The Leadership Preferences of Women Leaders Working in Higher Education

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the emic concepts and self-perceptions of leadership of women working in South African Higher Education institutions (HEIs). The study uses a phenomenological-hermeneutical research approach and qualitative methods to analyse twenty-three semi-structured interviews and data from observations in organizations. Findings show that women in HEIs in South Africa prefer associating leadership with certain characteristics which correspond to their core values of human existence. These core values are seen to influence the actions of women in leadership positions in HEIs. Based on their self-perceptions, women leaders use mindfulness which is characterized by various self-competencies, defined attitudes, spirituality at work and certain management practices. However, women leaders also feel that their mindful practices seem to be misunderstood in a highly competitive higher education (HE) environment in South Africa.

Las Preferencias de Liderazgo de las Mujeres Líderes en Educación Superior

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Resumen

El propósito de este estudio ha sido el explorar los conceptos emic y de auto-percepción del liderazgo de las mujeres que trabajan en Instituciones de Educación Superior en Sudáfrica (IES). El estudio utiliza un enfoque de investigación fenomenológico-hermenéutico y métodos cualitativos para analizar veintitrés entrevistas y datos semi-estructurados a partir de observaciones en estas instituciones. Los resultados muestran que las mujeres de las IES de Sudáfrica prefieren asociar el liderazgo con ciertas características que corresponden a valores fundamentales su existencia. Dichos valores parecen tener influencias en las acciones tomadas por estas mujeres. Sobre la base de sus autopercepciones, las mujeres líderes utilizan su concienciación, caracterizada por diversos auto-competencias, actitudes definidas, la espiritualidad en el trabajo y ciertas prácticas de gestión. Sin embargo, las mujeres líderes también sienten que sus prácticas parecen ser mal entendidas en el entorno altamente competitivo de la educación superior en Sudáfrica.

Palabras clave: mujeres, líderes, academia, liderazgo, Sudáfrica, educación, concienciación, auto-percepciones, espiritualidad.

Leadership is a highly researched and dynamic area which has strong practical implications for organisations. Studies have focused on how leaders should lead (Thomas & Strümpf, 2003), what leadership styles and ways of leading organisations are contributing to successful organisations and employees (Pircher-Friedrich, 2007), and which qualities of leadership are experienced as positive and supportive in coping with complex challenges in the workplace (Siddique, Aslam, Khan & Fatima, 2011).

South African leaders and organisations are riddled by challenges of the post-Apartheid era. These include radical changes in equity legislation, a call for a more gender-balanced and culturally diverse work force, as well as the need to stay globally competitive whilst managing communication and organisational issues (Oosthuizen & Naidoo, 2010). The South African constitution emphasises a non-racial and non-sexist democracy. However, South African leaders, particularly in institutions of higher education, are challenged by complex societal and educational issues, ranking from social and gender inequalities (Teferra & Altback, 2004), experiences of marginalisation and the exclusion of women in leadership positions in HEIs (Mama, 2003).

Recent research has highlighted on the one hand the important role of women in leadership in the African context (Darkwah, 2007). On the other hand, it has also been emphasised that women's health issues are still neglected and that women are still in the process of optimizing their health and wellbeing across cultures (Alexander, LaRosa, Bader, Garfield & Alexander, 2014). Women therefore need to focus on resources to deal with work related challenges, whilst concomitantly staying healthy (Amanatullah & Morris, 2010; Baxter, 2012; Mayer & Van Zyl, 2013). In this regard, women leaders in South Africa have been acknowledged as holding a resonance-building leadership style, consisting of adaptive communication skills, mentoring abilities, collaboration and qualities of cooperation (Van Wyk, 2012) which might contribute to managing health and well-being in organizations. Besides others, mindfulness has been described as a strong resource of a healthy state of cognitive openness, curiosity, and awareness (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005). Mindfulness has been presented as a fundamental coping strategy for women (Ando, Natsume, Kukihara, Shibata & Ito, 2011; Christopher, Chrisman & Trotter-Mathison, 2011),

which Mayer, Surtee and Barnard (2015) associate with concepts of workplace spirituality and meaningfulness in women leaders. Mindfulness is therefore seen as a prominent resource for women to deal with contemporary challenges in their workplaces (Nelson & Burke, 2000).

The South African Context

The concept of gender and of women in South Africa requires a consideration of the social, as well as the cultural history of this context. During apartheid South Africans were categorised according to four racial categories, namely African, Coloured (being defined as a mixed race (Adhikari, 2005)), Indian and White. According to Posel (2001), Whites were classified as being superior to the other racial groups and led the country's political and economic power for several decades. In the post-apartheid era, these racial categories were redefined in the Employment Equity Act (Department of Labour, 1998). Twenty years after the end of apartheid, South Africa is still undergoing complex transformation processes on various levels of society including the re-articulation of the concepts of race and gender (Mayer, 2011; Mayer & Barnard, 2015 in press).

Leadership

Leadership is a well discussed term and concept which is defined as a process in which an individual consciously influences individuals, teams and groups within an organisational context (Rosenstiehl, 2001). Leadership also includes the ability of leaders to motivate others to reach the aims of the organisation through influencing others through personal relationships (Amos, 2012). Leadership aims at creating healthy organisations (Mayer & Boness, 2013; Wolf, Huttges, Hoch & Wegge, 2010). Hable-Hafenbrädl (2013) point out that leaders need professional, as well as emotional and soft-skill competencies which contribute to the ability to resolve conflicts and accept criticism. Other authors (Pircher-Friedrich, 2007) emphasise the importance of sustainablility, meaningfulness, mutual trust and acceptance, respect and dignity in leadership approaches to make a leader successful. Recently (Dierendonk, 2010), servant leadership has been described as a successful type of leadership which is based on the

motivation to lead with a need to serve and display servant leadership. Personal characteristics and culture are positioned alongside the motivational dimension. Servant leadership is demonstrated by empowering and developing people; by expressing humility, authenticity, interpersonal acceptance, and stewardship; and by providing direction.

Fechler (2012) adds that leadership also needs to include active communication, transparency, openness, resource orientation, self-care and acknowledgement. Beechler and Javidan (2007) have pointed out that in a globalised work environment, leaders should able to understand global complexity (intellectual capital), hold a positive psychological profile (including attributes of passion, hope and resilience), psychological capital and participate in social networks with shared meanings (social capital). The last should be associated with flexibility, collaboration, listening and adaptability (Werhane, 2007; Werhane, Posig, Gundry, Powell, Carlson & Ofstein, 2006).

Mayer and Barnard (2015 in press) have pointed out that particularly in HEIs in South Africa, employees are challenged by transformation processes. A strong and empathetic leadership style is needed to transform the conflictual challenges of the past in contemporary organizations. Other authors highlight that particularly in those societal situations, visionary leadership is needed that communicates a clear vision and a future image of the collective within the organisation whilst persuading individuals and groups involved to contribute to its realization (van Knippenberg & Stam, 2014).

According to Good and Sherrod (2001) women in particular are challenged in contemporary organisations by having to deal with discriminatory practices, gender inequality as well as rallying for a gender-sensitive understanding of leadership and career paths. Despite this, the number of women continues to increase in leadership (Mostert, 2009) and executive level positions (Kinnear, 2014). However, the literature on women and leadership often focuses on women in business (Mayer & Van Zyl, 2013), women's leadership styles (Gouws & Kotzé, 2007), and on women in government as South Africa is one of the leading countries with relatively high numbers of women in parliament (Goetz & Hassim, 2003). However, the investigation of South African women in leadership in the HE

context has remained limited (Mayer, Barnard & Surtee, 2014; Pearson, May & Mayer, 2014).

Mindfulness in Leadership

The concept of mindfulness is associated with spiritual traditions (Cashwell, Paige Bentley & Bigbee, 2007) and particularly with the Buddhist tradition (Baer, 2003). Mindfulness is defined as a multilayered construct that is connected to cognition, awareness and emotion (Sauer, Walach & Kohls, 2011). A mindful person is aware of the present moment as well as of her/his actions and interactions. Atkins (2008) emphasises that a mindful person is non-reactive and is also able to understand and apply multiple perspectives to self and to others. Schmidt (2004) also highlights that mindfulness is aligned with an accepting and non-judgmental attitude, as well as non-attachment, gentleness and kindness. A quantitative research study on the mindfulness of women in academia (Louw, Mayer & Surtee, 2014) has highlighted that this cohort in comparison to women holding executive and consultant positions score lowest on mindfulness. The research data also pointed to the following trends: women with a doctorate degree scored lower on mindfulness than women with a Masters or honours degree; women who were married had higher mindfulness scores than those who were single or divorced; Coloured women had the highest mindfulness scores, followed by White, and African women respectively; and women who defined themselves as spiritual or as being Buddhist scored higher than the other participants in this study.

Purpose and Objective

The purpose of this study is to explore emic leadership concepts and self-perceptions of women leaders working in South African HEIs. The article aims to investigate the following key research questions:

- What characteristics do women leaders situated in South African HEIs associate with leadership?
- How do these women leaders perceive themselves in terms of their own leadership?

The study aims at contributing to qualitative, in-depth and emic empirical research on women's classification of leadership and their perception of their own leadership qualities.

Research Methodology

Research Design

A phenomenological (hermeneutic) research approach (Gummesson, 2000) characterises this study's research paradigm. It adopts an explorative and descriptive research methodology by using a social constructivist perspective (Collis & Hussey, 2003).

Sample

Using convenient and snowball sampling processes twenty-three women from the HERS-SA (Higher Education Resource Services, South Africa) network, were invited to participate in this study. HERS-SA is a non-profit organisation promoting and advancing the leadership development and career advancement of women working in higher education.

The diverse sample comprised women leaders in academic and support service positions who were employed in seven HEIs across South Africa. They came from four race groups as defined in the Employment Equity Act (Department of Labour, 1998) consisting of eleven White, four Coloured, five Indian and three African women.

Data Collection

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews and by observations made in the respective HEIs. The semi-structured interviews were conducted via Skype, telephonically or face-to-face. The duration of the interviews ranged from between 30 minutes to an hour. The interview questions focused on exploring the women's leadership experiences and their resources to lead within their HEIs. Questions were, for example: "Please describe your concept of life-orientation at work", "What personality is needed in leadership positions?", "How do you perceive yourself in terms of being a leader?", "How are gender, personality and leadership connected?", "How do you define mindfulness?", "How are mindfulness, gender and leadership connected?"

The semi-structured interview questions were developed following an extensive literature review of managing and leading in South African organizations (e.g. Mayer, 2008, 2011) and gender and women in South Africa (Mayer & Van Zyl, 2013).

The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, based on predetermined semi-structured research questions.

Data Analysis

The following five-step process of content analysis posited by Terre Blanche, Durrheim, and Kelly (2006, 322–326) were used to analyse the interviews: step 1: familiarisation and immersion; step 2: inducing themes; step 3: coding; step 4: elaboration; and step 5: interpretation and checking.

Categories and codes were (re)constructed using categorisation and coding methods in the content analysis process. This led to elaboration on and interpretation of the data. Data generated from observation contributed to the interpretation of information and is implicitly included in the research findings and interpretation. Inter-validation processes were used (Yin, 2009, 45).

Qualitative Research Criteria

Qualitative research criteria (Gummesson, 2000, 157) were applied, such as credibility, transferability, trustworthiness and confirmability (Mayer, 2011).

The clear and structured description of this research may lead to the qualitative research criteria of credibility, as well as to the transferability and trustworthiness of the research from the perspective of the reader (Creswell, 2003).

Ethical Considerations

The research study followed clearly defined research ethics. Individual informed consent was provided by all participants and participants were assured anonymity, confidentiality and the freedom to withdraw during the interview process. Ethical approval was provided by a research committee at Rhodes University in South Africa.

Research Findings

Biographical Data

Twenty three women in the HERS-SA network voluntarily participated in this study (see Table 1) and provided their conceptualisation of leadership.

All participants are South African citizens; three are African, four Coloured, five Indian and eleven White. Thirteen women held academic positions and ten work in support services positions. They are based at seven different HEIs in South Africa.

Table 1
Biographical data

Group	Total	Academia	Support Services
Black	3	1	2
Coloured	4	2	2
Indian	5	5	0
White	11	5	6
Total	23	13	10

Leadership: Types, Core Values and Actions

The data indicates that women leaders in HEIs in South Africa prefer to associate leadership with certain types (see table 2). These different types of leadership in turn are valued and applied in their daily work, to their core beliefs as being leaders and to their actions. Three women refer to types of leadership such as servant leadership, another three mention visionary leadership, two women each refer to peaceful leadership, a balanced leadership between authoritative and laissez-faire leadership, and charismatic leadership.

Table 2
Leadership Types

Leadership Types	Interviewees	Total
Servant leadership	I 18, W14, W19	3
Visionary leadership	C23, I17, B12	3
Peaceful leadership	C13, I22	2
Balanced authoritative and laissez-faire leadership	C13, W15; I18	2
Charismatic leadership	C3	1

   In general, the findings show that women leaders did not derive their preferred leadership typology by drawing on general and broader conceptualisations of this term. Instead, they described their own personal core values and the actions that they take based on the preferred leadership types they mention. Additionally, the women leaders also refer to the

application of mindfulness which they regard as a seminal aspect of leadership. An Indian participant emphasises (I18):

> Leadership is having a concept of spirituality which is based on values. You watch what you do.... as a leader you have to serve. Being mindful. Mindfulness is caring for people, caring for the environment, having empathy in your heart towards other things, and looking after things as well to serve the people.

This statement illustrates that leadership types are strongly interlinked with core values and spirituality. It appears that this participant does not primarily see servant leadership as a definition that needs to be clinically emulated, but rather a leadership quality that is derived from her personal and individual strong values of empathy, mindfulness, caring and looking after others, and to serve them (Table 3). The foundation of the core values that form part of her personality then led her to the concept of servant leadership which she prefers to apply at work.

Other participants highlight the importance of vision in leadership (visionary leadership), of a peaceful and non-violent, empathetic leadership (peaceful leadership), a balanced leadership that integrates aspects of the concepts of authority and laissez-faire leadership styles (balanced leadership), as well as leadership that is based on the leader's charisma (charismatic leadership).

Core Values of Women Leaders in HE

Across the board women leaders in this study regard respect as a main value in leadership. Respect is followed by the value of open-mindedness which allows one to see the possibilities which open up in the work context. Another shared common value is that of caring. Four White and one African woman highlight that caring about colleagues and others in general is important to them in leadership contexts. They see themselves as respectful and open-minded care-givers. Thereby, leadership is seen as visionary work that requires reflection of the context, the person as a whole, and bringing a certain kind of openness which makes the leader approachable.

An African participant emphasises:

> The ability to lead people in a way that will make them see the bigger picture. Like having a vision and knowing where you want

to take your unit or your organization. I also view humility…The reason is, we find most of the time people in higher positions tend to be proud, and sort of high up there – unreachable by the people they lead. That makes life very difficult for those that follow them. They can't even approach them for any help. If people are humble enough and approachable then it's easy for the people they lead to come to them any time they experience challenges and know that even if they will not come up with a solution, they will at least give them a shoulder to cry on.

This participant provides a picture of a caring, humble, approachable and open-minded leader that she herself strives to become. If leaders appear in a human way, leaders will be approached with expectations not to always get a rational solution, but also to gain emotional support.

In addition to these, it is important for the women leaders in this study to be career-driven, to value the whole person, be transparent and to deliver quality work. For two women additional important values include the need to work hard, the personal freedom to be a leader and to share leadership.

Table 3
Core values

Core values	Interviewees	Total
Respect	W15, W5, C19, C23; I17, I18	6
Open-mindedness	W11, W19, W27; B12, B29	5
Caring	W10, W11, W15, W16; B12	5
Career-driven	C5, C23; I18	3
Dignity, Humbleness, Humility	C23, B12, B29	3
Value whole person	C23, B12	2
Transparency	W3, I22	2
Quality work	C23, W10	2
Work hard	W15, W19	2
Freedom	C23	1
Share	B29	1

Parallel to the described core values, participants also highlight the leadership actions (Table 3) that are important in leadership. The majority of participants feel that supporting people is one of the key actions to be taken up in leadership. For these women leaders it is important to support others.

For other participants, it is important for leaders to excel academically in an HE context. Leaders are seen as mentors and guides, and they must be able to deal with complexities and transcend problems. Furthermore, leaders are expected to take ownership whilst they are leading and also to manage administration. A White participant explains:

> So what you've got to do as a leader is to be mindful. I think when people come in is to say: OK I'm now listening to what so-and-so is saying to me. Let me try and think of what that person's needs are and what they are doing, rather than having this at the back of my mind. It's quite hard, because I find myself sometimes thinking whatever you say now...and I listen more carefully... Listen more carefully to what the person is saying. Look at them of course, that's just a given, and clear your mind of other things.

This leader describes how she shifts her attention from herself towards the other. She applies strategies of active listening, exploring the needs of the other, looking at the person for creating a deep interpersonal contact and understanding.

A Coloured participant (C28) describes her personal actions in a leadership role:

> Well, the first thing that comes to mind is really the ability to be self-reflective because I think that many of the issues related to how we resolve conflict is also related to how we deal with ourselves – our responses to particular issues and so on. So I think an important leadership trait is that one of self-reflectivity, and I think the second one is very close to my idea of self-reflectivity, is the ability to step into your power – take ownership and step into your power. Because very often I've seen, particularly as women and this is a gendered comment I'm making now, we intuit things, we understand, we know what's happening, we know what should be done, but we are not able to step into our power and ensure that it happens. And again, there might be a whole range or reasons related to that, so those for me would be important personality traits.

This leader describes two main actions: she self-reflects and then steps into her own power and takes ownership of her actions and the situation. This participant therefore recognises the tendency of women in leadership

to take ownership and "step into their power" and believes that these leadership traits needs to be harnessed by all women leaders.

Table 4
Leadership actions

Actions	Interviewees	Total
Support people	I18, I22; B12, B29; W5, W7, W15, W10, W19	9
Excel academically	C3, C23, I17, B12	4
Mentor/ guide	B12, B29, W6	3
Deal with complexities	W15, I9, B12	3
Transcend problems	B12, C23, I22	3
Take ownership & lead	W19, I22, C28	3
Manage administration	W5, W27	2

For other participants, it is important that whilst being a women leader to also excel academically, to mentor and guide others, to deal with complexities and complex situations, transcend problems and manage administrative tasks.

Mindfulness in Leadership
Mindfulness is connected to self-competencies, to a certain kind of attitude, to spirituality in the workplace, as well as a management of mental, spiritual and a physical mindfulness.

The concept of mindful leadership comprises a practical component of self-competence. The concept of mindful self-competence includes the ability to reflect, to be emotionally competent, to contextualise, to stay balanced, understand others and listen carefully. Even the application of intuition and creativity across all participants is associated with mindfulness in leadership. Three White participants highlight that setting boundaries in a mindful way is very important to them.

A White participant states (W6):

> I think that mindful leadership is being very aware of how, with the other person you are dealing, how they click, trying to work out how to best deal with that person. If it's a difficult person trying to work out in your mind what makes him difficult. Being mindful you need to know what is going on in somebody else's life. And I think being mindful is not to take things personally… so you've got

to be mindful of the fact that there could be other things happening that you know absolutely no knowledge of.

This forgoing narrative shows that for this woman leader the relationship component is highly important to mindfully deal with the other to resolve problems. To know how to deal with another person, this leader highlights – as others do in their interviews –one needs to know the broader context of a person's life to know how to deal with them.

Table 5
Mindfulness leadership

Mindfulness			
Self-competencies (65 statements in total)	Reflect	W14, W15, W6, W10, W11, W19; C13, C23, C28, C29; I17, I22, B21	13
	Emotional intelligence	I18, B21, B29, B12, W3, W10, W11, W19, W15, W16, W5, W6	12
	Contextualise	C13, C23, C29; W15, W6-2, W10, W19; I18, I22-4, B29, B12	11
	Keep balance	W19, B21, C8, C13, C28, I9, I18	7
	Understand others	B12, B21, B29; W19, I22, C28	6
	Listen carefully	I22, B12, W5, W6, W10, W15	6
	Define boundaries	W14, W16, W10, W5	4
	Apply intuition	C28, B12, W19	3
	Creativity	C8, C28, W19	3

Table 5 continued

Mindfulness			
Attitude (53 statements in total)	Awareness	W14, W15, W5, W6, W19; C8, C23, C16, C28, I17, I18, I26, B12, B21, B29	15
	Consciousness	I22; C8, C23, C28, B29, B12, W3, W5, W6, W14, W19	11
	Present moment	W7, W10, W14, W3, W19, C8, C16, B21	8
	Needs-orientated	I18, W7, W16, W10	4
	Positive	W15, W6, B29, B12	4
	Caring	I18, B29, W19, C28	4
	Focus	B21, W16, W19, I9, I17	5
Spiritual mindfulness (20 statements in total)	Connection to higher power	B12, B21, B29-3; C3, C23, C29, W7, W27, W15	9
	Prayer & meditation	C8, I9, I22, W10, W11	5
	Walks	C23, W15	2
	Writing & Journaling	C8, W19	2
Management (19 statements in total)	Tackle issues	B21, I22, W6, W7, W10	5
	Play political games	W5, W6	2
	Apply ethics	W10, W11, B12, I22	4
	Deal with diversity	W10, W16, B12; I22	4
	Decision-making	W7, C8, C13, I22	4
Bodily mindfulness (3 statements in total)		C23, I17, I22	3

Mindfulness is connected to a certain attitude in leadership with regard to the self-perception of women leaders. For them, being a leader means being aware and conscious and leading in the present moment. They suggest however, that leaders also need to be a needs-orientated, as well as have a caring and focused attitude.

The concept of mindful leadership includes further on the spiritual and transpersonal component of leadership which goes beyond individual, organisational and societal concepts, a kind of spiritual mindfulness which is expressed through a connection to a higher power, prayer and meditation,

walks in nature, writing and journaling. An African participant highlights the importance of mindfulness for leaders (B29):

> I cannot see anyone who's a leader who does not have a very strong spiritual base. I cannot see such a leader. Because the norms that you put in and the principles that you put in as a leader, as a manager, speaks directly to trends defined in a spiritual being. For example, as a leader you need to share, you need to guide, you need to mentor, you need to support. You need to provide so much in resources. If you are not guided by understanding what it means to anyone to achieve their goals, that they need to be appreciated first. You can provide all that but if you do not appreciate them, you're not appreciating their thinking, their thoughts, their work, it might actually not help them to achieve the goal which is work related. Their self-esteem might be so low that they cannot even perform in any way while they have the capacity to perform, but they are not encouraged by the leader because the leader that doesn't see the importance of a spiritual being. You know it's a bit of a difficult question.

One interviewee (W11) describes her way of using visualisation to be mindful at work, particularly in conflict situations:

> I'll just hear them out and they were really going on and on and eventually I thought, 'well, think about something nice' and I thought about myself being on the ocean sailing. I was still listening to them, but I was trying to think of something I enjoy so that I wouldn't just get completely bogged down and drowned by this person's ranting and raving. And it actually did help me to keep calm. I think finding a way to keep calm is very important.

The use of visualisation opens up both positive emotions and strategies to deal with difficult and challenging situations in leadership contexts and to react mindfully to be outwardly calm during interpersonal interactions.

Moreover, women leaders are of the opinion that their management needs to be based on a management practice that includes tackling issues in the workplace in a mindful way, applying ethical considerations, dealing with diverse and mindful decision-making. However, mindfulness in the workplace is not only related to positive connotated concepts, but also to negatively perceived elements of managing power struggles and politics in

the workplace. Two White participants highlight that a female leader has to be considerate of how to play the game of politics in the workplace to protect herself from harm or bullying. W5 emphasises:

> You've got to know how to play the game. It sounds so cruel and it sounds so harsh, but if a woman comes into leadership without being able to play the political game and without knowing the political environment, and I don't mean in party politics, I mean institutional politics…you have to know, number one, even getting there, you've got to know who your competitors are, what their strengths and weaknesses are, and you've got to work damn hard to make sure you out perform them...
>
> The other thing that somebody told me many years ago, and it's the most truthful thing I've ever heard; when you work with top management you work with personalities and with people, and if you don't understand that you will not succeed because you do. People in top management have something different about them in terms of their ego, and you've got to be perceptive enough to read that personality to relate to them in terms of their personality rather than anything else, and that's the kind of mindfulness a woman needs to have.

This participant highlights how it is important for women to be mindful and to understand the politics in the work context to relate to other colleagues in top management and to communicate with them in a mindful way.

Last but not least, the data shows that participants seem to struggle when applying their leadership preference within the HE context. One Coloured leader (C28) who connects to the feminine side of mindfulness expresses her concern around the use of a feminine leadership style in a competitive environment:

> I think mindfulness is a very feminine stance. I'm not talking about feminine as in sex, but a feminine attitude, so sometimes that softness, that gentleness of being mindful is misunderstood in a hard, cut throat competitive environment such as higher education. I was absolutely amazed in my early days to see how competitive the environment is, and I must say I tend not to be competitive. I tend to be as hard working and as productive as I can but I'm not competitive. That sometimes freaks me out, with people, you know

you notice in meetings and so on, people will say things, not because they are contributing to the conversation but, but because they are competing for favour or whatever.

This participant believes that mindful leadership tends to be misunderstood in HE, by being seen as a ‚soft' or ‚weak' leadership response in a highly competitive environment. For this participant mindfulness is compatible with hard work, competition and productivity even though it is viewed to the contrary by others.

Discussion

As previous studies have focused on how leaders should lead (Thomas & Strümpf, 2003), what leadership styles and ways of leading organisations are contributing to successful organisations and employees (Pircher-Friedrich, 2007) and which qualities of leadership are experienced as positive and supportive to cope with complex challenges in the workplace (Siddique, Aslam, Khan & Fatima, 2011), women leaders in this study also refer to specific aspects to leadership types, values and actions.

As mentioned by Dierendonk (2010), servant leadership can support global leaders to be successful, three participants in this study also refer to servant leadership and to the social and developmental dimension of leadership. In addition, three other participants refer to visionary leadership and highlight the importance of the future in leadership (as emphasised in the literature (van Knippenberg & Stam, 2014), particularly with regard to South African legacy issues and the transformational leadership that is needed (Mayer & Barnard, 2015 in press). Further on, participants in this study aim for peaceful and balanced leadership which is related to general leadership concepts aimed at sustainability, meaningfulness, acceptance and respect, as described by Pircher-Friedrich (2007). Participants also refer to their leadership as being strongly connected to their values and to spirituality. Leadership values, as well as leadership practices emphasized by the participants support the assumption of Fechler (2012) that leadership needs to include active communication, transparency, openness, resource orientation, self-care and acknowledgement. Women leaders in this study are aware of these core concepts of leadership and go with this trend.

The core values of underpinning the approach of participants' leadership reflect the three capitals of global leaders, previously introduced by Beechler and Javidan (2007). Participants refer to the importance of intellectual capital in terms of being career-driven; being hard-working and contextual applications of understanding leadership within a certain global, local or cultural context. However, participants refer as well to the importance of a leader holding and projecting a positive psychological profile in terms of being respectful, open-minded, humble and transparent. Participants emphasise that their leadership is characterised by the concepts of dignity, humbleness and freedom which provides them with psychological capital. This positive psychological capital is strongly related to social capital, due to the fact that these positive concepts (for example, respect and dignity) include the social component of leadership values. Participants also speak directly of the importance of social capital in leadership – which seems to be of major concern to them – and which is addressed in their core values, such as that of valuing the whole person and caring which includes the concepts of listening and collaborating, as mentioned by Werhane (2007) and Werhane et al. (2006).

In parallel to the described core values, participants also highlight the leadership actions of which the majority of actions described falls into the category of social capital in leadership (Beechler & Javidan, 2007), such as supporting people, mentoring and guiding people, taking ownership and leading. However, the intellectual capital in leadership actions is also important, by excelling academically, dealing with complexities and transcending problems. In terms of described leadership actions, examples of positive psychological capital are not mentioned. Through the application of these leadership actions, participants try to deal with experiences of discrimination, gender inequalities and barriers to their personal career paths, as described in the literature (Good & Sherrod, 2001).

In terms of the concept of mindfulness, it is connected to self-competencies, to a certain kind of (positive and empathetic) attitude, to spirituality in the workplace, as well as to the way a mental, spiritual and physical mindfulness is managed. Generally, mindfulness seems to be a strong resource in the workplace for participants, as previously mentioned by Nelson and Burke (2000). Mindful self-competencies are the base for

mindful leadership practices which refer to competencies of reflection, emotional intelligence, contextualisation practices and different ways of being empathetic, intuitive and creative.

However, mindfulness for women leaders in this study is also expressed in a mindful manner, which is often referred to in the literature as being aware, and being present moment oriented and conscious (Sauer, Walach & Kohls, 2011). In the literature (Cashwell, Paige Bentley & Bigbee, 2007) mindfulness is associated with spirituality, but by participants this is not particularly referred to as a Buddhist tradition as in Baer (2003). Participants highlight further on that mindfulness is a powerful tool in management, as for example, in managing ethics, diversity or decision making and that they do not only refer to mindfulness with regard to emotion, cognition and awareness as emphasised by Sauer, Walach and Kohls (2011), but also with regard to their physical body. Women leaders in this study thereby go beyond the assumptions and statements in the literature on mindfulness at work. For them mindfulness is not only limited to cognition, awareness and emotion. It rather more includes the mindfulness that manifests in their physical body and the bodily awareness of their feelings and intuition. Women leaders in this study are fully conscious that mindfulness as a leadership concept can be totally misunderstood in a highly competitive context of HEIs. Whilst mindfulness emphasises the feminine side of leadership in terms of applying a gentle and soft approach, it is important to be very aware of the highly competitive culture in HEIs where a mindful approach might be misunderstood and interpreted as a sign of weakness.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The purpose of this study is to explore emic leadership concepts and self-perceptions of women leaders working in South African HEIs, by referring to the question of what characteristics women leaders situated in South African HEIs associate with leadership, and how these women leaders perceive themselves in terms of their own leadership.

The study shows that female leaders refer to concepts of servant leadership, visionary leadership, peaceful leadership, balanced and charismatic leadership, all of which correspond to their personal core

values. These core values are key to their leadership preference and are based on holistic, human and career-driven values. In conclusion, female leaders in this study refer to leadership by referring to categories of global leadership which include the concepts of intellectual, positive psychological and social capital. The data shows that these women leaders apply their values in their leadership actions on all three conceptual levels. These leadership actions include social interaction, academic and administrative performance, as well as the transformation of problems, ownership and managing complex challenges. Finally, for women leaders in HEIs their mindful leadership in the workplace is characterized by a display of certain self-competencies, including, a particular set of attitudes, spiritual mindfulness, and management that is tackled in a mindful way. For these female leaders, mindfulness is therefore based on mental, spiritual and physical concepts that impact on their leadership. However, mindful leadership seems to be often misunderstood and rarely valued by people situated in a highly competitive HE environment.

Limitations of the Study

The study is limited to the extent that it is a qualitative study which uses only a limited number of participants out of the HERS-SA network. It is further on bound to the phenomenological and hermeneutical research paradigm which aims at an emic and deep understanding of the content of research, not at producing generalizable results.

Declaration of Interest
The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

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