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# Competing discourses of leadership Transformational Leadership as blurring mechanism for masculinities in Denmark

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## Summary

This paper contributes to research on leadership, by incorporating insights from the literature on men and masculinities. Empirically, the paper is based on the narratives of three Danish (male) leaders struggling with tensions in discourses of leadership in an interview context. Re-reading of the transcripts in a gender perspective revealed that an understanding of nascent intertwined discourses of charisma (masculinities) and participation (femininities) was implicitly constructed in the interviews. This gave rise to what could be labeled as a transformational leadership discourse, whereby masculinities in leadership while remaining, are blurred.

In a broader perspective, a research implication is that while transformational leadership is most often introduced as being based on feminine and participative values, it should not be forgotten that male elements of leadership are still inherent in the concept, and generally in leadership of the 2000s. A certain fashion and shared meanings characterizes leadership in Denmark, relating to participation, dialogue, equity, democracy, and ethics (femininities). At the same time, corporate discourses related to charisma, result-orientation, and authority (masculinities) are present although blurred.

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## Introduction

Over the past decades, leadership researchers have turned their attention to charismatic, participative, and transformational leadership. While the concept of charismatic

leadership emphasizes the leader's personality and tends to regard the leader as a self-centered, and often opportunistic person (e.g. Harvey, 2001; Sosik, 2002), participative approaches are more concerned with employee involvement (EI) or, in other words, with leadership that is shared between leader and employees with a view to achieving common goals. Transformational leadership can be seen as emphasizing both charisma and participation. Although the leader is still presented as a charismatic role model, transformational leadership focuses to a greater extent on the leader as an inspiring, facilitating, and

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stimulating character, which in turn implies a closer relationship to employees.

Methodologically, leadership studies have traditionally been dominated by prescriptive approaches, based partly on theories and models regarding causal relations between various background variables and leadership styles, and partly on qualitative interviews with successful (male) charismatic leaders and their “excellent” styles (see e.g. House & Aditya, 1997; Yukl, 1989 for reviews). More recently, however, interpretive studies based on narrative and discourse analysis, have become more common in organization and leadership studies (Garrety, Badham, Morrigan, Rifkin, & Zanko, 2003; Grant, Hardy, Oswick, & Putnam, 2004; Lincoln, Travers, Ackers, & Wilkinson, 2002; Mumby & Clair, 1997; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Within this interpretive approach researchers have investigated among other topics, gender in relation to organizations (e.g. Billing & Alvesson, 2000; Collinson & Hearn, 1994; Fondas, 1997; Hearn & Collinson, 2006; Tienari, Söderberg, Holgersson, & Vaara 2005). This has meant investigating a social domain such as leadership, and in particular, how this is used to establish gendered identities, and to legitimize certain positions.

By incorporating insights from the literature on men, masculinities (e.g. Collinson & Hearn, 1994) and femininities (e.g. Fondas, 1997) this paper contributes to the leadership debate by arguing that while leadership is often presented as becoming softer and more towards the feminine, masculine values are still inherent and dominant. An empirical study is presented below, and it is argued that certain Danish leaders in an interview context proved to be positioned between masculinities and femininities in their struggle to re-construct their leader identity. The paper comprises three open-ended interviews with male leaders in Danish companies. It is shown how the leaders opened by emphasizing the importance of participative leadership, elaborating upon this “alternative” approach by describing their own experience of engaging in dialogue, listening to their employees and empowering them to assume responsibility and to lead themselves. However, their way of describing their non-belief in charismatic leadership, and their way of legitimizing the use of dominance and authority revealed that they still see charisma as fundamental to the traditional leadership approach. Thus, while democratic leadership approaches have been acknowledged (e.g. Manz & Sims, 1987; Pearce & Manz, 2005), the status of charisma as a dominant element in leadership is likely to be difficult to change.

Although elements of participative leadership do emerge as central in the empirical study, the study nonetheless includes charismatic aspects. More specifically, its findings inspired the incorporation of some insights from the literature on men and masculinities that is missing in studies on leadership. Starting from the gender perspective and the empirical study, this paper will argue that transformational leadership can be interpreted as a hybrid between charisma and participation, and that it should be regarded as a blurring mechanism for masculinities. And, therefore, should be questioned as a concept, which brings feminine values to leadership.

The paper is structured as follows. The theoretical background to charismatic, transformational, and partici-

pative leadership is briefly described. This is followed by a section on masculinities and femininities. The empirical study yields examples of the three leaders’ gendered re-construction of identity, and their implicit ambivalence in relation to masculinities and femininities. In the subsequent discussion, it is suggested that a discourse of transformational leadership is emerging, which functions as a blurring mechanism for masculinities, and thus hinders feminine values in leadership. Some suggestions are offered for future research and possible implications.

## Charismatic, transformational, and participative leadership approaches

### Charismatic leadership

The period since the 1980s has been characterized, among other things, by strong focus on the individual leader and personal “excellence” (e.g. Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Peters & Waterman, 1982). Personality traits have attracted renewed attention, which in turn has created a stream of empirical studies on successful leaders, in which such people have been presented as heroic, and charismatic characters often referred to as “managers of meaning” (Smircich & Morgan, 1982) or “visionary leaders” (Conger & Spreitzer, 1999; Peters & Waterman, 1982), who inspire their followers to share their visions and values, through which positive changes in the workplace can be accomplished. Originally, Weber (1947) had distinguished between rules and charisma as follows: “In contrast to authority where traditions or rules or elections conferred legitimacy on individuals, the holder of charisma is “set apart from ordinary men and is treated as endowed with...exceptional powers and qualities...[which] are not accessible to the ordinary person but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader” (Weber, 1947, pp. 358–359).

Charismatic leadership implies that the leader is somehow “larger than life” (Conger, 1989), someone who is by his followers idolized as a superhuman hero (Bass, 1985). Others have seen the charismatic leader as an un-questioned figure (Yukl, 1989). The heroic leader is very often associated with change and is presented as the mediator of visions and values (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Conger, 1989). However, in view of the strong focus on the leader, mediating may be regarded here mainly as a question of convincing people, or even of exemplifying a seductive one-way communication style. Moreover, it has been proposed by Willner (1984, p. 14) that: “It is not what the leader is, but what people see the leader as that counts in generating the charismatic relationship”. Other topics include whether or not charismatic traits are universally endorsed across countries (Hartog, House, Hanges, & Ruiz-Quintanilla, 1999), the extent to which charisma is related to rhetoric, and impression management (Harvey, 2001; Sosik, 2002), and whether charismatic characteristics should be regarded as wholly positive in the context of leadership (Yukl, 1989). More recently, the tendency to ignore the negative elements of charismatic leadership has been discussed. Examples include manipulation, covering up failures, blaming others for mistakes and playing down any

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