





CONCEPTS OF CREATIVE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN LEADERS IN 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract. This article presents the subjective perspectives of women leaders working in higher education institutions in the 21st century in South Africa. It focuses in particular on creativity as demonstrated by women leaders working in culturally and gender diverse post-apartheid settings. The aim is to contribute to the discourse on the creativity of women leaders from diverse cultural backgrounds within South Africa higher education institutions by examining how women leaders experience creativity and what creativity means to them from a qualitative perspective. The study reported on assessed the experiences of creativity of 23 women leaders and their views on creativity and creative leadership by means of a research paradigm based on Wilhelm Dilthey's modern hermeneutics. It used qualitative research methods, such as semi-structured interviews, as well as observations within one selected higher education institution. Data was analysed by means of content analysis. Quality research criteria and ethical considerations were upheld. The findings highlight the creative skills and attitudes of women leaders underlying successful leadership and the types of creative leadership applied. They suggest that women leaders' creativity manifests in facilitating creativity in higher education institutions by fostering the creativity of others rather than directing their own creative vision through or integrating it in the work of employees.

Keywords: 21st century workplace, creative strategies, creativity, diversity, higher education, mental health, women leaders.

Introduction

What makes a leader successful? This question has been asked and responded to repeatedly over time (Hoever, Knippenberg, Ginkel, & Barkema, 2012; Sternberg & Kaufman, 2018). According to Robert Sternberg (2003a, 2005b), a successful leader must demonstrate the

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three extraordinary qualities of wisdom, intelligences and creativity. Of these three qualities, creativity has drawn increasing research attention since the 1950s (Guilford, 1950), being described as a process of coming up with novel ideas to accomplish a defined task or goal (Miggiani, 2015). Creative individuals have the ability to manage complex problems and situations (Rojanapanich & Pimpa, 2011) by applying extraordinary mental processes (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014).

Women in leadership have been researched extensively within higher education institutions (HEIs), and has been explored as a positive or contingent experience (O'Connor, Carvalho, & White, 2014). In the South African (SA) context, studies of leadership in HEIs (Kinneer, 2014; Mayer & Barnard, 2015; Mayer, Surtee, & Barnard, 2015; Mostert, 2009) have highlighted gender inequalities (Ragadu, 2008; Surajlall, 2012). However, creativity as a quality of women leaders from diverse cultural backgrounds within SA HEIs has remained under-researched (Mayer, Tonelli, Oosthuizen, & Surtee, 2018).

Research indicates that in HEIs leaders are usually sourced from within the HE context, and have come up through the ranks (Moodly & Toni, 2017). A desktop overview of vice-chancellors (VCs) of the 26 universities in SA indicated that most rose through the academic ranks before taking up the position of VC. Of the 26 VCs, the desktop review revealed that 4 were women, representing 15.38%. This is a drop of 2% since the desktop review conducted in 2014 by Adele L. Moodly (2015).

Research by Moodly and Noluthando Toni (2015a) indicated a paucity of women as role models in HEIs. Moodly and Toni (2015b) identified structural and cultural factors within the institutional culture(s), policy-making, the micro-environment (work-family conflict), and the surrounding environment inhibiting the promotion of women to leadership positions within HE. These authors argued, moreover, that a lack of accountability on the part of HEIs in the implementation of national and international imperatives around women and leadership inhibited the advancement of women (Moodly & Toni, 2017). Generally, women in leadership in SA experience a lack of health and well-being in leadership and it has been pointed out before that women leaders are extremely challenged by discriminatory practices, male-dominated career paths, very limited female role models, a void in understanding women leadership in socio-cultural contexts (Mayer & Surtee, 2015).

Creativity is an extremely important quality in successful leaders, requiring the introduction of novel and compelling ideas (Baer & Kaufman, 2006; Mayer & Maree, 2018), and thinking from new perspectives and the ability to switch between them (Glăveanu, 2015; Runco, 2015). Thinking creatively from new perspectives further requires taking the socio-cultural context into account (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014) and integrating diversity (Cheung & Halpern, 2010). Creativity is vital to leadership and organisational success, since it supports the individual in interacting with the surrounding (socio-cultural) system by providing the individual with profound knowledge, original answers and effective behaviours and ideas in order to overcome work-related problems (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014).

The aim of this article is to explore concepts of creativity of women leaders in HEIs in the 21st century in SA. It is argued that they need creativity to tackle daily work-related challenges and to manage their way to the top in organisations (Henriksen, Mishra, & Fisser, 2016) and tackle numerous changes of technological innovation, workforce shaping and

competing forces (Morley, 2013; PwC, 2018). This situation calls for women leaders to take their opportunities and define new and clear meaningful purposes at work creatively (PwC, 2018). Creativity is a major force to integrate technology, leadership, purpose, workplace advancements and the ability to tackle social and workplace challenges (Henriksen et al., 2016; Morley, 2013).

1. Women leaders in higher education institutions in South Africa

The scarcity of women in power positions is a global phenomenon and not necessarily a problem limited to HEI in the SA context (Tessens, White, & Web, 2011). Among the many factors that contribute to fewer women in leadership positions in HEIs, Moody and Toni (2015a) mention attitudinal and organisational biases against women. Universities continue to be perceived as gendered institutions (Acker, 2010). Andrea Gallant (2014) attributes these organisational biases to “similarity attraction”, whereby institutions attract and employ people similar to their predecessors. This practice perpetuates the status quo of gendered organisational cultures that focus on male values and networks. Tessens et al. (2011) realise how male-dominated universities continue to be for women to advance into senior positions.

The recurrent gender biases against women equate to gate keeping (Rey, 1999), which Tessens et al. (2011) describe as “being part of or having connections with the dominant group”. Regardless of the prevailing masculinist culture, the skills needed for effective leadership in HE are not necessarily gendered and include strategic vision, strong research reputation, resilience and collaboration as being among the skills required to be an effective university manager (White, Riordan, Özkanli, & Neale, 2010; Moody & Toni, 2017). Creativity in women leaders from diverse cultural backgrounds within SA HEIs is a further skill required for effective leadership.

2. Creativity in Robert Sternberg’s WICS model

Sternberg and Todd I. Lubart (1995) define creativity as the ability to formulate and solve problems so as to produce solutions that are relatively novel and of good quality, including creative thoughts, extraordinary ideas and solutions, while tolerating ambiguity and task-focused motivation. Creative leaders need to be able to analyse problems and find solutions which use multiple perspectives and are able to work with ambivalence (Sternberg, 2005a). In order to be successful, leaders require wisdom, intelligence, and creativity (Sternberg, 2003b, 2005a; Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2004). These abilities are modifiable, rather than fixed (Sternberg, 2003a; Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2007; Sternberg, Rhee Bonney, Gabora, & Merrifield, 2012).

Sternberg (2003a) emphasises that leadership is viewed predominantly as how a leader formulates, makes and acts upon decisions. Creativity is a leadership skill needed to generate ideas and products which are a) relatively novel, b) high in quality, and c) appropriate to the task at hand. These ideas will usually find currency among followers. Sternberg divides creativity into two parts, namely processes of creativity and applications of creativity.

Sternberg (2000) considers nine creative skills and attitudes underlying successful leadership: (1) *Problem solving* – Creative leaders do have new approaches to problem solves which differentiates them from other leaders. They trust their own judgement and decide on the exact nature of the problem; (2) *Problem analysis* – Creative leaders are analyse and evaluate if their approach and/or solution is the best possible; (3) *Selling solutions* – Creative leaders are aware that they have to decide consciously to “sell” their creative ideas and put in an effort to do so. They realise that knowledge can both hinder as well as facilitate creative thinking; (4) *Willingness to take sensible risks* – Creative leaders are conscious to take sensible risks which can contribute to both, success and failure; (5) *Willingness to surmount obstacles* – Creative leaders are willing to surmount the obstacles that confront anyone who opts to defy the crowd. Obstacles might arise when people experience confrontations about paradigms; (6) *Self-efficacy* – The creative leader believes that he or she is able to do the job at hand; (7) *Willingness to tolerate ambiguity* – The creative leader knows about the possibility to experience long periods of uncertainty which leave them doubting about the certainty about being the right or the wrong thing; (8) *Willingness to find extrinsic rewards* – Creative leaders enjoy intrinsic motivation and find environments in which they get extrinsic rewards for doing an intrinsically motivated job; and (9) *Continuing to grow intellectually* – Creative leaders develop themselves, grow, find development opportunities and break through their common patterns of leadership which evolves as they accumulate experience and expertise (Sternberg, 2005a).

3. Types of creative leadership

Sternberg, Kaufman, and Pretz (2003) differentiate different types of creative leadership:

(1) *Replication* – This type of leadership is an attempt to show that a field or organisation is in the right place at the right time. The leader believes that the organisation is in the space where it needs to be;

(2) *Redefinition* – Leadership is an attempt to show that an organisation is in the right place, but not for the reason(s) that others, including previous leaders, think it is. The status of the organisation is seen from a different viewpoint;

(3) *Forward incrementation* – The focus in this type of leadership is the attempt to lead the organisation forward into the direction in which it is already going. Often this type of leadership is the most valued as being highly creative and recognised and appreciated as this;

(4) *Advance forward incrementation* – This type of leadership is an attempt to move an organisation forward. It moves the direction forward into the direction in which it is already going, but by moving beyond the point where others are ready for it to go. The leader moves forward rapidly beyond the expected rate of forward progression;

(5) *Redirection* – With this type of leadership the organisation can be redirected into different pathways and lines of direction. Re-directive leadership can only work when environmental circumstances are taken into account in order to succeed;

(6) *Reconstruction* – This type of leadership is an attempt to lead an organisation back to where it once was – so that it can restart from the start point, but this time into a different direction;

(7) *Re-initiation* – This type of leadership is an attempt to lead an organisation to a different, as yet unreached and new starting point. The leader moves forward from that point; and

(8) *Synthesis* – The creator integrates two ideas that were previously seen as unrelated or even opposed in his/her leadership (Sternberg, 2005a).

Sternberg (2007) notes that leadership success relates strongly to creative skills and attitudes, while others (Vessey, Barrett, Mumford, Johnson, & Litwiller, 2014) have expressed the converse idea that leadership influences the creativity of individuals in organisations.

4. Creative leadership as demonstrated by women

Mainemelis, Kark, and Epitropaki (2015) suggest that creative leadership as demonstrated by women generally entails leading others toward the attainment of a creative outcome, being achieved by three different means:

The three means presented in the following have implications for the salience of creativity as a leadership trait in both, the directing and integrating contexts, where the woman leader has a strong creator identity and makes visible creative contributions, and where creativity and innovation are key strategic objectives. *Facilitating*, is viewed as the creative woman leader focuses on fostering the creativity of employees; *directing*, highlighted as the creative woman leader focuses on realising her creative vision through the work of employees, and *integrating*, is defined as the creative woman leader focuses on synthesising her creative work with the heterogeneous creative work of other organisational members. However, little convergence is expected between creativity and leadership in facilitating contexts, where there is limited need for creative contributions by the woman leader (Epitropaki, Mueller, & Lord, 2019).

Mainemelis et al. (2015) further observe that research into leadership by women undertaken in traditional work settings often fails to capture the unique aspects of leadership by women in the more fluid creative industries. Creativity is often examined as one of many possible employee outcomes (such as job performance and work attitudes) of various forms of leadership behaviour demonstrated by women (for example transformational leadership and authentic leadership), and that the intricacies of creative leadership demonstrated by women are not further examined. Creative leadership by women may differ substantially from traditional forms of leadership, and as a result, it requires fresh theoretical and empirical approaches (Epitropaki et al., 2019).

Socio-cognitive approaches offer the opportunity to examine the foundational perceptual blocks of creative leadership by women and to take a look inside the “black box” of automatic processes that guide the perceptions held of women leaders and their creativity. For a unified construct of creative leadership by women to emerge, the prototype of leadership by women and creativity must also change to reflect that convergence. Such change can take place via two routes: via intrapersonal prototype change and via contextual changes that make the links between leadership by women and creativity more salient. On the intrapersonal level, two interventions could potentially change leadership by women and creativity schemas: conditioning and selective prototype activation (Dasgupta & Asgari, 2004; Epitropaki, Sy, Martin, Tram-Quon, & Topakas, 2013).

Prior studies have used *conditioning* (pairing a concept with a new association, e.g. women leader and creator) to reduce implicit gender stereotyping (Blair, Ma, & Lenton, 2001) as well as race bias (Dasgupta & Greenwald, 2001). *Selective prototype activation* assumes that women leaders hold multiple (positive, negative and neutral) implicit theories (Lord & Shondrick, 2011). A selective prototype activation intervention would involve repeated cueing of positive prototypes involving leadership by women and creativity such that these become permanently accessible, acknowledging creativity as a key organisational value allowing free expression of ideas, encourage risk-taking, having organisational structures and systems supportive of creativity (Epitropaki et al., 2019).

5. Study methodology

5.1. Participants and procedure

The research approach and strategy were anchored in a qualitative research design, based on Dilthey's (2002, pp. 101–212) hermeneutical research paradigm of modern hermeneutics of *Verstehen* (understanding). Matthew Miggiani (2015) has argued that qualitative research in creativity studies is necessary in order to explore the phenomenon of creativity in more depth and to improve understanding of it. According to Laura L. Ellingson (2013), research is understood here as being subjective, socially and culturally constructed, and as carrying contextual meaning.

The qualitative study explored the creativity manifested by women leaders in HEI. The core of the study circles around the fundamental meaning of the phenomenon of creativity. It explored how 23 women leaders from eight universities within SA and diverse cultural background experience creativity on personal, inter-personal, social and organisational levels, and what it means to them. The sample was drawn from the Higher Education Research Services South Africa (HERS SA), a non-profit organisation that promotes and advances the leadership development and representation of women in HEIs in SA. All participants were holding leadership positions within the universities at the time of the interview and all were SA citizens. The sample comprised women leaders from four race groups as defined in the Employment Equity Act No. 55 of 1998 (Department of Labour, Republic of South Africa, 1998), namely African (A; three interviewees), Coloured (C; five interviewees), Indian (I; four interviewees) and White (W; eleven interviewees, altogether 23 interviewees).¹

5.2. Measures

The researchers used semi-structured interviews to collect data. One of the researchers conducted participant observation in one of the HEIs over a long-term period of time. During the observation phase, the researcher took field notes which were later on used to interpret the data and findings of the study. The interviews included altogether 20 questions. Example questions of the interview guideline including open-ended questions are: "How you experi-

¹ African, Coloured and Indian are collectively classified as Black in the SA context and with regard to the interviews.

ence your work situation?”, “How do you manage the challenges at work?”, and “What are your views on creativity in the workplace?”. Data was recorded and transcribed verbatim for the conduct of a detailed analysis.

Data was analysed by means of content analysis. The content analysis was based on the process described by Martin Terre Blanche, Kevin Durrheim, and Kevin Kelly (2006, pp. 322–326):

1. familiarisation and immersion (researchers read through the interview data several times);
2. inducing themes (possible themes in data were defined and discussed through inter-subjective validation (Yin, 2009) of the researchers);
3. coding (the researchers coded the data);
4. elaboration (data was elaborated and discussed); and
5. interpretation and checking (data was interpreted by the researchers, discussed and finally discussed with regard to previous literature published).

Ethical considerations were discussed and applied by the researchers. Ethical approval was given by the Department of Management, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, SA. Further, each individual participant gave consent to participate in the study voluntarily. Participants gave individual informed consent with regard to their participation. The researchers adhered to qualitative research criteria, such as: credibility, transferability and dependability to ensure the qualitative research methodology standards of the research study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

5.3. Findings

The findings indicate the subjective experience and meaning of creativity in women leadership. All 23 women interviewed see creativity as an important leadership aspect and refer during their interviews to the theoretical approaches of Steinberg (2005a).

Table 1 shows that women leaders particularly referred to categories of skills and attitudes underlying successful leadership. Most of the women leaders referred to creative attitudes and skills in terms of the belief in one’s ability to accomplish the task at hand (23 statements). This category is followed in terms of frequency of mention by continuing to grow intellectually rather than stagnating (22 statements). Of the participants, 18 referred to the ability and willingness to surmount obstacles, 9 identified willingness to tolerate ambiguity as important, and 7 regarded problem redefinition and problem analysis as being important categories of creativity in their leadership. Only 3 of the participants identified willingness to take sensible risks and willingness to find extrinsic rewards for the things one is intrinsically motivated to do as important. Finally, only one participant classified selling solutions as important in her creative leadership.

In the next section, a selection of statements by participants is presented to offer insight into the voices and perceptions of these women leaders regarding creativity and leadership.

Table 1. Creative skills and attitudes underlying successful leadership (Sternberg 2005a) (source: created by authors)

Category	Definition	Women leaders	Total
Belief in one's ability to accomplish the task at hand	Self-efficacy – leader believes he/she can do the job.	W3, W5, W6, W7, W10, W11, W15, W16, W25, W27 I9, I2, I17, I18, I22 C8, C13, C19, C23, C28 A12, A21, A29	23
Continuing to grow intellectually rather than stagnating	Effective leaders do not get stuck in their patterns of leadership. Leadership is based on experience and expertise which self-actualises.	W3, W5, W7, W6, W10, W11, W14, W15, W16, W25, W27 I9, I2, I17, I22 C8, C13, C19, C23 C28 A21, A29	22
Willingness to surmount obstacles	Willingness to tackle obstacles arising from confrontations between those who accept paradigms and those who do not.	W3, W5, W10, W11, W15, W16, W25, W27 I2, I17, I18 A12, A21, A29 C13, C19, C23, C28	18
Willingness to tolerate ambiguity	Realise that there might be long periods of uncertainty, not knowing whether their actions are right or wrong and what the result will be.	W7, W11 I9, I17, I18 C8, C19 A12, A21	9
Problem redefinition	Creative leaders define the problem in new ways, using the exact nature of the problem and their own judgement.	W7, W10, W11, I2, C8, C13, C28	7
Problem analysis	Willingness to analyse whether their solution is the best one.	I2, I17 W11, W15 C13, C28 A29	7
Willingness to take sensible risks	Willingness to take risks which might lead to either success or failure.	W5, W11 A12	3
Willingness to find extrinsic rewards for the things one is intrinsically motivated to do	Creative leaders are intrinsically motivated and are able to find environments in which they receive extrinsic rewards for the things they like to do anyway.	W3, W7 I2	3
Selling solutions	They realise that they have to sell their creative ideas and make the effort to do so. Realise that knowledge can both hinder and facilitate creative thinking.	W5	1

6. Creativity and leadership

In the following, the findings address the interlinkages of creativity and leadership in the women leaders' mindsets.

6.1. Belief in one's ability to accomplish the task at hand

23 women emphasised that creative skills and attitudes are connected to the belief in one's ability to accomplish the task at hand. For example, I9 explained:

“When I start something, I will actually complete it and make a success out of it. And it's also a testament to the fact that women can also do the job and do it meritoriously. I don't allow anyone to distract me. If I need to get something done, I'll do it despite all the rattles and challenges and tactics”.

In terms of creativity, being pro-active is highly important for women leaders, with a will to make things work and manage the tasks at hand without procrastination across different cultural groups. They have a “can-do” attitude which is always “positive” (W6). Being driven in a positive way leads into developing a positive personality which is based on: “You've got to go out there and believe you can do it” (W6).

6.2. Continuing to grow intellectually rather than stagnating

22 participants identified their personal growth as an indication of creative attitude and skill. Personal intellectual growth was extremely important for the participants, seeing themselves as having a defined path, as growing as persons, as individuals, as intellectuals, and holistically. C19, a Coloured woman leader, stated:

“I would say openness and accessibility and also the willingness to learn from others and not only have your own opinion, but still have the willingness to learn from others in leadership [...] I think it's a case of I prefer growth in terms of who I am and what I do. I think, part of my discomfort is that I'm easily bored. When things are running smoothly all the time, you know it's going the way that I expected to plan, I mean I'm happy with that, but I think – I don't look for conflict, but I look for situations where I can grow”.

For women leaders change and growth are highly connected and important. Growth was not limited to intellectual growth, but referred to intellectual and spiritual growth, and also to changes of identity and feelings. They also want to be challenged to grow. Participants described their journey of growth, their changes and learnings. Their main approach to learning is tackling challenges and they emphasised the connection between growth and the ability and willingness to tackle obstacles and challenges. W14, a White woman leader in HEI, said:

“Yes, I've a challenge with leadership. I'm an A type personality, I do know that. I'm an extrovert, I'm a very strong personality. I think those are qualities that lend people – it does draw people. Strength draws people, strong personalities draw people. I take my journey as a leader – I'm a far more empathetic leader now than I used to be. I'm humbler than I used to be. I really have moved on. Because it's a journey. I think the nature of servant leadership, for me is something very close to my heart”.

6.3. Willingness to surmount obstacles

Of the participants, 18 emphasised a link between creativity and the willingness to surmount obstacles. I9 explained:

“We’ve established a research culture which didn’t exist. It brought in experts from all over the world to speak on pertinent issues, establish different partnerships like the Royal Bank and the European Union and it goes on and on. The pass rate has increased phenomenally”.

Several of the participants provided examples of the obstacles and difficulties they had overcome. They spoke about the challenges of changing the research culture, the organisational cultures, managing hierarchical relationships, building partnerships, and their dedication to increasing the student pass rate. They acknowledged that becoming a woman leader within a male dominated leadership culture is perceived as a challenge and a career obstacle, but they were willing to face it and grow as women leaders. W16 also offered this insight:

“And I mean institutions are very hierarchical and so one has to be careful. It’s a bit of game playing and one can’t entirely be yourself. It will never work. You can’t say what’s in your head. You must be quite careful. That’s it. I can’t quite think of anything else right now”.

The categories of problem redefinition and problem analysis were highlighted by 7 women leaders only. Interestingly, only a few of the participants referred to problem redefinition and problem analysis as creative skills and actions put into practice by women leaders. In their view, problem redefinition is closely related to the perception, the values and the point of view a person argues from.

6.4. Problem redefinition

W3 expressed the following opinion:

“In the workplace. I think defining problems and tackling them – it’s got to do with your own moral standing, being responsible for your work, and whatever your spiritual orientation is. Your values. How you see the world defines how you define a problem and how you deal with it as a leader”.

In terms of problem analysis, only seven of the participants viewed problem analysis as an important creative leadership skill. C8, for example, emphasised her ability to change her perspective, and in that way to analyse the problem from a number of perspectives. This Coloured woman leader considered it important to recognise and analyse at least two perspectives and come up with at least two alternatives.

6.5. Problem analysis

A12, an African woman leader, mentioned the analysis of problems. She listens to the various stories in the workplace, assesses and analyses them, reflects on them, educates herself about the topic and analyses the story within its context. Problem analysis is a critical creative skill:

“I suppose not unusual when you listen to different parcels of stories, I assess it but you also look at context and you look at who the people are and where they’re coming from. You take all that into account and you think about it, maybe read further about it, talk to people about it and then you apply your mind” (A12).

For C28, a Coloured woman leader, self-reflection for problem analysis is a creative act that lays the foundation for assessing and analysing problems in leadership:

“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 how we understand and manage situations”.

W11 paid particular attention to problem analysis and how it helps her in her leadership position:

“When I analyse the problems, I find that I’m quite resourceful and I tend to just go that extra mile and make sure that I’ve found everything out before I go back with an answer or a query to colleagues in leadership, so I think in my case, being resourceful has helped me a lot”.

Furthermore, three women leaders referred to willingness to take sensible risks and willingness to find extrinsic rewards for the things one is intrinsically motivated to do.

6.6. Willing to take sensible risks

W15, a white woman leader, explained how important it is in leadership to know how to play the institutional political game and to take only small risks in order to make it up the career ladder:

“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, and only take small risks and out-perform them”.

6.7. Willingness to find extrinsic rewards for intrinsically things to do

The point has been made that a creative leader should find extrinsic rewards for the things he or she is intrinsically motivated to do. W7 explains: “I think I could never have worked in a job where I didn’t think that whatever I was doing was meaningful. Here, I do it and I am paid for it”.

Intrinsic motivation was found by the participants to be extremely important in terms of their values and their meaningfulness at work. They felt intrinsically motivated when the work appeared to match well with their personal values, their interests and their view on meaningfulness in life. Only one of the participants identified selling solutions as important for creativity in leadership.

6.8. Selling solutions

W5 occupied a leadership position very close to the VC, and was required to provide the VC with her opinion on a variety of subjects:

“If I’m asked to do something I think is going to impact negatively on the VC, I’ll write to him and say, ok, this has come through, this is my view. Then he chooses the verbal course of action, but after all these years I know exactly what’s going to have a negative impact and what is not – then I just have to sell my opinion to him to make it work and to convince him of my opinion”.

She explained that, in her position, it was very important that she sell her opinion to the VC so that he could act accordingly. None of the other 22 women leaders referred to selling solutions as a creative act in their leadership position. Following the comments on creativity as these related to skill and attitude, the types of creativity according to Sternberg (2005b) were also analysed.

7. Types of creative leadership

As indicated in Table 2, a significant number of the participants (8) mentioned *redirection*, as a leadership type, being of the view that attempting to redirect the organisation in a new direction to match the environmental circumstances was particularly suitable for HEIs in terms of creative leadership. W7 expressed herself as follows:

“I know it sounds crazy to say that, but still: if you could come in and change the environment, where people are all unhappy, if this would be possible to change and give a new direction. And where you come in and change and all begin to feel a bit better. It’s a hard thing to do and I’m not saying I would do it, but it would be fantastic if you could”.

W7 explained that she would be happy to give the organisation a new direction, but that this, in her view, was not possible. Instead, it was something of a thought experiment in which she wished that she could change the organisation for the better. She therefore had creative ideas and thoughts, but had not yet put her leadership ideas into practice, although this was her preferred leadership style.

This category was followed by the category of *forward incrementation*, leading an organisation forward in the direction it is already going. This tends to be the category that is most easily recognised and valued, since it extends existing notions and does not appear to be too revolutionary (6 participants). For I9 it was very important that she should lead the organisation forward in the direction it was already going, in that way reinforcing the chosen direction of her organisation:

“When I need to make a decision, and this is for anything in my life or at work, I first explore where I, where the organisation stands. All of my decisions I try as far as possible to base on Biblical principle, so to my mind the two are inseparable – leadership and belief. And I listen to people, see where the organisation is leading towards and take it from there”.

This woman leader viewed herself and her leadership, which was based on her belief system, as an explorer of the contemporary situation. She analysed the situation and the standpoint of the organisation and from there led the organisation forward in the direction it was already travelling.

The category of *re-initiation*, which refers to efforts to redirect the organisation to a different, as yet unreached starting point and then to move from there, was selected by four participants. Through re-initiation, leaders usually attempt to redirect the organisation to a different, as yet unreached starting point, and then to move from that point. I9, an Indian woman leader, provided the following account of how she strove for re-initiation through her leadership:

“Initially there was a lot of resistance to my appointment as Head of Department because the position was groomed for a white male who was trained and only active for about two months or so. It was the first time in history that a woman and a woman of colour was appointed so obviously there was tremendous resistance and management in the department was predominantly male and white”.

Through her gender and racial origin, this woman leader used re-initiation as a form of leadership. By taking on the leadership position, she took the organisation forward from a new starting point. In her interview she described how difficult it was for her and her staff members to start at this new point and to re-initiate creative leadership.

Finally, *synthesis* as a type of creative leadership was important for one participant. This category of creative leader integrates two ideas previously seen as unrelated or even opposed to each other. A Coloured woman leader (C8) explained that her leadership style was based on synthesis:

“So one must be directional. I think it’s also helpful if one can listen to people creatively, so take what people say, discern what they are saying and then actively synthesize what they say so that you can direct the way forward. I think one must have compassion and I think one must have integrity and bring the thoughts of the employees and yourself together”.

The synthesis of different perspectives and viewpoints was the most important type of creative leadership. Her aim was to bring views together, synthesise them and be integrative, for example, by bringing the views of the employees and the leaders together (Table 2).

Table 2. Types of creative leadership (source: created by authors)

Leadership category	Definition	TOTAL	Women leaders
Redirection	Attempt to redirect the organisation in a new direction which needs to match the environmental circumstances.	8	W5, W7, W25, W27 C19, C23 A21, A29
Forward incrementation	Lead an organisation forward in the direction it is already going. Often most easily recognised and valued, since it extends existing notions.	6	W10, W15, W16 A12 I17 C28

End of Table 2

Leadership category	Definition	TOTAL	Women leaders
Re-initiation	Attempt to redirect the organisation to a different, as yet unreached starting point and then to move from that point.	4	I9, I18, I22 A12
Synthesis	The creative leader integrates two ideas which previously were seen as unrelated or even opposed. Integration becomes a process that merges existing paradigms.	1	C8
Replication	The organisation is in the right place at the right time. The leader prefers to keep the organisation where it is rather than moving it. The leader's role is to keep it there.	0	
Redefinition	The organisation is in the right place at the right time, but for reasons that are different from what others think. They implement the ideas of others and receive credit for implementing these ideas for the right reasons.	0	
Advance forward incrementation	Lead an organisation forward in the direction it is already going, but by moving it beyond where others are ready for it to go. This often creates resistance in the organisation.	0	
Reconstruction/redirection	Attempt to redirect the organisation back to where it once was (reconstructing the past), but from that point of reconstruction it moves forward in a different direction.	0	

Discussion

All of the women leaders interviewed were of the opinion that creativity involves accomplishing a defined task or goals (cf. Miggiani, 2015) by applying their own, original and even new ideas. They considered themselves able to accomplish their tasks and were willing to manage complex challenges and obstacles in their careers (cf. Rojanpanich & Pimpa, 2011). As described by Csikszentmihalyi (2014), they believed themselves being able to use their mental processes to manage the tasks and overcome complex challenges as described in previous studies (e.g. Moodly & Toni, 2015a, 2015b, 2017), including the limitations on women pursuing a career in HEI, the strong networks of exclusion and the prejudices regarding women in leadership. It is assumed here that women leaders need to be creative to be promoted and make a career in the male-dominated top levels of HEIs and to respond to work-related challenges.

Women leaders believe in their abilities to manage the tasks at hand and to meet complex challenges. They are willing to overcome the organisational biases against women (cf. Acker, 2010). They are committed to learning and growing intellectually, and do not want to stagnate in their positions. Faced with gendered and racialised networks (Gallant, 2014), a clear majority of women leaders are willing to surmount the organisational, gendered and racialised obstacles. They are willing not only to tolerate ambiguity, but also to leave the terrain of certainty and explore new pathways. Since they are not part of the male-dominated leadership (Tessens et al., 2011), they have to be prepared to occupy a position of uncertainty and to be without support for long periods of time, as one of the Indian woman leaders describes. As emphasised by White, Riordan, Özkanli, and Neale (2010), women leaders do have a vision for themselves, yet they need to be creative manage their positions. They need a great deal of resilience in the HEI context, apply creative skills such as problem redefinition and problem analysis with regard to new and complex challenges and restructuring processes. They need to tolerate ambiguity, since creativity and patience are needed (as described in PwC, 2018) in order to work with both expected and unexpected outcomes.

Only a small number of the participants stated a willingness to take sensible risks, to find extrinsic rewards for the things one is intrinsically motivated to do, and to sell their solutions. However, these creative skills are unquestionably needed in the HEIs, characterised by novel ideas, as stated in John Baer and Kaufman (2006). Since women leaders prioritise the leadership category of redirection, they are prepared to take the environmental (socio-cultural and historical) circumstances into account in their leadership and lead the organisation from a contextualised point of view. This goes together with Csikszentmihalyi's (2014) notion of considering creativity within its context, and applying it accordingly.

Others favoured leading the organisation forward to extending existing notions. Both of these leadership categories (mentioned by 10 of the 23 participants) take the circumstances into account and connect to the present situation. Only four leaders stated that they would aim at starting the organisation from a new and yet unreached starting point, while one leader was committed to trying to synthesise and integrate previously unmatching ideas. This shows that women leaders are aware of connecting to the organisation's and employee's standpoint without changing the focus too radically, indicating an empathetic and system-oriented leadership which aims at not overloading the surrounding system with novelty and change. As described before (Sternberg, 2003a, 2005a; Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2004), creativity is expressed in (a) generating new and exciting ideas, (b) creating analytical intelligence to evaluate whether one's own (and others') ideas are good ideas; and (c) practical intelligence to execute one's own ideas and to persuade others of their value. Women leaders generate new and exciting ideas and create analytical and practical intelligence to evaluate and execute them. However, persuading others of their ideas does not seem to be their main aim or skill. Rather, they hold onto their wisdom, (d) in order to ensure that their abilities are being used for some kind of common good that balances their own interests with those of other people and the institution over the short and long term. It seems that in their leadership view, women leaders see the importance of their ability to take the socio-cultural circumstances into account and drive the organisation forward in an adjusted and smooth way. Women leaders do not see their HEI environment as supportive in terms of stimulating creative ideas. However, according to Sternberg (2005a, b), this could encourage women leaders to be even more creative.

Conclusions

The aim of the study was to explore subjective concepts of creativity of women leaders from diverse cultural backgrounds within SA HEIs. The findings highlight the creative skills and attitudes of women leaders underlying successful leadership and the types of creative leadership used. Women leaders' creativity manifests particularly in facilitating creativity in HEIs through fostering the creativity of others rather than directing or integrating their own creative vision through the work of employees. Only a minority of women leaders focused on directing their own ideas and starting at a new starting point or integrating and thereby synthesising their ideas. In this, women leaders seem to differ from their male counterparts in that their emphasis is primarily on being socio-culturally adaptable. This should be recognised as creative leadership and be supported by the HEIs; however, this seems not yet to be the case.

The creativity of women leaders entails intellectual and practical creativity, being able to overcome obstacles, accomplish a task, and to manage ambiguity. However, their creativity seems to relate less to problem redefinition, analysis, risk taking, managing to find extrinsic rewards, and selling themselves. Their creativity is therefore more closely connected to individual intra-psychological tasks and abilities than to selling this creativity to the outside world.

Women leaders prefer creative forms of leadership which redirect and use forward incrementation. This indicates that women leaders think and act context-specifically, and that they lead based on the connection to their environment (redirection). Women leaders lead the organisation by taking where the organisation is going as a starting point, and extend existing notions based on where the organisation and its people stand. The majority of women leaders prefer not to start somewhere new, but rather adapt their leadership creativity in terms of where the organisation is. Thus, the creativity of women leaders is profoundly influenced by socio-cultural and environmental factors, and relates mainly to the context rather than being ego-driven and self-relational.

Recommendations for applied women leadership

Organisations should support women leaders in practice in expressing and implementing their creative ideas. On a practical level, it is recommended that women leaders should expand their creativity in terms of selling their solutions, applying their intrinsic motivations, being rewarded extrinsically and by being prepared to take more sensible risks. Organisations should learn from women leaders to approach challenges and changes by taking the socio-cultural and contextual aspects into account, using a system-oriented approach. This signifies on a practical level that women leaders:

- could use their creativity to sell their ideas and to be rewarded extrinsically;
- could focus on redefining problems or problem analysis, while at the same time acknowledging that this is usually not their preference in terms of creative behaviour;
- need to realise that their preference for connecting to the environment holds the inherent danger of their forgetting their own way, and relating mainly to the context rather than to their own, personal preferences; and
- use their strong social skills to lead creatively.

Organisations should be aware of the preferences of women leaders as these relate to creativity and support the professional development and creativity within workplaces.

Recommendations for future research

Future research with larger populations of women leaders is recommended in order to generalise the findings of this study and to create balance in creative leadership in terms of redirection, forward incrementation and other, bolder ways to lead organisations forward.

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XXI AMŽIAUS KŪRYBINĖS MOTERŲ LYDERYSTĖS KONCEPCIJOS

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Santrauka

Šiame straipsnyje pristatomos subjektyvios moterų lyderių, XXI a. dirbančių aukštojo mokslo institucijose, perspektyvos Pietų Afrikoje. Čia ypač daug dėmesio skiriama kūrybiškumui, kurį rodo moterys lyderės, dirbančios kultūros ir lyties požiūriu įvairioje postapartheido aplinkoje. Tikslas – prisidėti prie skirtingos kultūrinės kilmės moterų lyderių, dirbančių Pietų Afrikos aukštojo mokslo institucijose, kūrybiškumo diskurso, tiriant, kokia yra moterų lyderių kūrybiškumo patirtis ir tai, ką joms reiškia kūrybiškumas kokybiniu požiūriu. Tyrime pateiktas 23 moterų lyderių kūrybiškumo patirčių bei jų požiūrių į kūrybiškumą ir kūrybinę lyderystę įvertinimas, parengtas pasitelkiant tyrimų paradigmą, kurios pagrindą sudaro Wilhelmo Dilthey'aus modernioji hermeneutika. Buvo taikyti kokybiniai tyrimų metodai, tokie kaip pusiau struktūruotais interviu, taip pat stebėjimais vienoje pasirinktoje aukštojo mokslo institucijoje. Duomenys buvo nagrinėjami turinio analizės metodu. Buvo vadovaujama kokybinių tyrimų kriterijais ir laikomasi etinių nusistatymų. Rezultatai atskleidžia moterų lyderių kūrybinius gebėjimus ir nuostatas, pagrindžiančias sėkmingą lyderystę ir vyraujančius kūrybinės lyderystės tipus. Jie parodo, kad moterų lyderių kūrybiškumas atsiskleidžia palankiomis kūrybiškumui sąlygomis aukštojo mokslo institucijose, puoselėjant kitų kūrybiškumą ar integruojant jį į darbuotojų atliekamą darbą, o ne kreipiant jų pačių kūrybinę viziją.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: darbo vieta XXI a., kūrybinės strategijos, kūrybiškumas, įvairovė, aukštasis mokslas, psichinė sveikata, moterys lyderės.