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Surviving in a Man's World with a Sense of Humour: An Analysis of Women Leaders' Use of Humour at Work

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Abstract *Communication not only constitutes one of the crucial aspects of leadership performance, but leadership can productively be viewed as a communication process. Humour is one of the prime means which enables leaders to achieve their various transactional as well as relational objectives. This article aims at exploring some of the ways in which women leaders make use of this particularly versatile discursive strategy in order to enhance their leadership performance while also resolving the challenges of being the 'odd girls out' in a predominantly masculine work environment. Drawing on authentic discourse data collected in two New Zealand organizations, and pursuing a discourse-analytical approach, this article illustrates that women leaders skilfully employ humour to portray themselves as effective leaders while at the same time negotiating and performing their gender identities in a masculine domain. Findings also indicate the advantages of a discourse-analytical approach for an assessment of the complexities of the leadership process.*

Keywords *case study; communication; discourse-analytical approach; gender; humour; leadership*

Introduction¹

Although research in leadership has long recognized that language constitutes a crucial aspect of leadership performance (e.g. Conger, 1991; Gronn, 1983; Mintzberg, 1973; Thayer, 1988), there are only a few studies which look at the link between leadership and communication in a workplace setting (e.g. Berson & Avolio, 2004; Ford, 2006; Holmes, 2000). This shortcoming is particularly surprising since a number of researchers have suggested that communication is more than an ancillary aspect of leadership performance, but that the notion of leadership is 'fundamentally grounded and rooted in communication processes' (Bligh & Hess, 2007: 88; see also Dwyer, 1993; O'Connor, 1997). And while there are no precise estimates, scholars have suggested that leaders spend most of their time engaged in communication activities. Gardner et al. (1996: 153), for instance, note that leaders spend up

to two thirds of their time communicating with their colleagues and subordinates, and Case (1994: 145) argues that 'much managerial behavior occurs through linguistic activity'.

Indeed, it appears that communication affects leaders' effectiveness on various levels since many of the central leadership activities, such as creating and communicating a vision, encouraging, motivating and guiding subordinates, setting a goal and ensuring subordinates' compliance all involve communication skills (e.g. Bennis & Thomas, 2002; Dwyer, 1993; Gardner, 1990; Gardner et al., 1996; O'Connor, 1997; Parry, 1998). It is thus perhaps not surprising that it is even noted that '[i]magine leadership outside of language is all but impossible' (Lyons & O'Mealy, 1998: ix).

Taking into account this central role of communication, we have defined effective leadership elsewhere as discursive performance, which by influencing others advances the goals of the organization (transactional behaviour) while also maintaining harmony within the team (relational behaviour) (Holmes et al., 2003b; Schnurr, 2005). This relatively broad definition of leadership has proved useful for a discourse-analytical approach to different types of leadership in diverse contexts (e.g. Holmes, 2006b; Marra et al., 2006; Schnurr, in press; Schnurr & Chan, 2007).

However, in spite of the apparent significance of communication in this context, leadership research has only recently started to pursue more discourse-based approaches to leadership (e.g. Ford, 2006). And most of the studies that explore the role of communication for leadership processes, concentrate on charismatic and transformational leaders (e.g. Berson & Avolio, 2004; Fiol et al., 1999) but neglect other types of leaders. Another shortcoming of most research on leadership communication is the restricted methodology: the majority of these studies collected data in the form of interviews, survey questionnaires or (public) speeches (e.g. Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Berson & Avolio, 2004; Bligh et al., 2004; Decker & Rotondo, 2001; Fiol et al., 1999), and only relatively little attention has been paid to the ways in which leaders actually communicate with the people they work with on a day to day basis.

But since it has been noted that communication is one of the factors that distinguish between successful and unsuccessful leaders (Bass, 1990; O'Connor, 1997), it appears justified to assume that all types of effective leaders draw on a range of discursive strategies in order to achieve their various workplace objectives. And because communication lies at the heart of the leadership process, it appears crucial to look at how leaders actually communicate throughout their working day, rather than exclusively focusing on special occasions (such as public speeches) and relying on the leaders' self-assessment of their behaviour (as reflected in surveys and interviews).

This article aims at addressing these issues by exploring some of the discursive processes through which leadership is enacted. In particular, it analyses the ways in which workplace leaders communicate with their subordinates in their daily interactions, with a focus on the interplay between leadership and gender.

Leadership and gender

Leadership is not a neutral concept but is marked by gender-bias. Historically, most leaders have been men. Hence, leadership is often associated with masculinity (Hearn

& Parkin, 1988; Sinclair, 1998), and leadership discourses 'are understood to involve core elements of masculinity that reinforce male identities and thereby sustain asymmetrical gender relations' (Ford, 2005: 245). As a consequence, women in leadership positions often face particular challenges in their performance of leadership: since leadership is an inherently masculine concept (e.g. Duerst-Lahti & Kelly, 1995; Eagly & Carli, 2003; Martin Rojo & Gomez Esteban, 2003; Sinclair, 1998), female leaders are often perceived as deviant exceptions to the (male) norm (Trauth, 2002: 114; Ely, 1988; Geis et al., 1990; Heilman et al., 1989). This is even more true in predominantly masculine professions, such as Information Technology (henceforth IT) which is typically viewed as a domain of 'men's work' (Trauth, 2002: 101).

This gender imbalance is reflected, for instance, in the numbers of male and female employees in IT: in New Zealand in 2001 male IT workers in managerial positions outnumbered females by three to one (Information Technology Policing Group, 2003).² Due to their under-representation, women in IT professions are often viewed as the 'odd girls out' (Trauth, 2002: 114).

Numerous studies have found that female leaders are often judged as being less competent than male leaders (e.g. Ely, 1988; Geis et al., 1990). Even the so-called 'female advantage' (i.e. the observation that 'effective leadership is congruent with the ways in which women lead' [Eagly & Carli, 2003: 810]) has not advantaged women, in particular in male-dominated organizations (Fletcher, 2004: 654). Instead, women's performance of leadership is often viewed as something other than leadership (Rutherford, 2001; Sinclair, 1998). And when women leaders are displaying authoritative and more transactional leadership styles stereotypically associated with masculinity, they tend to be associated with negative attributes, such as 'bitter, quarrelsome, and selfish' (Heilman et al., 1989: 41).

As a consequence, women leaders often find themselves caught in a double bind facing the different demands of being professional (i.e. being authoritative) and being perceived as feminine (Alvesson & Billing, 1997; Case, 1994; Peck, 2000). In order to assert themselves in a predominately masculine environment and to escape this double bind, these leaders need to balance their professional and their gender identities carefully in their leadership performance. In attempts to reconcile these 'dualistic positions', they have developed a wide range of 'individual and collectivistic coping strategies' (Fournier & Kelmen, 2001: 267). Although much has been written about the various coping and resistance strategies of women in organizations (e.g. Gherardi, 1995; Marshall, 1995), relatively little attention has been paid to the role of communication in this context. But communication clearly constitutes a prominent channel through which women leaders attempt to balance their professional and their gender role (e.g. Holmes, 2000).

This article thus aims at exploring some of the ways in which women leaders in masculine workplaces deal with this double bind, and how their discursive behaviour assists them in combining these competing demands while at the same time enhancing their leadership performance.

Leaders draw on a wide range of discursive strategies in order to integrate the various aspects of leadership performance spanning transactional as well as relational behaviours. One of the particularly interesting and versatile discursive strategies on which they regularly draw in order to advance their various workplace objectives, while at the same time trying to survive in a man's world, is humour.

Leadership and humour

Numerous studies have emphasized the various valuable functions of humour for leadership performance (e.g. Barsoux, 1993; Clouse & Spurgeon, 1995; Duncan & Feisal, 1989). In particular, humour has the potential to assist leaders in achieving their various transactional as well as relational objectives, sometimes even simultaneously.

The performance of transactional leadership behaviours, for instance, may be facilitated by the leaders' use of humour, in particular with regard to problem solving, decision making, and mediating conflicts (Consalvo, 1989; Perret, 1989). A humorous remark may enable the articulation of opposing opinions and enhance 'bridging differences' between interlocutors (Coser, 1960: 83). Thereby, an open-minded climate is created in which everyone can contribute to the advancement of transactional goals (Barsoux, 1993: 112). But in addition to this empowering function, humour may also be used to bring people back into line and to help control subordinates' behaviour (Clouse & Spurgeon, 1995). It may be employed by superiors or more powerful interlocutors in order to reinforce existing power relations by controlling and channelling the addressee's discourse (Holmes, 1998; Pizzini, 1991).

In addition to facilitating the achievements of transactional leadership objectives, humour may also enhance the performance of relational behaviours. Many of these maintenance related aspects ultimately have positive effects on the advancement of transactional aims. Humour may, for instance, motivate and support subordinates and thus enhance their job satisfaction which may in turn improve their performance (Decker, 1987). It is often used to create team spirit, to emphasize a sense of belonging (Barsoux, 1993; Duncan & Feisal, 1989), and to minimize status differences between leaders and subordinates (Beck, 1999; Yukl, 1989). All these relational functions may have positive effects on the transactional aspects of leadership behaviour mentioned above. And due to its potential for performing these numerous interpersonal functions, humour may positively influence the overall work climate and affect colleagues' relationships.

However, although numerous researchers have discussed various benefits of humour for the performance of leadership, there is only a relatively small number of studies that have empirically investigated this topic.

Among the few studies that have conducted an empirical study on the relationship between leadership and humour is Avolio et al. (1999), who distributed survey questionnaires to 115 leaders and 322 subordinates in a large Canadian financial institution. The aim of their research was to compare the impact of humour on leadership performance in different leadership styles (including transformational, contingent reward, and laissez-faire leadership styles). They measured the frequency of the leaders' use of humour and correlated their findings with participants' effectiveness (based on the company's annual assessment of the leaders' performance). Results indicate differences in the relation of the various leadership styles to the leaders' use of humour and subordinates' effectiveness. A quantitative analysis of the results illustrates that transactional leadership is positively related to the use of humour and to subordinates' performance, while contingent reward leadership shows positive relations only to the use of humour but is negatively related to subordinates' performance. Laissez-faire leadership, on the other hand, is negatively related to both humour and subordinates' performance.

These findings are supported by Decker and Rotondo (2001) who analysed 359 questionnaires of alumni of a management school. Like Avolio et al., they also found that humour enhances leadership performance. In particular it led to increased perceptions of favourable task and relational behaviours, and was perceived as having a positive effect on the leaders' effectiveness.

Data

This article aims at illustrating the importance of communication for leadership performance by conducting an in-depth case study of the ways in which leaders communicate with their colleagues and subordinates on a day to day basis. In particular, using naturally occurring data and pursuing a discourse-analytical approach, the article demonstrates the various contributions such an approach may make to leadership research, and illustrates how a detailed analysis of the linguistic performance of leaders may offer valuable insights into how leadership is 'done' on a micro-level, i.e. in their daily encounters with subordinates.

The data was collected for the Wellington Language in the Workplace (LWP) Project located at Victoria University. Over the past decade, the LWP has been collecting and analysing authentic workplace interactions from a range of New Zealand workplaces. With a focus on effective communicators, the research team typically identifies suitable contributors and asks them to record a range of their everyday work interactions carrying a minidisk recorder and a small label microphone (usually attached to their collar). These one-to-one interactions are augmented by video recordings of larger meetings, which are recorded by two cameras that are placed in the corners of the room in order to capture all participants (see Holmes and Stubbe, 2003; Stubbe, 1998 for a fuller description of the data collection methodology and the corpus).³ Currently the LWP corpus comprises more than 1500 (mainly spoken) interactions from over 22 organizations.

The analysis is based on more than 14 hours of spoken interactions recorded in one-to-one conversations as well as larger more formal meetings involving a range of participants. This linguistic data is supplemented by interviews conducted with the leaders and the people they work with. Moreover, participant observation was done and organizational documents were consulted in order to gain a better understanding of the culture of the leaders' organizations. Employing such a multi-method approach involving diverse sources of data facilitates and supports the linguistic analysis of the leaders' discursive performance. It provides valuable background information and additional knowledge which substantially advances the interpretation of the linguistic data (for the various advantages of this methodological approach see e.g. Hurmerinta-Peltomaeki & Nummeia, 2006; Jick, 1979; Mingers, 2001).

The data that will be analysed in this article have been selected from two IT organizations, which have received the pseudonyms Sitcom and A&B Resolutionz. Case studies are conducted of two leaders, Jill and Tricia,⁴ who have been described as effective by their colleagues and subordinates. It was of great importance to leave the decision of which leaders were considered to be 'being effective' to organizational members as the criteria for assessing effective leadership may vary across

organizations. Jill is one of the founders and the Board Director of a small IT company, A&B Resolutionz, and Tricia is the Director of the IT department in a large New Zealand organization, Sitcom. At the time of the data collection Tricia supervised 10 managers and almost 90 staff members. When she joined Sitcom she initiated and successfully implemented a dramatic restructuring of the IT department which had substantial effects on the entire organization. Jill, on the other hand, has been with A&B Resolutionz since the beginning, and was nominated Chairperson only three years later. She now acts as the Chair of the Board of Directors and is primarily responsible for securing external funding.

The workforce in both organizations is predominantly male, and at A&B Resolutionz the gender divide is particularly apparent in the type of jobs men and women occupy: none of the female staff members are employed as a software engineer, which is a traditionally masculine position. At Sitcom, on the other hand, women are represented relatively equally among the different types of jobs. Case study research was chosen as the most adequate and suitable method for this research as it allows for an in-depth investigation of how individuals perform leadership in their particular workplace.

Analysis

The analysis of naturally occurring conversational data explores some of the distinctive discursive processes through which these two women leaders construct and enact leadership in their daily workplace performance. Five examples are chosen here to illustrate some of the ways in which Tricia and Jill employ humour to advance their various and complex leadership objectives by considering masculine stereotypes of leadership as well as acknowledging the masculine make-up of their workplaces, while simultaneously constructing and negotiating their gender identity. These women leaders not only exploit the various positive functions of humour with regards to the achievement of their leadership objectives but also employ this versatile discourse strategy as an alternative way of dealing with (and sometimes also challenging and contesting) the masculine expectations and norms they are confronted with on a daily basis. Both women use humour when displaying masculine and feminine behaviours, as well as to send up gender stereotypes.

Displaying masculine leadership behaviours

Gender stereotypes suggest that most transactional leadership behaviours, such as displaying authority and giving directives, are associated with masculinity (Case, 1988, 1994; Kathlene, 1995). This gender bias is also reflected in the 'think manager, think male discourse' established in the 1980s (Olsson, 1996: 360), according to which a masculine style of behaviour is generally viewed as appropriate for the performance of leadership because it constitutes the normative way of expressing power and authority (Hearn & Parkin, 1988). As a consequence, masculine notions of leadership have become 'deeply entrenched in thinking and language, so that the language of leadership often equates with the language of masculinity' (Hearn & Parkin, 1988: 21).

Features of communication stereotypically ascribed to leadership behaviours,

such as assertiveness, competitiveness, task-orientation, and the display of power are also indexed for masculinity (Bass, 1998; Berryman-Fink, 1997; Hearn & Parkin, 1988; Martin, 1993; Still, 1996). Several studies have illustrated how women adopt components of masculine behaviours and speech styles in an attempt to 'blend in as one of the boys' (Ford, 2006: 81; see also Beck, 1999; Calas & Smircich, 1996; Holmes, 2006b). However, these masculine norms of leadership may cause some problems for women leaders, as Decker (1991: 126) notes: 'while it can be professionally appropriate for females to display a task orientation, some appearance of femininity is sacrificed'. As a consequence, women leaders who are displaying components of 'masculine' speech styles in order to enhance their leadership performance, may find themselves caught in a double bind and may face the danger of being perceived as 'unfeminine' (Heilman et al., 1989; Peck, 2000; Still, 1996).

Humour is a particularly valuable discourse strategy in this context as it may offer alternative ways to escape this dilemma. Because of its versatile nature, humour may help women leaders to combine the sometimes competing demands of doing leadership authoritatively and being feminine.

Example 1 illustrates how Tricia attempts to resolve this conflict by using humour to hedge her display of masculine behaviours in order to prevent herself from being judged negatively. This example was recorded in an informal meeting between Tricia and her two subordinates Isabelle and Noel. It occurred at the beginning of the meeting, just after Isabelle and Noel have arrived in Tricia's office. Tricia is about to send off an email she has written to a software provider with whom her department is experiencing some problems.

Example 1⁵

Context: Tricia's managers Isabelle and Noel have just arrived in Tricia's office and start inundating her with questions and comments.

- 1 Tricia: we'll have a little chat chat about it //[sighs]
- 2 Isabelle: /yes\\
- 3 Tricia: and see what we can do +
- 4 Isabelle: yeah
- 5 Tricia: now if you just wait I just gotta send this email off
//I've\ got to sort out [software provider] today
- 7 Noel: /yeah\\
- 8 Tricia: if I don't we're in the poo [laughs]
- 9 Noel: so what are you waiting for

In this extract Tricia performs a range of behaviours typically associated with masculinity: she displays her power and silences her subordinates. With her comment 'now if you just wait I just gotta send this email off' (lines 5 and 6) uttered in a determined but still friendly tone of voice she overtly expresses her authority, and with her use of the colloquial expression 'if I don't we're in the poo' (line 8) she releases stress and tension in a rather masculine way. Both behaviours thus portray Tricia as an authoritative and decisive leader.

Judged by interlocutors' responses Tricia's swearing and her humour do not seem to minimize her display of power and expression of frustration. Instead, they indicate the seriousness of the problem to her subordinates, who do not respond with laughter

but rather express agreement and share her concern: Noel's reply in line 9, 'so what are you waiting for', is uttered in a serious and concerned but not challenging tone of voice, and can thus be interpreted as an expression of understanding. He appears to have understood Tricia's concern and thus seems to encourage her to deal with this problem before they start with the meeting, which is being delayed. This interpretation is further supported by the fact that Noel and Isabelle let Tricia finish her email while they discuss a report that Isabelle has written.

This example, then, illustrates how Tricia skilfully draws on humour to display stereotypically masculine leadership behaviours of being authoritative and silencing her subordinates, as well as expressing her frustration by drawing on speech styles stereotypically associated with masculinity. However, in addition to displaying these behaviours, Tricia also employs a range of features which have been ascribed to a feminine style. In particular, her use of the inclusive pronoun 'we' throughout the extract and the choice of the relatively weak expletive 'poo' (rather than more forceful ones, such as 'shit') are associated with a feminine register. And some aspects of her relational behaviour such as her initial offer to consider her subordinates' issues (line 1) illustrate a concern for her subordinates and an attempt to include and empower them (Case, 1988; Clifford, 1996), which are behaviours that are normatively associated with feminine ways of doing things. By skilfully combining elements of masculine and feminine styles, Tricia thus attempts to enhance her leadership performance while also performing these stereotypically masculine behaviours, and at the same time negotiate her gender identity. It is in particular by combining masculine and feminine discursive strategies that she seeks to be effective.

A similarly authoritative and stereotypically masculine behaviour is displayed in an interaction in which Tricia and her colleague Garth are discussing how to deal with a particularly problematic employee. When recounting some of the unacceptable behaviours of that employee Tricia exclaims in an agitated tone of voice: 'now apparently he was very surprised that we took that to be a threat and I said well it was [laughing] bloody obvious it was a threat'. As in Example 1, Tricia also uses humour and laughter here to ratify her stereotypically masculine behaviour. In particular, her swearing ('bloody obvious') and her overt display of power and authority (which emerges from portraying herself as a decisive leader in her short anecdote) are indexed for masculinity (Coates, 2003; De Klerk, 1997).

Using humour in this context can be interpreted as a means to legitimize the use of components of masculine speech styles and to facilitate the display of behaviours typically associated with masculinity. This function of humour is further illustrated in the next example, which was recorded in an interaction of three members at another IT company, A&B Resolutionz. Example 2 shows Jill, the company's Board Director, using humour to manage a meeting, in particular to get participants back into line and to return to the task-oriented discussion.

Example 2

Context: During a Board meeting at A&B Resolutionz. Participants have just discussed problems they are having with one of their clients.

- 1 Don: um they've stepped out of line once or twice
- 2 and I've snapped at them

- 3 and I think they've you know getting you know
 4 the [laughs] //the reason we s-\
 5 Jill: /the big white man\\ on his great big white horse charg-
 6 [laughs]: (what is that you're saying):
 7 Don: [laughs throughout Jill's comment]
 8 Jill: [laughs]
 9 Don: um
 10 Jill: [laughs]: sorry (Donald): (so) //there's a there's a\
 11 Sam: /(the)\\ customer service (is a bit)
 12 keep hitting (him) with a stick
 13 Jill: //yeah\
 14 Don: /that's\\ that's my job
 15 Ann's job is to massage them and she's and
 16 that's that's where it's working well
 17 it's working very //well at Ann's\
 18 Jill: /Donald's perfecting the\\ good cop bad cop
 19 um process of managing //customers\
 20 Don: /[laughs]\\
 21 Jill: but can we move on I've got Dave Bruce coming in at one

Uttered during a Board meeting at the end of discussing an item on the agenda this relatively extended instance of conjoint humour seems to provide a welcome break for the participants. In particular, Jill's humorous description of Donald as 'the big white man on his great big white horse' (line 5) uttered in a teasing tone of voice, and Samuel's amusing report of Donald's problems with customer services (lines 11 and 12) provide an opportunity for all participants to release some of the tension that has built up during the previous discussion.

This is a good example of how Jill makes use of humour to assist her in performing masculine leadership behaviours while at the same time maintaining her femininity: by initiating the humour and playing along with her colleagues' contributions, she performs a range of important relational functions: she allows her colleagues and subordinates to take a short break from the serious business and thereby seeks to create a positive working climate and reinforce solidarity with them. The extent to which this is a successful strategy would need, of course, to be assessed by further empirical work, beyond the bounds of this discursive analysis.

Interestingly, however, it is also Jill who decides when the humour is to end (line 21). With her final humorous comment 'Donald's perfecting the good cop bad cop um process of managing' (lines 18 and 19) uttered in a teasing tone of voice, followed by her direct request of getting back to business 'but can we move on' (line 21) she also skilfully manages to bring people back to the agenda.

In contrast to Tricia's behaviour in Example 1, Jill uses the humour immediately before her overt display of power. However, her use of humour in this example has a similar effect to Tricia's humour in the examples above: in all cases this discursive strategy seems intended to mitigate the impact of the women's display of power and authority – behaviours which have stereotypically been associated with masculinity.

Humour thus appears to be one of the strategies on which Jill draws in order to

try to escape this double bind of opposing demands. On the one hand, she displays traditional leadership behaviours typically associated with masculinity, such as displaying power and being task-oriented; but at the same time, Jill also seeks to minimize the impact of these masculine and potentially threatening behaviours by using humour and laughter. In this example, then, the mitigating function of humour is employed to negotiate her gender *and* her professional identity.

This ability of humour to combine competing discourses is also shown in a teasing comment Jill uses to rebuke her colleague Errol for his poor computer skills. When Jill, Errol and the other members of the Board are discussing tight timeframes in an upcoming project that involves a lot of programming, Jill remarks 'you'd better do a quick programming course, Errol'. Uttered in a teasing and slightly challenging tone of voice this comment has a critical edge to it and highlights the tense situation which the team faces due to the tight timeframe. Interestingly, however, Errol does not respond to Jill's teasing but the discussion continues without any further reference to this interlude.

In this instance, then, Jill makes use of humour to communicate a critical and potentially face-threatening message, namely to rebuke Errol for not being able to help with the upcoming programming. And using humour in the form of a teasing comment allows Jill to express her criticism while it also enables her to maintain a good relationship with Errol. Although the teasing remark clearly has an edge to it, it is certainly less challenging than if the criticism was uttered without any humour.

These examples thus nicely illustrate how Jill manages to get her face-threatening message across, to 'do power' *and* to negotiate her femininity: she displays behaviours typically associated with leadership and masculinity and at the same time employs a range of mitigating strategies in order to minimize the potential negative impact of these utterances on her subordinates.

Examples 1 and 2 have illustrated some of the ways in which Jill and Tricia manage the conflict between the contradictory demands of using masculine styles to achieve their leadership objectives and to negotiate their gender identity by making use of the various transactional and relational functions available through humour. The ways in which they use humour enable these women leaders to combine elements of masculine and feminine registers, thus offering a way out of the catch-22 situation of being 'caught between contradictory ideals of being feminine and being managerial' (Alvesson & Billing, 1997: 150) and of being 'expected to be assertive but condemned as castrating bitches when they are' (Peck, 2000: 223; see also Case, 1994). The humour legitimizes their display of interactional behaviour typically associated with masculinity (such as displaying power overtly, being authoritative, and swearing) while at the same time preventing them from being judged negatively as 'unfeminine'.

Similar behaviours have been observed by Holmes et al. (2003a: 448), who found that the professional women they researched often introduced 'a humorous key into the discussion' after they had been authoritative in order to reconcile these contradictory demands. This observation also seems to characterize Tricia's and Jill's behaviour in the above examples: both women make use of humour to combine the traditionally masculine behaviour of displaying power and status with the stereotypically feminine behaviour of considering their addressees' face needs. However, in contrast to the female leaders mentioned in Holmes et al. (2003a), Tricia and Jill

produce the humour *before* and *during* instead of *after* their display of power and authority.

In addition to displaying leadership behaviours that are typically associated with a masculine style, the women leaders also frequently perform leadership behaviours that have traditionally been ascribed to feminine ways of doing things, such as relational behaviours.

Doing feminine leadership behaviours

In spite of the fact that masculine styles constitute paradigmatic ways of performing leadership in most organizational contexts, especially in 'work environments traditionally seen as the province of white-collar male professionals' (Pauwels, 2000: 137), behaviours stereotypically associated with femininity offer valuable alternatives (Case, 1988). According to gendered stereotypes, more relationally oriented behaviours, such as reinforcing solidarity and creating a positive working atmosphere, are typically ascribed to femininity (Fletcher, 1999; Holmes & Marra, 2004). Feminine styles of leadership are characterized by an orientation towards relationships rather than tasks, by nurturing and caring (Bass, 1998: 72), and by a particular interest in 'the well-being of the collective' (Martin, 1993: 275). These positive facilitative elements are increasingly recognized for their benefits for leadership performance. Bass (1998: 79), for instance, argues that '[a]lthough traditional hierarchical organizations of the past may have required "masculine" leader behavior, today's flatter organizations may call for a more "feminine" approach' (see also Ferrario, 1994; Olsson, 1996; Parry & Proctor, 2000). A particularly interesting and frequently used behaviour characterizing this more feminine approach is downplaying power and thereby minimizing status differences.

Although these behaviours may not be perceived as stereotypical leadership activities, they nevertheless have several positive effects: Yukl (1989: 256), for instance, notes that displaying power in a subtle way 'avoids threats to the self-esteem of subordinates'. And in a study on managers in an Australian bank, Beck (1999: 201) found that participants employ particular discursive strategies, 'to emphasize collaboration, to minimize status differences as well as to foster egalitarian relationships with their staff'. It thus seems that minimizing status differences constitutes yet another strategy which enables the leaders to combine both leadership aspects – the achievement of transactional and more relational objectives.

However, it is possible that minimizing status differences is particularly characteristic for the discourse of New Zealand leaders. It seems that especially in New Zealand, people in management positions often 'have a tendency to "downplay" their authority, effectiveness and achievements' (Olsson, 1996: 366). This behaviour may be explained by the 'tall poppy syndrome' which is deeply embedded in New Zealand culture and which describes the cutting down of 'conspicuously successful person[s]' (Oxford Dictionary of New Zealand English as quoted in Mouly & Sankaran, 2002: 36) to prevent any individual from standing out (Acheson, 2002). Hence, in order not to be perceived as a 'tall poppy' the leaders may downplay their own expertise, and portray themselves as equals to their subordinates. However, since expected and normative leadership performance varies across cultures (Clyne, 1994; Thomas, 2001), leaders in other countries may not put the same emphasis on portraying

themselves as equals to their subordinates by minimizing status differences. Interestingly, women leaders across a range of different countries were found to display this behaviour (e.g. Beck, 1999; Kendall, 2003).

One of the communicative strategies on which leaders may draw in order to downplay their power and to minimize status differences is self-denigrating humour.⁶ Example 3 illustrates how Jill employs this type of humour in an attempt to downplay her status and authority in an interaction with her subordinate Lucy.

Example 3⁷

Context: Jill went to see one of her subordinates to help her with a computer problem.

- 1 Jill: [walks into room]
- 2 he just laughed at me
- 3 Lucy: [laughs]: oh no:
- 4 Jill: he's definitely going to come to my aid
- 5 but () he just sort of laughed at me
- 6 Lucy: [laughs]
- 7 Jill: (and then) I've got this appalling reputation
- 8 of being such a technical klutz and
- 9 Lucy: [laughs]
- 10 Jill: sometimes look it's not ME + I work with what I've got +

In this exchange, Jill draws laughing attention to her reputation as technically ignorant and incompetent, 'a technical klutz' (line 8). Although she laughingly refutes this persona to some extent by blaming her tools (line 10), this comment is clearly tongue-in-cheek since there is abundant evidence from her other recordings to suggest that she frequently adapts this identity, milking it for humour and emphasizing her role as a helpless ignoramus in this area. Interestingly, this feminine helpless identity regularly elicits laughter from Jill's male subordinates (in this example she tells Lucy how one of her technical support staff has 'just laughed at me' [line 5]). Jill's use of self-denigrating humour, then, enables her to construct a stereotypical feminine identity by playing down her experience and knowledge and portraying herself as 'a technical klutz'. This example thus presents one way in which Jill's use of humour enables her to subversively challenge rather than adopt the masculine norms that prevail in her predominantly masculine organization. Rather than portraying herself as a knowledgeable superior, Jill exploits the feminine stereotype of technophobic women and downplays her knowledge and expertise.

In addition to drawing on speech styles and behaviour that are indexed for masculinity (as shown in Examples 1 and 2) both women leaders also regularly adopt a wide range of stereotypically feminine ways of doing business, which is not only shown in their use of self-denigrating humour but also in the ways in which they run meetings and make decisions. In the interactions we have recorded, both Tricia and Jill generally put considerable emphasis on relational aspects of leadership, for example by ensuring their subordinates get their say in decision-making and by mediating between subordinates when necessary (for a more detailed discussion of these women's leadership styles see Holmes & Schnurr, 2005; Marra et al., 2006; Schnurr, 2005).

As woman leaders in male-dominated organizations and a predominantly

masculine area of business, Tricia and Jill employ humour to resolve the tensions between being an effective leader while also negotiating their gender identity. Regularly displaying behaviours typically associated with femininity (such as downplaying status and authority) the women deliberately assert their femininity in this masculine context, and thereby subtly challenge the widespread assumption that leadership behaviours are inherently masculine (Mills, 1999). And the examples above illustrate that humour is an ideal means for achieving this.

The extent to which Jill in particular has comfortably resolved this problematic conflict between constructing herself as an effective leader while at the same time negotiating her gender identity is also apparent in her ability to explicitly make fun of the contradictions. This is discussed in more detail in the next section.

Sending up feminine and masculine stereotypes

In addition to drawing on discursive strategies typically associated with masculine and feminine behaviours to subtly combine the sometimes contradictory demands of portraying themselves as effective leaders while also negotiating and constructing their gender identity, women leaders may also overtly put the gender issue on the agenda and signal their awareness of the fact that they are the marked exceptions in a masculine profession (Trauth, 2002). One particularly interesting way of bringing the notion of gender to attention is making fun of the stereotypes that the women leaders sometimes readily adapt and adopt, or vehemently reject and dismiss. Example 4 illustrates how Jill uses humour to resolve potential conflicts between her gender and her leader identity by sending-up the stereotypes she has to deal and compete with when interacting in a predominantly masculine environment (see also Holmes & Schnurr, 2006).

Example 4

Context: Donald, the organization's CEO is installing Jill's new computer.

- 1 Lucy: and you're not gonna have a monitor
- 2 Jill: I'm not gonna have a monitor
- 3 I'm not //gonna have\
- 4 Lucy: /now you've got\\ room for a pot plant
- 5 Jill: () perfect //there you go\
- 6 Donald: /[laughs]\\
- 7 Jill: you can tell the girly office can't you
- 8 Donald: yes //(yeah)\
- 9 Lucy: /[laughs]\\

This extract demonstrates how Jill and her colleague Lucy utilize humour as an in-group marker to highlight their gender identities in a predominantly masculine profession. Jill's apparently self-denigrating remark 'you can tell the girly office can't you' (line 7) makes fun of Lucy and herself, and also constructs them as a distinct feminine subgroup in a primarily masculine environment (see also Mullany, 2006). Uttered in a smiling yet assertive tone of voice her slightly ironic remark is in no way apologetic: Jill asserts her femininity with assurance. Using humour to reinforce solidarity with her female colleague in this instance, she concurrently

challenges the norms for office ‘furniture’ in this male-dominated workplace. Like in Example 3 Jill exploits gender stereotypes to signal that she is aware of her special status.

In this context humour serves valuable functions as it provides an ‘avenue for a subordinate group to assert their differences while expressing frustration and ambivalence at the effects of marginalization’ (Holmes et al., 2003a: 450). Making fun of the special status she and Lucy share, Jill self-consciously sends up feminine stereotypes. Like the adolescent girls studied by Eder (1993: 27), Jill indicates that she is aware of this traditional view of femininity, and that she can distance herself from it and treat it lightly. And by sending-up feminine stereotypes, she brings the gender issue to the surface and finds a way of expressing her criticism and perhaps even discontent.

Interestingly, the data does not contain any instances of humour where the men use gender stereotypes to make fun of their female colleagues in a similar vein. Using humour in this way does not seem to be part of the normative way of interacting in these workplaces. Thus, since the women’s behaviour constitutes a marked exception to the prevailing workplace discourse these humorous instances should not be interpreted as the women’s attempt to make sexist jokes before the men get the chance. Rather, by sending up gendered stereotypes the women challenge masculine hegemonies by making fun of them and thereby bring them to the fore.

This is also achieved in Example 5 where Jill employs humour as a boundary marker to make fun of the organization’s male software engineers. Using humour as a means to make fun of male software engineers at A&B Resolutionz, Jill once more makes gender an issue and brings it to the forefront.

Example 5⁸

- 1 Jill: //+ ac\tually I still remember
 2 Lucy: /mm\
 3 Jill: we hadn’t been in here very long at all
 4 [. . .] and I was trying to work out what was out
 5 there was a line clothes line just kind of out the
 6 window and I was looking out (one of the) windows and
 7 (I thought) [high pitched]: what the: hell is that on
 8 the line and it was all these chicks’ G-strings
 9 (and I thought)
 10 Donald: yes [laughs]
 11 Jill: [high pitched]: that’s kind of: () you know like
 12 Lucy: [laughs]
 13 Jill: (stimulaic) for [high pitched]: the day
 14 it’s like (what) and it:
 15 took me like several minutes of squinting to work out
 16 [laughs]: (what I’m) looking at but I //thought ()\
 17 Donald: /(the) the thing is\ the guys didn’t know this cos
 18 Lucy: /is that right\
 19 Jill: /[laughs]\ cos they’re software engineers so
 20 // [laughs\
 21 Lucy: /yeah I was gonna say\ (developmentors)

This humorous anecdote is initiated by Jill's lively narrative about her early days at the company (lines 3–9). Portraying the software engineers as geeks having 'those chick's G-strings' (line 8) hanging outside their window, Jill makes fun of this distinct group at A&B Resolutionz. At the same time she also distances herself and Lucy from this all-male group. Eventually, Donald interrupts her in what could be understood as an attempt to protect the software engineers by claiming that they were unaware of what was hanging outside their window: 'the guys didn't know this cos' (line 17). Although it is not clear from this interaction whether the software engineers did not know what was outside their window because they did not recognize what was hanging there or because they simply did not look closely enough, Jill nevertheless takes the chance to make even more fun of them: she explains their lack of knowledge with the fact that 'they're software engineers' (line 19), and Lucy joins her 'yeah I was gonna say developmentors' (line 21).

This extract illustrates yet again that the women are well aware of their special status within the predominately masculine environment – a fact which they sometimes exploit as a reason for bonding. And by jointly making fun of their male colleagues, Jill and Lucy not only attempt to create a distinct gendered subgroup but also assert themselves in this masculine workplace.

The fact that women seem to constitute marked exceptions in the masculine environment of A&B Resolutionz is further supported by a comment that Ann, a project manager and one of the few female staff members at A&B Resolutionz, made when she found out that the company was planning to hire a female programmer: 'another girl cool'. This slightly ironic comment nicely illustrates the fact that female staff at the organization are aware of their minority status, which ultimately may have some influence on the women's leadership performance and in particular their choice of discourse strategies to construct their professional identities.

Discussion

This article has explored some of the discursive processes through which leadership is constructed and enacted in a workplace setting, with a particular focus on the interplay between leadership and gender. The analysis of naturally occurring conversational data has focused on distinctive discursive practices regularly employed by leaders when 'doing leadership', while at the same time responding to gender-specific challenges. In particular, it has been illustrated how two women leaders in New Zealand IT organizations make use of humour in order to assist them in achieving their various transactional as well as relational workplace objectives while at the same time providing a valuable tool for them to survive in a man's world.

Drawing on humour, the two women leaders are able to perform the various aspects of leadership while avoiding the danger of being perceived either as 'unmanagerial' or 'unfeminine' (Alvesson & Billing, 1997: 150). Humour thus provides a valuable tool for them to balance their gender and professional identities and to escape the double bind of opposing demands. It enables the women leaders to 'do femininity' *and* to achieve their transactional leadership objectives, it allows them to be authoritative *and* to be feminine, and it even provides a useful vehicle for them to express their recognition and frustration about the fact that femininity is 'marked' in their predominantly masculine working environment.

Jill and Tricia both demonstrate that being a woman and being a leader in a masculine profession are not opposing parts of an unresolvable oxymoron (Holmes, 2006a), but may actually be successfully combined (Clare, 2002). Far from being a disadvantage, the ability to control a more feminine discursive style offers opportunities for accomplishing the complex notion of leadership more satisfactorily. It is, in particular, the ability to combine elements from a relatively feminine style with those of a more masculine style of interaction – the relational as well as the transactional – that assists individuals in accomplishing effective leadership (see also Holmes, 2006b).

It has been argued that instead of accepting that certain professional domains are masculine, and adjusting to these masculine workplace norms, women, especially those in leadership positions, ‘should attempt to reconstruct the work and values of the IT [and other male dominated] profession[s] into something less masculine’ (Trauth, 2002: 102). Tricia and Jill provide paradigmatic examples of two women leaders who are successfully doing this in their everyday working interactions by modifying and sometimes even challenging predominantly masculine norms, and thereby offering alternative ways of ‘doing leadership’.

This case-study has not only explored some of the discursive processes through which leadership is enacted, but it has also illustrated the various advantages of pursuing a discourse-based approach and of drawing on naturally occurring conversational data for an investigation of the ways in which leadership is performed through communication. It appears that an in-depth analysis of the ways in which leaders communicate with the people they work with on a day to day basis provides particularly interesting and valuable insights into the diverse ways in which these leaders actually ‘do leadership’ and how they deal with the various challenges they are confronted with.

While this article has concentrated on just one aspect of the complexities of the leadership process, namely gender, a discourse-analytical approach promises to be a useful tool for investigating further conversational practices through which leaders attempt to enact and respond to the various expectations that come with their leadership roles.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Janet Holmes, Brad Jackson and two anonymous reviewers for their useful comments on earlier versions of this article.
2. This number includes not only IT companies but also professionals in IT jobs in non-IT organizations.
3. I wish to thank those who allowed their workplace interactions to be recorded and other members of the LWP team who assisted with collecting and transcribing the data.
4. Pseudonyms have been used for the participants.
5. The transcription conventions are listed below.

[laughs]	Paralinguistic features in square brackets
+	Pause up to one second
-	Incomplete or cut-off utterance
...//... \...	Simultaneous speech
.../... \\...	

(hello)	Transcriber's best guess at an unclear utterance
VERY	Capitals indicate emphatic stress
[. . .]	Section of transcript omitted
ke-	Incomplete word
[laughs]: no:	Laughter throughout the utterance of the word in between the colons

All names are pseudonyms.

6. For a thorough discussion of the numerous functions of this type of humour for leadership see e.g. Barsoux (1993), Duncan and Feisal (1989), Morreall (1997).
7. This example is also discussed in Holmes and Schnurr (2005). It has been slightly simplified here for ease of reading.
8. This example has been slightly amended for ease of reading.

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