

Anna Liisa Westman. Ph.D. Thesis. "Under the Northern Lights. The Reflection of Gender on the Career of Women Managers in Finnish Municipalities"

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RESEARCH AIMS AND METHODS

The underlying research problem that Liisa Westman's thesis examines is why, 'in a society strongly committed to gender equality, only 6.6% (in 1996) of municipal managers are women. This problem provokes a series of subsidiary questions which the thesis seeks to answer about the careers and leadership styles of those managers who are women. These questions are organised around three themes:

- The career development of women managers and their views of their work
- Factors contributing to the support and success of women managers.
- The role for women managers in the future organisation of municipalities in Finland.

Following a detailed literature review of three areas of academic research (i) of management with reference to gender; (ii) theories of organisation with reference to municipalities; and (iii) feminist theory with reference to equality and difference - the candidate develops an ideal typology of three styles of leadership - masculine, feminine and androgynous. Using this, she proposes that the requirements of new public management in Finland demand characteristics and styles of working which are nearer to a "feminine" than to a "masculine" style, for example, that it is more person-centred, less hierarchical, more dependent upon networking, able to deal with diversity, and so on. She then seeks to investigate the various styles of leadership used by women municipal managers in Finland and the contextual factors which influence this, such as personal history, political values, political base.

Using primarily qualitative methodology, the candidate draws her empirical data from in-depth interviews with 26 women municipal managers

from all parts of Finland. In addition she examines documentary evidence on municipal equality policies. Her evidence leads her to conclude that a major shift is taking place in the municipalities from a bureaucratic regime to a democratic managerialist regime which is more responsive to the diverse needs of municipal citizens. Although there is no simple equation between women managers of feminine leadership styles, for this is dependent upon other factors, nevertheless, many of the women interviewed were developing new and more democratic styles of leadership, drawing both upon their experiences as women and on their perceptions of the most effective ways of developing municipal services that were directly responsive to citizens' needs. The extent to which this also involved the prioritisation of equality issues within both the organisation and the provision of services was often influenced by the significance that those women leaders attached to their own appointments as women. At the same time, many of the women operated within political systems which were not always supportive to them qua women. Their gender made their work more high profile, and there were instances where there was clearly greater pressure placed upon them by both the media and the councillors who appointed them to prove their abilities. Not surprisingly, perhaps, one of the conclusions is that one important factor contributing to effectiveness and success was a supportive and understanding partner / husband.

ASSESSMENT

The main strength of this thesis lies in its original contribution to the gendered practices of municipal organisation in Finland. Very little empirical work has been done in this area and

this study will provide an important basis for future work both by the candidate and hopefully by others. The original research question about the low proportion of women municipal managers in a society committed to gender equality is an important issue which is of interest in Finland and internationally.

In order to investigate this question, the candidate had to develop an interdisciplinary approach to her literature review and theoretical framework. This is undertaken comprehensively and effectively. In adopting a feminist approach to her conceptualisation and methodology, the thesis adopts a well-balanced understanding of the agency-structure relationship. A fully rounded picture develops on the one hand of the women themselves, their views, their backgrounds, their practices, and, on the other, of the constraining and enabling dimensions of their immediate work and family context. This is further placed within the changing political context of Finland and also developments within the European Union.

The study utilises a qualitative methodological approach in a field where little data exists drawn from people's - or women's - own narratives of their work experiences. Significant effort went into setting up and collecting of data from women from different municipalities in Finland. This is a not inconsiderable feat for a PhD student for she needed to establish legitimacy and rapport in order to be granted interviews and elicit information.

The study is not without flaws. There is, in the conceptual framework, a slippage between an understanding of *masculine, feminine and androgynous* as socially constructed properties belonging to an ideal-type, and as attributes which are seen to follow from, naturally and in an unexplained way, from women's (and, by implication, men's) personal experiences and practices within the family. There needs to be a clear exposition of the difference between "feminine" (socially constructed descriptions and practices) and feminine (descriptions of women's behaviour). Furthermore, the concept of *androgynous* as used in this study, is very much at odds with the ways it is used in contemporary feminist and queer theory. In this study, it is equated with "gender blind" practices, in most theory I am familiar with, it refers to practices which, whilst recognising the socially constructed dualism between masculinity and femininity, seek

to transcend this with behaviour and representation which can not be attributed to either masculinity or femininity. Although the candidate recognises the problem about creating a false binary between masculine and feminine behaviour, her notion of androgyny actually, paradoxically, serves in my view to reinforce the dualism, not to bridge it.

The literature review, comprehensive as it is, does not clarify the candidate's own intellectual and theoretical location. There is a tendency to draw on different intellectual sources whilst not acknowledging the contradictions and conflicts this course of action may pose.

In the area of methodology, the data the candidate develops from the interviews enables her to answer her three thematic questions (see earlier), but I am not convinced it enables her to explain the research puzzle upon which the thesis is built: the problem of the low proportion of female managers in a society committed to gender equality. Furthermore, this data focuses much more upon the *views-* of the women managers of effective leadership styles than it does upon their actual practices. Without a narrative of particular experiences and actions in given situations, rather than opinions and feelings, and without triangulation from other data sources, (for example. other employees, documentary evidence), there are certain limitations to the data. Such triangulation was probably beyond the resources and scope of a PhD student, nevertheless. a thesis should involve reflective consideration of the limitations of the data and methods.

One of the strengths of the researcher/ interviewee relationship in this study is the empathy, the student brought to bear upon her respondents as a former 'insider'. Her own experience and knowledge of municipal work, as well as similarities of age and gender, enabled her to strike up a rapport with her respondents. At the same time, however. this worked against the development of a critical distance to aspects of her data. It is, of course, important to respect interviewee's narratives and understand these as representations of 'truths' within a more questioning discussion.

At a more general level, I also felt the candidate tried too hard to fit her data into her conceptual framework, rather than let the data direct her analysis and theorising. However, this criticism.

along with some of the other criticisms made above, are skills learned over time and not always present in the first excursion into empirical research. Many of them are lessons for the future. I would also include in this. advice to be clearer and more *precise* in the conceptualisation, theorisation and analysis of research questions.

At the public defence, all these criticisms were raised and the candidate defended her work well and acknowledged criticisms with grace and understanding which, I think, bodes well for future work.

All in all, however. the thesis shows great dedication, commitment and promises exciting work for the future. My criticisms need to be balanced with the originality and potential influence of this and any future work. The work has great relevance for policy-making and it is to be hoped that the candidate will find the opportunity to develop these ideas further in both policy and research.

Fiona Williams
