me with conceptual frameworks through which to make sense of these experiences, and to develop a sense of understanding of *how and why* this phenomenon is shared by these women.

I turn now to the presentation of these empirical data. This is divided into three sections, illustrating key themes that emerged from the analysis, which are organised here around Leder's theory of dys-appearance. I begin by exploring the Otherness of the female body in leadership, as expressed by the participants. This leads into a discussion of the *consequences* of this Othering — the dys-appearance of the female body in leadership — followed by data that demonstrate the telic demand that the dys-appearing body places on the subject to rectify or deal with its problematic presence.

The Othering of the Female Body in Leadership

The disembodied, purportedly gender and sex-neutral subject of leadership scholarship has been exposed as implicitly male, thereby branding the female as Other. We see evidence of the Othering of the female body in an extract from Emily, who is reflecting on the experience of being different to the norm in her leadership role:

I remember speaking at a networking event a while ago and I come in and there's a sea full of grey.....it's the sheer mass of them and the uniformity between all of them, it's quite staggering sometimes..... it's bizarre, they all dress the same. They all look like clones! And they speak like clones! (Emily)

Emily draws on several metaphors to illustrate the homogeneity she is faced with: the "sea full of grey suits" evokes an image of expansive sameness and mundanity, and "clones" indicates similarity but also an un-human quality. This, Emily describes, as "staggering". Men are the majority and this majority offers their individual bodies

invisibility. They blend into the “sheer mass” of others like them; they lack bodies that stand out.

Penny speaks of the effect of being the minority, the Other, on her experience and perception of self:

When you walk into a room of men in pinstripe suits one of three women in the room, they don't want to talk to you because they don't think that you've got a) anything interesting to say or b) the right level of contact that they want...and when that happens it knocks your confidence a bit and you think 'hmm, I'm not on an equal footing here' and so that kind of stuff does affect you. (Penny)

The “room of men in pinstripe suits” again connotes a uniformity in the embodied presence of the men, and being “one of three women” produces a feeling of difference. As in Emily's quote above, the suit is an important symbol of this alikeness among the men, and one that the women are not accorded. As Harding (2002: 67) argues, the suit “allows masculine allegiance to the larger social order and man's privileged position therein”. For Penny, the difference that she represents contributes towards a lack of interest, respect or recognition from the men. She becomes aware of herself as lacking in the privilege or “equal footing” that others experience. In this moment, she experiences herself as disadvantaged and hindered by her sexed body, due to her body's representation as Other to the norm.

Lydia describes her emotional response to a comment about the size of her breasts that she overheard when working with a (male-dominated) film-making organisation:

It just made me conscious of the fact that oh I'm a woman so I'm different. I'm not the default, I'm not the real, actual thing. I'm not the person that..... this company is a male thing and I'm encroaching on that, I'm coming into that therefore I'm being derided for not being normal, real, natural. That's kind of how it made me feel. (Lydia)

For Lydia, the consequence of this overheard remark was a consciousness of herself as a woman, and as an unwelcome imposter in a male world, for which she was being

“derided”. Overhearing this comment brought her attention directly to her body and the difference that it signifies. She recognises the male body as neutral and concludes that her body is seen *in relation to* this norm; that her body is visible as Other.

In this extract Hayley is describing a common interaction in which she experiences herself as Other in the eyes of another:

If I go into a meeting with someone who hasn't seen me before, I can see in their face that they're like, uch they've sent some junior woman to speak to me rather than someone important. And I know that's a combination of being young and being a woman, but I think it's more about being a young woman, you know, they've sent someone in who's got no influence, no sway, and I do feel that sometimes. (Hayley, 1.19)

Hayley describes here the consciousness of another's response to meeting her, and the assumptions that she perceives in that initial interaction. She feels that people's perceptions of her as “a young woman” are marred by assumptions about her inexperience and lack of influence or authority. In these situations, the Otherness of Hayley's body causes her to become extremely conscious and aware of her body and the impressions that are being forged because of it. Her body becomes visible to her, as a problem. In this extract we are beginning to see the impact of her experience of alterity on her self-perception, which is explored in greater depth in the next section.

The extracts above demonstrate the experience for these women of the Otherness of their bodies in leadership... The relationship between Otherness and visibility is evident in their accounts, and this contributes toward an awareness of oneself as different, unexpected or unwanted, and therefore problematic. The problematic body is analogous to the body in pain as described by Leder, which experiences an “intentional disruption” (1990: 73). The body is now “no longer a ‘from’ structure, the painful body becomes that *to* which he attends” (ibid). Merleau-Ponty argues that “to perceive something is both to enter into a communality with it and to confront it as something that is at least marginally separate from the perceiver” (Leder, 1990: 76). When the perceiver perceives their own body, it becomes an object within their perceptual field and through this “an element of distance emerges” (ibid: 77). The

body *dys-appears*: it is experienced as an unwanted presence, separate from the self, and highly visible to the subject as an intentional object.

A number of scholars have challenged the assumption of gender neutrality so as to bring the issue of sex and gender to the fore in our studies of leadership (e.g. Billing & Alvesson, 2000; Knights & Kerfoot, 2004; Collinson & Hearn, 1996; Bowring, 2004). More recently, some have turned their attention more directly towards the Othering of the gendered and sexed body in leadership (e.g. Sinclair, 2005b; 2011; Muhr & Sullivan, 2013; Kelan, 2013). Through a phenomenological lens, emphasis is placed on the *lived experience* of this Othering. This approach allows us to understand how alterity *feels*, and the impact that this experience and perception of their body has on how women position themselves and understand themselves in relation to the ideal image of the leadership body, emanating from a male-dominated, hyper-masculine tradition. Merleau-Ponty's theory of reversibility (1968) demonstrates how our experience and perception of self is, to some extent, the product of how we perceive ourselves as perceived by others. In light of this, it is important that we consider the impact that the alterity of women's bodies has on how women experience and perceive their own bodies in leadership, and in relation to the ideal leader's body.

Dys-appearance: the disruptive presence of a problematic body

Dys-appearance describes the experience of one's body as unwantedly visible and objectified within one's intentional field. The data discussed in the previous section could be understood as illustrations of the visibility that results from being Other to the norm as a woman in leadership; the female body is visible as a "physical spectacle" (Lewis & Simpson, 2010: 8) due to her difference. The theory of dys-appearance highlights this relationship between alterity and visibility also but differs in its focus. In this account we explore a phenomenological manifestation of visibility, in which the body becomes visible, as an object, to the self. In this extract from Lydia we see her reflect on her body as an object within her self-perception:

I just feel like I constantly have to fight to get my voice heard, and to get my inner self seen, and the only way to do that is through my body and my body is a barrier to

doing that because it's femaleit's still the thing between us [...] I think that if it's something that constantly needs to be monitored, then you can't help but see it as separate from yourself. It still becomes something that isn't me, and something that I reflect on and look at and think 'oh ya that's fine, it's ticking away nicely', but it's still in that position of not being - it's my body but it's not me. (Lydia)

Lydia reflects on her frustrations at not getting her “voice heard” and her “inner self seen” by others. There is a separation of ‘me’ and ‘body; she uses the word “thing” to describe her body, and talks of “it” being a barrier between her and others. A direct link is being made between the body as something that requires monitoring, and the experience of a separation out of ‘me’ and body: the mind and the body. The body is an object that she carries — a barrier, a visible thing that needs maintaining — not part of the subjective self. It becomes “a painful prison or tomb in which [she] is trapped” (Leder, 1990: 87).

Jessica, as part of her photo elicitation task, took this photograph and described her reasons for its selection. Again, the participant engages in self-objectification.

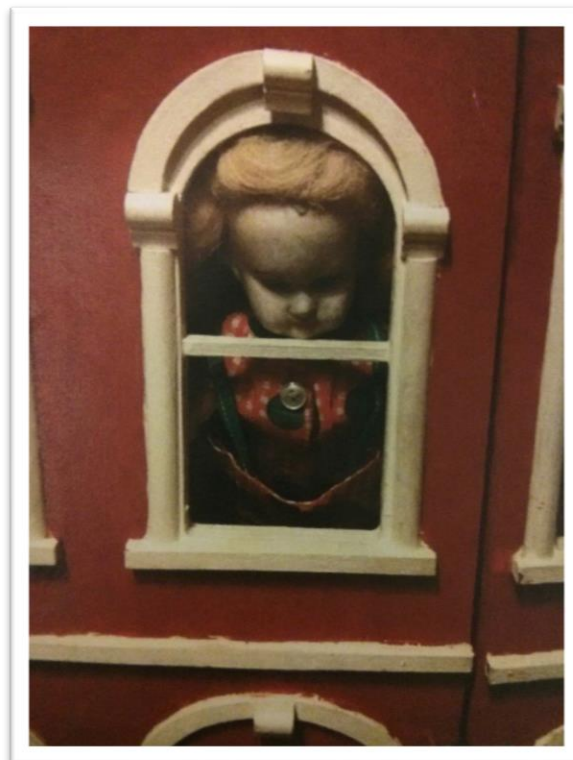


Figure 1: Jessica's photograph of the doll in the red house

I thought of this body being absent and odd and a bit disconnected, so I chose a lifeless object to represent the body, but a lifeless object that is also a representation of a body so I chose my favourite doll (Jessica)

The following extract is from Carol, and she is describing a regular aspect of her leadership practice:

Each morning I go in and have to interrupt the trauma meeting where all of the orthopaedic surgeons are gathered around, they're all men. And although I am the same rank or higher than everybody in that room, it is quite an intimidating room to walk into [...] It's the one environment where I feel female. I'm thinking, oh I've got a skirt on today, where [mostly] you don't think much of it, and then you walk in there and you think oh...and you're aware of what you look like because they are looking at what you look like, and you can feel that [...] If you walk around the swimming pool in a swimming costume, people are clocking you aren't they? So, it's the same thing. I'm young, I'm female, I'm in a position of some authority....there's a dynamic there. And I do feel that. (Carol)

Carol is very aware of the difference and Otherness that her body symbolises in this context, and feels that she is *being looked at* because of this. It causes her to “feel female” in a way that she doesn't elsewhere. The visibility of her body within their gaze — her objectified body in this “lion's den” — brings her awareness and focus back to her sexed body. Her thoughts are drawn to her physical appearance in a way that differs from her normal experience of her body where “you don't think much of it”. She goes as far as to compare this feeling of bodily visibility to a semi-nakedness in a public space where one's body is exposed, vulnerable, and open for judgement. It becomes thing-like in its presence as the intentional object of her awareness and focus.

Leder suggests that one “may become aware of [one's] body as unsightly in the eyes of others” (1990: 97); that corporeal self-consciousness can arise from the perception of one's own body as unacceptable or unattractive to others. The issue of weight came up regularly in interviews, which is unsurprising considering the extraordinary social pressure women experience to self-monitor and self-discipline their “loose and flabby” bodies (Bordo, 2003: 187). The following extract from Beth illustrates the

dys-appearing effect of the body that does not conform to her definition of appropriate weight:

When you are much slimmer you don't have to worry about things going in and out, you just wear anything and you still look fantastic in it because you can dress it in any way, in or out, tight belts or not tight belts, and you don't have to worry about blubbery bits and knicker lines and all of that disappears, you don't have to worry about it. (Beth)

Beth talks here about the body disappearing when she is slimmer. The slim body is an absent body, a body that fades into the corporeal background and loses its intentional or “thematic focus” (Leder, 1990: 84). She uses language that objectifies her body, like ‘thing’ or ‘it’ demonstrating a separation of self and body. We see here an acute consciousness of the body, particularly at times when it does not subscribe to the appropriate female body, which is slim and contained, and when “the outside world’s definition of what’s a good leader and what’s a physically beautiful woman and all those things start to bang on the door” (Beth).

This next extract demonstrates the feeling of bodily visibility and awareness that results from an experience in which Ursula perceives herself as problematic or Othered in the eyes of the Other:

I think I told you about the meeting I had with the senior guy who made a comment about me not being old enough to know Joni Mitchell? So that day I was wearing, I have a purple sort of jersey dress, which I love, I really like it and I think it looks nice on me and I feel really comfortable in it, and I knew I’d have this meeting so I wore that dress because I...ya, because I really like it. But actually it's not really that smart, and it probably makes me look quite young, it's quite a girly dress, and so I felt that day....I wish I had worn trousers and a shirt. (Ursula)

Ursula was referring to a story she told me previously about an older male colleague commenting on her (perceived) youth. As a huge Joni Mitchell fan, this comment was not received well by Ursula. She found it patronising and inappropriate, and she made reference to it a number of times throughout our interviews. In this quote, she describes her subsequent focus on her embodied appearance, and the concern that she

was dressed in a “girly” and “young” way. In this moment, where she feels her authority or status is being undermined, she regrets that her body is not presenting the ideal leadership image. Her perception of her own body is directly informed by how she feels she is being perceived by this man: young and therefore more junior, less leaderly, and not to be taken seriously. Although the dress she was wearing is one that she likes and feels comfortable in, it becomes an unwanted presence in her experience of her embodied self at that moment because it does not represent the ideal, legitimate and sanctioned body of the leader.

For her photo-elicitation exercise, Ursula brought these two images, which represent how she “would like” to be perceived (on top) and how she feels she *is* perceived (underneath) in her role. The second image is an illustration from a children’s book (Donaldson, 2011), and Ursula drew attention to the character of Red Cheeked Rose – the screaming child in the boat – to illustrate, among other things, her anxiety around looking like “a little girl”.



Figure 2: Ursula’s image of the “ideal look”



Figure 3: Ursula's image of Red-cheeked Rose

The phenomenon of dys-appearance portrays the bad or unwanted appearance of the body within one's own perception. Like the body in pain, the body that is subject to the "objectifying gaze" (Leder, 1990: 96) of the Other is "ceaselessly reminded of the here-and-now body" (ibid). One experiences their body as intensely present within their own perception, and "incorporates an alien gaze, away apart, asunder from one's own, which provokes an explicit thematization of the body" (Leder, 1990: 99). The Othered, objectified body appears as an "alien presence" (ibid, 73) that disrupts the experience of body-as-subject (characterised by the absent body) and creates an experience of body as a 'thing' that one must carry; an uneasy presence that brings an awareness and focus to the body-as-object. The idea that the female body is subject to objectification is by no means new, but Leder's theory highlights the process of *self-objectification* in which the experience of being Other to the norm causes the Othered body to appear within the perceptual field of the individual as the object of analysis, resulting in a symbolic separation between self and body. The body is experienced as a "recalcitrant" (Leder, 1990: 87) presence, an unwanted object, "separate from and opposed to the 'I'" (ibid).

The Telic Demand

The disruption of the painful or problematic body exerts a “telic demand” (Leder, 1990: 73) upon the self to return the body to its absent state. The dys-appearing body shifts our focus from an outward facing intentionality, inwards, so that “the painful body becomes that *to* which [one] attends.” (Leder, 1990: 74. This “affective call” (ibid: 73) causes our awareness to take on a corporeal focus. We are seized by the inescapable presence of the body; “the sensory aversiveness and world disruptions effected by pain *cry out for removal*” (Leder, 1990: 77, my emphasis). The dys-appearing body does not just appear to us in a disruptive or unpleasant way, but actively requires our attention. The objectified, problematic body is visible to us as *something* that must be ameliorated; released from its distressing circumstances, and resumed in a desirable state of absence and normality. Leder argues that “in order to return to normal mastery, the body itself becomes the focus of ongoing hermeneutic and pragmatic projects” (1990: 86). The intentional disruption, experienced by the problematic, female, dys-appearing body in leadership, draws one’s attention away from other projects and exerts a demand for action *towards* the body.

For Carol, being a young woman, and a hospital consultant, is a constant source of self-awareness. She describes, in this quote, the assumptions made about her based on her age and sex, with both leading to the perception of her body as one that does not fit with the expectations of the role:

In looking after older people, they assume if you’re a woman that you’re a nurse. So I have always been quite careful about how I introduce myself - quite clearly, at the start of consultation, so I can say who I am and they realise - and I guess I’ve tried...I’ve tried to dress in a sort of traditional doctoring way so that I look like I’m a doctor. So, I guess I’ve always tried to kind of wear stuff that makes me more believable as a doctor and makes me look a bit older I suppose. (Carol)

Carol has come to see her body as something that must be maintained in such a way that it is “more believable” to others as a doctor. This includes her clothes, her manner, and her “introduction”. Carol consciously overrides the assumptions made about her body when she meets a new patient by ensuring that her introduction, as the

consultant, is clear and immediate. This need to reiterate her position and role demonstrates an awareness of her sexed body, and of the need to monitor and manage it.

Nancy speaks about the “evolution” of her embodiment in work (represented in the image below), and the effect that her growing confidence had on her ability to dress in a “more feminine, more colourful, more individual” way. This demonstrates the shifting demands that are placed on women to embody their gender and their leadership, and is an interesting insight into one woman’s dynamic responses to the “affective call” of her body in different times and contexts.



Figure 4: Nancy's illustration of her changing appearance at work

Lydia talks about the need to “monitor” her body, in an active sense, in that she makes choices about her clothing and appearance based on this process of monitoring.

I feel it's more about not having anything that can be picked at.... so it's more about monitoring than being attractive. But very much feeling the need to monitor my appearance for the sake of that becoming something they can't attack me for (Lydia)

For her, the maintenance of her body is a way of avoiding being attacked, picked at or judged, rather than a means of making herself look more attractive. She normalises the body, making it less visible as a spectacle, and as something that could be judged by others.

As part of her contribution for the photo elicitation method, Grace brought this magazine clip (and other similar examples). These magazine cut-outs allowed her to explore and make sense of the situation women find themselves in, with their bodies constantly judged and appraised, assumptions made about their abilities based on their appearance, and exposed to pressures and forces designed to have a disciplining and controlling effect on their bodies.



Figure 5: Grace's photograph of a magazine

Because we're just being manipulated constantly into this whole.... it is about linking the way you look, to the way you're perceived, to how good you are at what you're doing. And that link is being made. Externally. (Grace)

Emily describes her feeling of coming back to her leadership role after maternity leave:

After my second child was born, you just felt you weren't a professional woman anymore, the one you were before, all of a sudden you're a slightly overweight....Mum. And you all of a sudden move from, in my mind, from sort of a decently attractive sexy woman to a Mumsy....into the Mumsy brigade who stands at the school gate....And so getting my body back was very, very important to me. Even extreme at some points. And then once I did that, and I was back to where I used to be, then it became less of an issue again (Emily)

We see here the difficulty she faced in coming back to work and feeling that her body no longer represented the ideal image of an appropriate professional woman. In this state, her body represented the private, domestic sphere and was not regarded as appropriate for the public, professional sphere (Collinson & Hearn, 1996). Her body appeared to her as a 'thing' that required alteration and maintenance. The route to reconciliation, for Emily, was to normalise her body — engaging in “extreme” body work — so as to bring it “back” into the realms of acceptability and, thereby, of absence.

Although many of the examples above reflect the participants' attempts to normalise their bodies, this was not a ubiquitous strategy. The Telic Demand manifested in acts of resistance and rebellion also. For example, Sophie describes how she subverts masculine pressures and expectations by asserting her bodily femininity “as a leader”. One of her images, for photo elicitation, was a photo of her lip-gloss and mirror:



Figure 6: Sophie's photograph of her mirror and lipstick

She described how she will intentionally apply lip-gloss in a meeting, and how she sees this as a statement — a celebration of her womanhood — and her determination not to hide or suppress that:

I don't see anything wrong with the symbols and the artefacts that go with being a woman, and ok, men don't wear makeup, and don't have the opportunity to look better as a result! So I suppose what I might be saying is, I'm almost celebrating the fact that I'm a woman, and I'm not going to hide the fact that I like putting lip-gloss on, and that is part of who I am." (Sophie, 2.20-2.21)

We can interpret this as an act of resistance for Sophie, a concerted challenge of the assumptions of hegemonic masculinity in leadership, through her body. We can also see it as a response to the telic demand placed upon her body through the phenomenon of dys-appearance, albeit a very different one to the normalising remedies we have seen above. Sophie is clearly aware of being of a body that marks difference, that is out of place, and therefore highly visible. But with this

understanding does not come a desire to rectify the problematic presence of her body. Rather, her response is to highlight this further as an act of defiance.

Concluding Discussion

Prior research on the conceptualisation of women, and the female body, as Other within leadership has focused, primarily, on the impact of alterity on how women are perceived, conceptualised and treated by others. That work has provided invaluable context for understanding the situation that women find themselves in when engaging in leadership. This paper contributes towards that inquiry, offering rich, descriptive data that illuminates further the gendered assumptions that infiltrate leadership discourses, and the experiential reality of the Othering of the female body for women who self-identify as leaders. But it also takes a significant step further, in providing new insights into the *impact* of this phenomenon on women's experiences and perceptions of self, and on the emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) and body work (Wolkowitz, 2006;2011) that women leaders engage in.

Simpson and Lewis (2005: 1259) tell us that “to be invisible is to have power”. The body that represents the normal, the neutral, or the majority has the ability to disappear as a unit of analysis. But the body that marks difference is not granted the privilege of invisibility. These bodies are often the focus of judgement, prejudice or discipline by others. Leder's theory of dys-appearance exposes a novel aspect of (in)visibility and provides a lens through which to explore this from a phenomenological perspective. By turning our analytical focus towards the subject's self-perception and experience of bodily visibility, we uncover a new phenomenon for women in leadership. The alterity of women's bodies in this context provokes a disruption of the self by separating and objectifying the body in the subject's perception. This is illustrated profoundly in the data, through the participants' descriptions of self-objectification, and of the tendency for their bodies to appear in an unpleasant or unwanted manner when subjected to feelings of Otherness or difference.

When women's bodies are cast as problems in leadership they lose the desired absence of the body within their intentional field, a state that accompanies the

unproblematically functioning body. The body becomes a visible object within their perception of self, something that stands opposed to the self, and is regarded as a recalcitrant and undesirable accompaniment; something that requires change. This is a significant development in our understanding of how women experience their bodies in the context of leadership and organisation. A Merleau-Pontian lens focuses the analysis inwards, to the subjective experience of the gendered structures and assumptions that mould our understandings of leadership and of women's bodies. It shows us that external perceptions cannot be seen as just that; external. But that the experiential, felt reality of these perceptions impacts one's perception of self.

Analysis of the data through Leder's theory also highlights the telic demand experienced by the participants. This offers key insights and new perspectives on women's relationships with their bodies in leadership, and the tendency to regard the body as something that must be understood, monitored, adjusted and manipulated. As an accompanying phenomenon to the experience of dys-appearance, the concept of the telic demand reveals *why* women may regard their bodies as things that demand hermeneutic and pragmatic consideration. The visibility of one's body in one's own perception is exposed as an unwanted and problematic condition, and provokes an active response — a process of diagnosis and rectification — so as to reconcile the body within the corporeal background.

This sheds new light on research that addresses the body work women do in leadership. We are granted an insight into the possible motivations behind this — the amelioration of the dys-appearing body — and the lived experience of the phenomenon. Through the lens of (in)visibility outlined by Lewis and Simpson (2010), evidence of body work in the above data could be understood as a quest for social invisibility through a process of normalisation. However, when we explore this through the concepts of the dys-appearing body and the telic demand we take this analysis a step further. We understand the accomplishment of a body that matches the perceived ideal or norm as a means towards invisibilising the body *within the subject's perception of self*. The participants' approaches are varied, their understandings and reflections diverse, but there is a commonality to their experiences also: the body is an intentional object, a 'thing' that they have and that must be understood, attended to and worked upon.

As Merleau-Ponty (1968) proposes, in his theory of the reversibility of perception, the way in which we experience and perceive ourselves is partially the product of how we perceive ourselves as perceived by the world around us, and those who inhabit it.

Dys-appearance provides a conceptualisation of the lived experience of being Other to the masculine, male-bodied norm of leadership, and the unwanted visibility of one's objectified, alien body within one's self-perception. It allows us to understand how the Othering of the female body in leadership *feels* to the subject, and the impact that this experience and perception of one's body has on how one positions themselves and understands themselves in relation to the ideal image of the leadership body, emanating from a male-dominated, hyper-masculine tradition.

Dys-appearance extends considerably our understandings of the *consequences* of reversibility, for the lived experience of the Othered body. Within the boundaries of the theory we discover a number of themes that constitute the experience of dys-appearance. Empirically, this paper illustrates the experience of being Other to the norm in leadership, the self-objectification of the body, and the unwanted presence or visibility of the body to the subject. Each of these themes, in their own right, contribute rich and important insights into the experience of leadership for women. But together, they take our understanding in a new and enlightening direction, by investigating the overarching phenomenology of Otherness for these women, and the bodily visibility this produces within their experience and perception of self.

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