

# Working Paper Series

► Reimagining ethical leadership as relational, contextual, and political



**No. 2 March 2014**

**Dr Helena Liu**

Lecturer, Swinburne Business School  
Research Fellow, Swinburne Leadership Institute

## About the Swinburne Leadership Institute

The Swinburne Leadership Institute (SLI) seeks to promote **Leadership for the Greater Good** across government, the private and not-for-profit sectors, and civil society.

Our mission is to enrich the understanding and practice of authentic, ethical and sustainable forms of leadership in Australia.

Leadership for the Greater Good can take many forms. It always needs to be locally relevant and culturally appropriate. However, in all cases it recognises the legitimacy of the individual as citizen, the reality of our shared interests, and the importance of judiciously balancing competing interests in ways that enhance the public good.

The emergence in Australia of a political, business and civil culture that elevates immediate private interests over long-term public interests is a worrying sign that the Greater Good and leadership in its service is insufficiently valued in our society.

It is a social and research priority to understand the meaning and the myriad manifestations of Leadership for the Greater Good so as to enrich the practice of leadership in Australia.

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## Introduction

In a context seemingly besieged by crises, leadership theories in recent years have intensified their focus on ethics (Ciulla & Forsyth, 2011). This trend is further driven by the pervasive reporting of corporate malfeasance and corruption in the last decade, leading to the collapse of companies such as Enron in the United States, HIH Insurance in Australia, as well as the more recent case of the Libor scandal in the United Kingdom. At the core of media reporting on the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) was the idea that the credit crisis was brought about by unethical bankers and inadequate leadership (Ho, 2009; Hosking, 2012; O'Reilly, Lain, Sheehan, Smale, & Stuart, 2011; Willmott, 2011).

However, much of what has been theorised about leadership is limited by modernist assumptions that organisations are unitary entities, characterised by order and predictability, and clearly demarcated and differentiated from their environment (Dale & Burrell, 2000). Leadership research then, as follows, was preoccupied with identifying the universal traits and behaviours that allowed leaders to effectively control organisational functions, and mobilise followers towards the organisation's purpose (Townley, 2002). For seven decades, this preoccupation drove the proliferation of leadership theories from charismatic to visionary, transactional to transformational, spiritual to authentic; sustained by the unprecedented growth of business schools and consultancy firms which benefited from the commoditisation of 'leadership' (Townley, 2002). Most of these leadership constructs display the epistemic foundations of modernity, namely, the belief in decontextualised rationality, linear cause and effect relationships, objective decision-making, quest for certainty, and hierarchical authority structures (Townley, 2002).

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Although existing theories have made considerable achievements in highlighting the crucial connection between ethics and leadership, this paper proposes three key limitations of the field: an overwhelming focus on the individual at the expense of the relational; a cursory understanding of how context informs the exercise and enactment of leadership; and the depoliticisation of leadership.

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Ethical leadership theories are no exception. Leaders are argued to set the ethical tone for the organisation, where by nature of their role, they are seen to have the power to develop strategies, articulate values, and implement disciplinary and reward systems that incentivise particular behaviours (Brown & Mitchell, 2010). Leaders are also purported to act as role models for followers, with research suggesting that employees conform to the ethical values they espouse (Schminke, Wells, Peyrefitte, & Sebor, 2002). The perception of ethical business leaders has been linked to employee commitment, increased positive behaviour in the organisation, and ultimately, improved organisational performance (Kanungo, 2001; Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes, & Salvador, 2009; Treviño, Butterfield, & McCabe, 1998; Weaver, Treviño, & Cochran, 1999).

The idea that prominent individuals can and do play a role in shaping values and practices is not to be denied, but it is also not to be overestimated. The turn of the 21st Century has seen the emergence of new discourses of organising. In a so-called 'postmodern' context, organisations are becoming styled as complex adaptive systems (Schneider & Somers, 2006). Leadership is no longer seen as exclusively about formal position and authority and the traits located within individuals, but it must be recognised as socially constructed, performative, contextual, and attributional (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012; Grint, 2001; Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007).

This review of the literature provides an overview of the concurrent philosophical and social scientific streams of ethical leadership research. Although existing theories have made considerable achievements in highlighting the crucial connection between ethics and leadership, this paper proposes three key limitations of the field: an overwhelming focus on the individual at the expense of the relational; a cursory understanding of how context informs the exercise and enactment of leadership; and the depoliticisation of leadership. Through this paper, I put forth the argument that notions of 'leadership' defined by persistent Western ideals of individualism, capitalism, and masculinity are often inimical to ethical ideals of equality, justice, and emancipation. I articulate throughout the paper a reimagination of leadership research, development, and practice grounded in a feminist, communitarian (Denzin, 2009), and corporeal (Diprose, 2002; Hancock, 2008; Pullen & Rhodes, 2013) ethic.

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## Ethical leadership as individualised

The body of literature on ethical leadership can be broadly distinguished by two approaches. One stream of theory is concerned with prescribing how leaders 'ought' to behave. Proponents of this approach draw on philosophical perspectives of ethics to develop definitive normative models that outline a leader's duties and responsibilities. Price (2008) for example follows from Kant and challenges the tendency among leaders to perceive themselves as exempt from rules of morality and calls for leaders to accept their duty to help others and respect others as rational agents rather than instruments to be used. Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) argue that ethical leaders unify organisational members through their articulation of core values and purpose, liberate their followers' human potential, while securing their satisfaction and effectiveness. Finally, perhaps the most influential writer in this field, Ciulla (2005) asserts that leaders have to be both ethical and effective. She draws on virtue theory, deontology, and teleology to argue that leaders need to promote eudaimonic well-being through ethical intentions, processes, and outcomes.

Within the field of philosophical approaches to ethical leadership, the relationships leaders have with others are regarded as vital, yet theories focus overwhelmingly on leadership as the capacity of individuals (Painter-Morland, 2008). This tendency to essentialise leadership has been thoroughly challenged by an emerging relational view. From a relational perspective, leadership is understood as a phenomenon produced through interactions between leaders, followers, and other social actors, while being intimately informed by the wider sociocultural context (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012). Leadership is not seen as solely located within individuals in the form of traits and styles, but also in the myriad ways people interact, engage, and negotiate with each other.

As with leadership, the tendency to essentialise moral agency within the individual has also been challenged (Clegg, Kornberger, & Rhodes, 2007; Hancock, 2008; Painter-Morland, 2006). Popular belief holds that moral agents are isolated, rational agents, capable of relieving themselves of personal biases in order to objectively choose 'right' over 'wrong' (Painter-Morland, 2006). Through the discourse of heroic theories of leadership, exceptional leaders are heralded as being particularly adept at 'solving' moral dilemmas (Lawler & Ashman, 2012). However, moral dilemmas are often encountered in the face of "acute and painful uncertainty" (Bauman & Tester, 2001, p. 46), where decision-makers may be choosing between 'right' and 'right' (Lawler & Ashman, 2012). In the context of contemporary organisations marked by dynamic and interconnected social relations, moral agency is exercised in interaction with others (Painter-Morland, 2006). Like leadership, moral agency is a relational process.

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The social scientific approach, which orients itself to explore what ethical leadership *is* rather than what ethical leaders *should* do, goes some way to accommodate a more relational view. Social scientific research of ethics is rooted in disciplines such as organisational studies, psychology, and sociology, and attempts to investigate how people perceive ethical leadership and how leaders model ethical behaviours to their followers.

Brown, Treviño, and colleagues orient their work to a social scientific approach that focusses on how leaders actually operate in everyday business practice (Brown & Mitchell, 2010; Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005; Brown & Treviño, 2006; Treviño, Brown, & Hartman, 2003; Treviño et al., 1998; Treviño, Hartman, & Brown, 2000). For instance, Treviño et al. (2003, 2000) found that in order to be perceived as ethical, leaders needed to demonstrate that they were both a strong moral person and a strong moral manager. As a moral person, a leader has to be seen as honest, trustworthy, approachable, fair, while showing concern for others. As a moral manager, a leader needed to set and communicate moral standards and enforce them through reward and punishment.

More importantly, ethical leaders are thought to model their behaviours to followers. Brown and Treviño (2006) applied social learning theory to posit how individuals pay attention to and emulate the attitudes, values, and behaviours of attractive and credible role models. Followers further learn what is considered acceptable and unacceptable behaviour both through direct reward and punishment, as well as vicariously learnt through observing how others' behaviours are rewarded and punished. When senior leaders are perceived as ethical, Treviño et al. (2000) suggest that this sends a strong ethical message to all employees that will positively influence their thoughts and behaviours. Perceptions of ethical leadership are believed to be crucial to maintaining the long-term reputation of the organisation

while restoring confidence in business leadership in an era of corporate crises (Treviño et al., 2003, 2000).

To be sure, much of this research continues to focus on individuals, which include an ever-expanding list of characteristics comprising high power inhibition, high moral reasoning levels, internal locus of control, low Machiavellianism, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and social responsibility (Brown & Treviño, 2006; De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008; Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009). As it can be seen, social scientific theories continue to bear the assumption that leaders via hierarchical control, rationally enact ethical behaviours, objectively enforce reward and discipline, and wilfully shape the ethical behaviour of all organisational members via a linear causal relationship.

While these assumptions may have been useful in a scientific managerial analysis of bureaucracies, their relevance for a post-industrial landscape marked by rapid change, flexible structures, and fluid boundaries (Collier & Esteban, 2000) steadily wanes. The inability for ethical leadership theories to account for the complex and unpredictable ways in which social actors, from all levels of an organisational system, shape one another's perceptions and behaviours is brought to sharp relief. To address this limitation, I argue that ethical leadership theorising enlist in the "relational turn" observed in wider leadership research (Ospina & Uhl-Bien, 2012, p. xix).

Relational approaches that engage with the network of processes and relationships that constitute leadership has seen a surge in recent years (Ospina & Uhl-Bien, 2012, p. xix). In contrast to an essentialistic approach that concerns itself with the traits, behaviours, intentions, and perceptions of individual leaders, relational leadership approaches focus on the processes that bring about leadership (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012). Such approaches include systems thinking, complexity, and the

social construction of leadership. Some have even articulated a promising blend of various relational perspectives (see Barge & Fairhurst, 2008 for a systemic constructionist approach; and Painter-Morland, 2008 for an account of leadership in complex adaptive systems).

Research inspired by systems thinking argues for the importance of seeing patterns of interdependency between people, things, and ideas (Senge, 2006). Systemic leadership highlights the ways by which communities of leaders share responsibility for sustaining change and shape the organisation's future (Collier & Esteban, 2000; Painter-Morland, 2008). Leadership is seen as shared and distributed across multiple organisational members, rather than confined to lone individuals at the top of organisational hierarchies (Painter-Morland, 2008). Ethical processes of systemic leadership may be better understood by exploring how organisational systems emerge in ways that nurture trusting and accountable relationships between organisational members as well as external stakeholders (Painter-Morland, 2006), invite constructive dissent (Grint, 2005a), and dynamically develop organisational values and purpose via everyday interactions and practices (Painter-Morland, 2008).

A complexity view of organisations frames leadership as a complex interactive dynamic for the purpose of organisational adaptability (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Leaders are seen to enable (as opposed to direct) learning, change, and innovation that emerge through interactions between people, and facilitate the emergence of a shared understanding of unfolding events (Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Like systemic leadership, the complexity view encourages leadership that disrupt existing patterns of behaviour (Plowman et al., 2007), although there is room to extend the theory with more explicit ethical consideration of how power dynamics

play out in the pursuit of shared understandings and common outlooks. Critical approaches have the potential to elaborate and strengthen the ethical dimensions of complexity leadership theory by examining how 'enabling' processes differ from traditional 'directing' processes, and to what extent discourses of complexity, uncertainty, and adaptability simply become norms to which organisational members conform in the pursuit of organisational effectiveness and sustainability (Foucault, 1977).

My own research adopts a social constructionist perspective, which embraces a relational view by recognising leadership as co-constructed (Collinson, 2006; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010; Grint, 2001). What it means to lead ethically emerges from the ongoing process of negotiated meaning-making between social actors; rendering it fluid, dynamic, and changeable over time (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012). Leadership is seen as inseparable from context; both shaping and shaped by the group, organisational, industry, sociocultural, and historical contexts (Fairhurst, 2009; Grint, 2005b). Social constructionist scholars examine processes ranging from sequential interactions of control (e.g., conversation and interaction analyses, Fairhurst, 2004; Gronn, 1983), acts of organising and influence (e.g., framing, narrative, and drama, Czarniawska-Joerges, 1997; Fairhurst, 2011; Harvey, 2001; Liu, 2010), and shared meanings of leadership (e.g., media culture analyses, Bowring, 2004; Pullen & Rhodes, 2012). A social constructionist approach to ethical leadership is well-positioned to explore power dynamics in the processes of co-construction (see Nicholson & Carroll, 2013), and reveal the ways by which dominant discourses of leadership can be resisted and alternate discourses of leadership brought into being.

Relational leadership is not reducible to the notion that leadership responsibilities ought to be shared or distributed with 'followers'. In fact, it calls into question the binary constructed between leaders and followers, which is founded on and reinforced with a hierarchical assumption that leaders are visionary and heroic agents of change (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003), while followers are an undifferentiated mass who are passive, predictable, and compliant (Collinson, 2005; Gronn, 2002). Even research that attempts to invert this hierarchy, where 'followership' is valorised as the indispensable element to leadership (Meindl & Shamir, 2007), continues to reinforce the leader-follower dualism. In contrast, relational leadership theorists see leadership as a multidirectional influence relationship, even while acknowledging the power in that relationship is often unequal (Rost, 1995). Those leading in one context may become the led in another, and vice versa.

Relational leadership is about recognising that leadership is necessarily a social process that occurs in the space in between people. Moreover, theories sensitive to the relationality of leadership bear an ethical agenda. Relational views of leadership are reactions against the heroic constructs of mainstream leadership theories that advocate individual leader action without considering its effect on others (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). Instead, by understanding "social experience as intersubjective and leadership as a way of being-in-relation-to-others" (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011, p. 1430), relational leadership theories promote an ethical, communitarian view of others as subjects rather than objects to be manipulated towards the organisational purpose.

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### **Ethical leadership as decontextualised**

While philosophical theories have attempted to evince universalistic models for ethical leadership, social scientific perspectives can be credited with a greater consideration of the role of context. Context has largely been explored in the literature on the aspect of what has been referred to as an ethical climate (Victor & Cullen, 1987) or ethical culture (Treviño, 1990); both of which denote the extent to which an organisation supports ethics-related attitudes and behaviours. The organisational context is suggested to define what is considered acceptable and unacceptable behaviour and shapes individual behaviour as much as individual characteristics (Treviño et al., 1998). Treviño (1990) conceptualised ethical culture as the interplay between both formal and informal systems of control, where formal systems comprise policies, training modules, and reward systems, while informal systems refer to peer behaviour and norms.

In this sense, ethical leadership theories reify context into a fixed, contained, and neutral object that can be read and remedied by the leader in the pursuit of organisational goals. Grint (2005b) compellingly demonstrates that this view of context is reductionistic and overlooks the complex ways in which decision-makers perceive, persuade, and negotiate understandings of the situation. His framework of leadership and problem-solving extends Rittel and Webber's (1973) typology of tame and wicked problems to suggest there are three ways in which 'problems' faced by decision-makers can be framed. A tame problem is described as potentially complicated but is likely to have occurred before and can be resolved methodically with 'management'. A wicked problem is novel, intractable, potentially indefinite, and entails considerable uncertainty, requiring 'leadership'. Grint (2005b) then augments the typology with a further critical type of problem that is proposed to engender a sense of urgency, prompting immediate answers, and is thus associated with a 'command' form of power.

However, the novelty of Grint's (2005b) contribution to leadership theory is its departure from the positivistic notion that these typologies are objective, accurate, and 'real' assessments of problems. Informed instead by a social constructionist view of leadership, Grint (2005b, p. 1469) proposes a framework for the analysis of leadership that takes into account "the processes through which decision-makers persuade their followers, and perhaps themselves, that a certain kind of action is required". Through the case studies of three different events: Shell's attempted disposal of an oil storage unit, Brent Spar; the Cuban Missile Crisis; and the War on Iraq; Grint (2005b) revealed how in each case, the 'problem' was framed in diverse ways by the decision-makers. As a consequence, the decision-makers involved promoted different solutions to the problems and the ultimate response was negotiated through the social construction of the situation.

While Grint (2005b) highlights how the construction of one 'problem' and its corresponding response can be persuaded by decision-makers, my application of Grint's (2005b) framework to the study of banking CEOs in Australia during the GFC revealed that the an apparently single 'problem'—in this case the GFC—may, at the same point in time, be constructed in different ways with different consequences for each leader by the media (Liu, 2013b). To illustrate, at the start of 2008 the Australian media concurrently framed the GFC for one CEO as a critical problem where the banking system was portrayed as being on the brink of death: "the worst credit crisis since the Great Depression was about to strangle the international banking system" (Verrender, 2008, p. 21). For another CEO however, the GFC was constructed as the 'natural' "end of the very sweet part of the credit cycle" (Gluyas, 2007, p. 19) as though it was merely a routine, and therefore, tame problem. For two other CEOs, the GFC was portrayed through metaphors of darkness (e.g., "the global credit squeeze is causing pain and clouding the outlook", Maiden, 2008, p. 12) and illness (e.g., "this is a worldwide problem, and one from which Australia is not immune", Moncrief, 2008, p. 4), which enhanced the sense of an uncertain and potentially intractable wicked problem. This finding suggests that similarly, leaders facing ethical dilemmas may find that their 'problem' is a complex, ambiguous co-construction that is irreducible to the application of universal maxims (Clegg et al., 2007).

My research further revealed cases in which 'congruent' constructions of the problem and response led to the leader being questioned and 'incongruent' constructions praised, suggesting that the influence of context is even more prevalent. Due to their quest for universality, existing theories of ethical leadership have for the most part ignored the ways in which leadership is embedded in the wider social, historical, and economic contexts. One only needs

to look to how in Anglo-American societies, 'leadership' has reached canonical status (Gronn, 2003) while '*führer*' and '*duce*' remain more fraught, to see this point. In the case of Australian banking CEOs, their responses to the GFC depended as much on how they positioned their response with the media's construction of the financial crisis, as well as the extent to which they were seen to conform to cultural norms and gender stereotypes, while subverting the traditional 'bastard banker' archetype (Liu, 2013b).

It is worth pointing out that while banking CEOs in my study were more readily portrayed by the media as ethical when they behaved in line with cultural and gender norms, there was little space for challenging the media's reinforcement of parochial 'insider'- 'outsider' categories and patriarchal gender roles. Examination and discussion of the context of the banking sector and its facilitation of excessive risk-taking practices faded even further away from view while the media scrutinised the images of high-profile leaders. The theorising and practice of ethical leadership in ways that are alive to the normative constraints of the wider sociocultural context have the potential to resist existing structures that enact self-interest, social exclusion, and oppression.

A more nuanced view of context has implications for ethical leadership development. The recent ethical scandals pervading the media have propelled the argument for development programmes on ethical leadership, advocating for competencies such as "communicating relevant values and ethical guidelines", "modelling ethical behaviour", and "opposing unethical practices" (Hassan, Mahsud, Yukl, & Prussia, 2013, p. 141). However, research on leadership development in general has compellingly demonstrated that development programmes based on competency frameworks offer only a false promise to reduce and rationalise the processes of leadership, while

neglecting its full relational, contextual, and embodied aspects (Bolden & Gosling, 2007; Buckingham, 2001; Carroll, Levy, & Richmond, 2008). Ethical leadership competencies espoused in the literature assume leaders act in isolation from context; and ethical conduct in organisations will be achieved by adopting generically prescribed behaviours.

Carroll et al.'s (2008) practice approach to leadership development offers a promising alternative to the individualised and decontextualised competency model. Practice theory reorients us to think about the vast majority of leadership work that is tacit, non-reflective, and non-conscious; improvised through the mundane day-to-day interactions between organisational members (Carroll et al., 2008; Chia & Holt, 2006). Carroll et al. (2008) found that leadership development informed by practice theory drew the attention of the participants to the subtler aspects of leadership. By engaging in conscious dialogue and conflict processes, critically-oriented reflective and collective sense-making, and experiential exercises to explore tacit knowledge; participants gained a heightened awareness of their intuitive 'habits' and were prompted to unlearn established norms of practice (Carroll et al., 2008). Ethical leadership developed via a practice approach has the potential to engage with the organisational reality described by Bauman and Tester (2001) as mired in ambiguity and uncertainty, where leaders' navigation through moral dilemmas is more likely to be achieved through on-the-spot coping than the conscious, deliberate application of ethical rules or planned modelling of ethical conduct.

## Ethical leadership as depoliticised

In a Foucauldian sense, micro-level practices of leadership can be understood to both reflect and reproduce wider systems of thought around power, authority, and legitimacy. In the context of Western (particularly North American) scholarship from which the vast majority of leadership theories are born, discourses of leadership have been constructed in white, middle class, heterosexual, and (certain) masculine terms. This prevailing discourse has venerated expressions of leadership as 'heroic', 'dominant', and 'charismatic', along with more recent trends towards 'entrepreneurial', 'innovative', and 'sustainable'. This leads me to my final critique of ethical leadership theory, which can also be argued of leadership in general; namely, the illusion that leadership is apolitical.

Mainstream leadership theories and popular management texts have come to form a 'regime of truth' (Foucault, 1980) where discourses of leadership as masculine, white, middle class, and heterosexual have been rendered orthodoxy. At the same time, leaders are often constructed as a 'democratised self' (Townley, 2002), capable of passing judgement on what is deemed ethical and unethical from a detached, abstract, and universal point of view. That is why despite all its scholarly and practitioner attention, mainstream accounts of leadership continue to ignore wider societal power structures that enable certain individuals to rise to positions of leadership more readily than others. The politically-blind practice and theorising of leadership only serves to reinforce those existing power structures.

Critical studies of leadership have attempted to stand outside this truth regime and question it. Kerfoot and Knights (1993) demonstrated how particular forms of masculinity are sustained and privileged in managerial practice. On one hand, 'paternalistic masculinity' steeped in 19th Century bourgeois values construct leaders as wise father figures who under the guise of 'care', reinforce hierarchical social relations by constructing others as in need of protection. This form of masculinity is entangled with 'competitive masculinity', which promotes the insatiable quest for material and symbolic success, and conquest and domination become taken-for-granted ways of relating to the world (Kerfoot & Knights, 1993). Gender performances in turn reinforce the unequal social division of men from women, and some men from other men (Kerfoot & Knights, 1993). They are often played out via micro-level practices such as sexualised banter (Kerfoot & Knights, 1993), homosocial bonding (Roper, 1996), and obsession with sports and fitness (Johansson, 2013).

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How discourses of race, and in particular, whiteness are entrenched in managerial practice remain relatively uncharted. Mainstream theories of leadership are mostly silent on race and ethnicity, reflecting the assumption that leadership theories are and should be universal. The underrepresentation of non-white leaders in business and politics in Western countries, however, signals that the habits and structures of white privilege, while often concealed, remain resilient and widespread (Sullivan, 2006).

Racial theory suggests that like gender, racial norms are reflected and reproduced in mainstream leadership theory. Take for example the habit of ontological expansiveness, where white people “tend to act and think as if all spaces—where geographical, psychical, linguistic, economic, spiritual, bodily, or otherwise—are or should be available for them to move in and out of as they wish” (Sullivan, 2006, p. 10). This habit echoes the belief that leaders possess the ability and the right to assert their dominance over—to ‘colonise’—followers, organisations, industries, and societies.

Further examples can be found of how discourses of heterosexuality are embedded in the performance of leadership as seduction and sexual conquest (Calás & Smircich, 1991; Kerfoot & Knights, 1993; Sinclair, 2007); how class divisions support the leader as controller metaphor (Western, 2008), while in Australia, media representations of CEOs imply an identification with the working class via superficial markers of ‘rags to riches’ narratives, casual dress, and the use of slang, that obscure wider problems of income disparity (Liu, 2013a); how physically attractive, tall, athletic, able-bodied leaders are seen to be more fit to govern others because they are believed to govern themselves (Jackson & Scott, 1997; Johansson, 2013; Sinclair, 2012); and how Christian discourses shape ideas of leaders as transformational/transcendental and leadership as the evangelical pursuit of

certain truth, establishment of totalising cultures, and the conquest of new markets (Western, 2008).

The principles of hegemonic masculinity, whiteness, and the middle class have come to guide the ways in which organisational life and Western societies are organised. Discourses of gender, race, and class are further enmeshed with capitalist discourses of self-interest, rationality, and competition that are reliant on the capitalist imaginary of endless growth. Its unreflexive reproduction of gender norms (even while ironically advocating for more ‘feminine’ traits), racial norms (while advocating for ‘cultural intelligence’), and class norms (while advocating for ‘flatter’ structures) are just some examples of how leadership perpetuates self-defeating practices that preserve rather than disrupt the status quo.

I see a key purpose of ethical leadership theorising as about challenging these deeply problematic regimes of truth about leadership and articulating ways through which leadership could be practised and developed with emancipatory intent. The concept of emancipation is deeply embedded in the tradition of critical theory and the principles of the Frankfurt School (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992; Fournier & Grey, 2000). Research following these principles attempts to expose and resist power relations and structures in society and ultimately aspires to human freedom and liberation from oppression. For Foucault, power is not a commodity that can be acquired, seized, or shared. Rather, power is relational and resides with the practices, techniques, and procedures through which it is exercised (Foucault 1980).

To resist against the power wielded through the ways in which people, organisations, economies, and societies are organised requires us to go beyond denouncing individuals and institutions. For example, it is insufficient to cast blame for the recent financial crisis on unethical leaders, risky banks, or regulators who supposedly ‘fell asleep at the wheel’. Besides, a practice approach suggests that actions on the part of bankers and regulators are largely non-reflective and non-conscious (Carroll et al., 2008; Chia & Holt, 2006); entrenched in institutionalised habits and practices. In the case of the financial crisis, power is resisted instead by questioning how the relations between individuals and institutions are rationalised; including how leadership is shaped by the intersecting dominant discourses of capitalism, masculinity, heteronormativity, whiteness, and the business class elite.

The purpose of leadership, in my view, is not far from this aspiration for research. Like research, leadership is a political act. It has the potential to draw together all members of society, including those who have been rendered marginal, weak, and voiceless, yet is too often conceptualised as a vehicle for individual heroism and the acquisition of power and profit. I have in the preceding sections argued for the importance of approaches to leadership theorising and development that is alive to the relational, contextual, and political aspects of its nature. I now synthesise these ideas by drawing on the concept of corporeal ethics as originally theorised by Australian philosopher Rosalyn Diprose (2002), and applied to the context of organisations by Hancock (2008) and Pullen and Rhodes (2013), to articulate an approach to ethical leadership practice driven by the ideals of equality, justice, and emancipation.

The theme of corporeality has emerged in leadership studies in recent years with a growing awareness and examination of the embodied nature of leadership and the role bodies play in the aesthetic and affective dimensions of leadership (Ladkin, 2013; Pullen & Vachhani, 2013; Ropo & Parviainen, 2001; Sinclair, 2005). Embodiment theory challenges the Cartesian separation between mind and body, seeing psyche and physicality as intricately connected to one another (Wolkowitz, 2012). A corporeal lens reveals however, that leadership until recently has been an over-cognitived phenomenon that neglected to consider the human body as a primary site for one's subjective engagement with the material world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Pullen & Vachhani, 2013; Ropo & Parviainen, 2001). A corporeal ethics approach to ethical leadership addresses this oversight and the three limitations outlined in this paper.

Central to Diprose's concept of corporeal ethics is an understanding that ethical subjectivity is co-constructed through inherently embodied and political relations. This view eschews the notion of a universal moral law (Hancock, 2008) and is instead consistent with a social constructionist perspective of leadership; recognising that what it means to lead ethically emerges from the interpersonal interactions between organisational members. For Diprose, this interaction must be fundamentally grounded in generosity. Diprose (2002, p. 4) does not confine 'generosity' to its popular understanding as an individual virtue often conceived as "the expenditure of one's possessions". Her generosity is that of a "dispossession of oneself"—an openness to others that is fundamental to human existence (Diprose, 2002, p. 4). At a relational level, corporeal ethics emerges through the affective experience of being open to the other with no expectation for reciprocity, founded on a radical hospitality for the other person's difference (Hancock, 2008; Pullen & Rhodes, 2013).

The normative philosophical approaches to 'ethical leadership' are thus inimical to the concept of corporeal ethics as it attempts to consume the other into one's own pre-existing system of ethical knowledge (Hancock, 2008; Pullen & Rhodes, 2013). Social scientific examinations of perceptions of ethical leadership concerned with maintaining corporate reputation and public trust are also called into question from a corporeal ethics standpoint for partly translating ethical responsibility into a means to an organisationally sanctioned end (Rhodes, 2012). Leadership exercised with a corporeal ethic would place one's encounters with others before any detached, institutionalised set of conditions about what it means to be 'ethical'.

Like Pullen and Rhodes (2013), I am particularly inspired by the practice of corporeal ethics as an explicitly political project. Corporeal ethics attends to the failure of leadership as more often the exercise of power that closes down difference than one that draws on its potential to disrupt exclusionary and oppressive regimes of truth. Leadership grounded in corporeal ethics resists the norms and values that "coagulate the self, rendering it unable to openly welcome the other in generosity" (Pullen & Rhodes, 2013, p. 8). These norms and values include the ways through which leadership is rationalised; where conventions privileging masculinity, heteronormativity, whiteness, and the business class elite do violence to those who do not conform to those standards in the forms of judgement, correction, condemnation, and ridicule (Diprose, 2002).

Ho (2009) in her ethnography of Wall Street bankers observed this in the ways people of colour were excluded from the social networks of their senior leaders (receiving no "invitations to the Hamptons", p. 113), and how female administrators arriving to work in their running shoes from their longer commutes outside Manhattan were ridiculed for their "tacky" style by higher-ranking women (p. 117). The elevation of agentic 'leaders' from passive 'followers' also constructs those lower down on the organisational hierarchy as homogenous commodities to be exchanged and utilised in the pursuit of organisational goals (and thus the reinforcement of that hierarchy).

The political practice of ethical leadership is centred on the dispelling of this violence against others. For members at all levels of an organisation, ethical leadership is enacted via the commitment to resist oppressive forms of power as they emerge in the discourses of everyday interactions and micro-level processes. Resistance is more likely exercised via "micro-emancipations" rather than large-scale revolts that carve out multiple spaces for autonomy (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992, p. 446). It involves identifying specific, concrete practices and transforming them from facilitators of control into vehicles of liberation (Spicer, Alvesson, & Kärreman, 2009). By way of example, employees who have been constructed by management as being in competition may find the means to open oneself to another in generosity and disrupt the oppressive institutionalised relations of power through sharing information and resources, open and vulnerable communication, and solidarity.

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**Leadership exercised with a corporeal ethic would place one's encounters with others before any detached, institutionalised set of conditions about what it means to be 'ethical'.**

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For leaders, my reimagination of ethical leadership calls for a generous willingness to relinquish power and privilege produced via unequal structures. This need not come in the form of a self-sacrificial act where leaders distribute power equally to all organisational members. After all, Grint (2010) rightfully points out that sustained distribution of leadership and power in organisations are notable for their absence. He considers if the quest to displace heroic conceptualisations of leadership is ultimately futile due to the sacred nature of leadership marked by separation (between leaders and the led); sacrifice (as seen in the scapegoating of both followers and leaders); and silence (of both followers' fear and dissent) (Grint, 2010).

Although I question the idea that sacredness is intrinsic to leadership, being reminded by Halperin (2002, p. 21) that "in history as in love, the real harm in power imbalances comes not from the dissymmetry of itself but from the its sentimentalisation or institutionalisation"; I nevertheless acknowledge that ethical leadership could be enacted without the radical de-sacralisation of leaders. However, what is valorised as sacred in leadership needs to be renegotiated collectively between leadership scholars, developers, and practitioners (comprising members at all levels of the organisation) beyond sentimentalised categories and hierarchies that continue to close us off from generosity to others.

## Conclusion

I have through this article attempted to denaturalise the seemingly immutable ideas that leadership is essentialised within an individual located at the top of a hierarchy and measured by material and symbolic success; in other words, leadership as synonymous with masculinity, whiteness, and the business class elite. I argue that ethical leadership be reimagined via a feminist, communitarian, and corporeal ethic (Denzin, 2009; Diprose, 2002; Hancock, 2008; Pullen & Rhodes, 2013) that has the potential to resist existing structures of power. I propose that this reimagination begins with understanding ethical leadership as occurring in the space between people, intimately embedded in context, and necessarily a political act that can and ought to be exercised towards goals of equality, justice, and emancipation.

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**My reimagination of ethical leadership calls for a generous willingness to relinquish power and privilege produced via unequal structures. This need not come in the form of a self-sacrificial act where leaders distribute power equally to all organisational members.**

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### About the author

Helena Liu is a Research Fellow at the Swinburne Leadership Institute and Lecturer in HRM & Organisation Studies at the Swinburne Business School.

She completed her PhD last year at the University of Sydney Business School. Her research focuses on the discursive construction of leadership. This approach has led her to examine the ways in which leaders apologise and account for failure and the media representation of authenticity among banking CEOs during the Global Financial Crisis. Central to her work is a critical disposition towards the gendered, racialised, and classed nature of how we have come to understand 'leadership.'

Dr Liu is a qualitative researcher who specialises in visual and verbal discourse analysis. She has published in *Management Communication Quarterly* and *Journal of Global Mobility*.

She is currently involved in collaborative projects exploring media constructions of philanthropic leaders with Dr Christopher Baker and leadership practices in Australian banks during and post-GFC with Dr Roshanthi Dias.

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(03) 9214 5717  
PO Box 218 Hawthorn VIC 3122  
leadershipinstitute@swin.edu.au  
swinburne.edu.au/leadership-institute

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