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Women leader/ship development: mindfulness and well-being

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Women leader/ship development: mindfulness and well-being

Women
leader/ship
development

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to propose mindfulness (e.g. practices such as yoga, meditation) as a fruitful addition to women leader/ship development research and practice, specifically as a means through which to prevent and mitigate negative health outcomes.

Design/methodology/approach – This is a literature review-based paper that integrates scholarly research on gender and women's leadership, well-being (including stress reduction), women leader/ship development and mindfulness.

Findings – Women continue to be under-represented in senior leadership roles and many confront a “labyrinth” of “gender-organization-system” challenges throughout their careers. These challenges can have material effects on the well-being of women leaders. Research reveals positive psychological and biological effects of mindfulness practices on well-being (including stress). Some of this research reveals that women are more likely to engage in mindfulness practices and experience greater benefits. Leader/ship development programs designed specifically for women are needed, and it is proposed that incorporating mindfulness into these programs may result in beneficial outcomes for women leaders.

Originality/value – This research contributes to the limited body of work on women leader/ship development, mindfulness and leadership.

Keywords Well-being, Leadership, Women leaders, Leadership development, Mindfulness, Leader development

Paper type Literature review

Introduction

It has been argued that differences in leadership styles and effectiveness of men and women leaders are minimal and that women may even experience a gender advantage as leaders (Eagly and Carli, 2003; Rosette and Tost, 2010; Vecchio, 2002; 2003). Further, both men and women in formal positions of authority (e.g. leadership roles) experience high workloads and resulting stress (Campbell *et al.*, 2007; Torkelson and Muhonen, 2003), signaling that leadership is fraught with challenges regardless of gender. Women, however, continue to be under-represented in senior leadership roles and many confront a “labyrinth” (Eagly and Carli, 2007) of “gender-organization-system” (Fagenson, 1990) challenges throughout their careers (Broadbridge and Fielden, 2015; Mavin and Grandy, 2016a). These challenges can have material effects on the well-being of women leaders. “Women managers encounter various kinds of demands that can make them more vulnerable to health problems [including stress], but also more inclined to leave managerial careers” (Muhonen, 2011, p. 429, insert added). Despite this, leader/ship development programs rarely take into account gender and women's experiences of learning leadership (Bryans and Mavin, 2003; Ely *et al.*, 2011; Hopkins *et al.*, 2008; Stead, 2014a; 2014b; Stead and Elliott, 2009). As such, we are



interested in exploring ways through which leader/ship development programs designed for women might be enhanced. Specifically, we explore mindfulness as one such approach.

A nascent body of work on leadership and mindfulness suggests that mindfulness practice (e.g. yoga, meditation) is an effective means to improve well-being (e.g. reduce stress) (Ladkin, 2014; Wasylikiw *et al.*, 2015). Further, research outside of organization studies has concluded that women are more likely to engage in mindfulness practices (Olano *et al.*, 2015) and experience greater benefits relative to men (Katz and Toner, 2013; de Vibe *et al.*, 2013). Building upon the aforementioned work on women's leadership, well-being and mindfulness, the purpose of this research is to propose mindfulness as a fruitful addition to women leader/ship development research and practice as a means through which to prevent and mitigate negative health outcomes they might otherwise experience. We acknowledge in taking such a path we risk criticism for not fully considering the implications of what might be interpreted or implemented as a postfeminist agenda; a well-intended proposal that results in women learning to internalize a sense of responsibility for their success without acknowledgement of systems and practices that are embedded in gendered power that reinforces a masculine norm (Mavin and Grandy, 2016a; Mumby and Ashcraft, 2006; Stead and Elliott, 2012). This is certainly not our intent and thus we tread this path with caution.

The impetus for this research is in many ways personal for both authors. The first author's experiences with yoga and meditation as means through which to manage stress and observing more women than men engaged in yoga and other mindfulness practices triggered her interest in this topic. The second author has "dabbled" in meditation practice as a way to manage stress, and she has also made efforts in recent years to incorporate mindfulness into the leadership courses she teaches. Our discussions about these experiences led to a combined interest in exploring the possibilities of mindfulness in women's leader/ship development. Specifically, two research objectives emerged from our discussions and subsequent review of the literature:

- (1) to review and integrate existing literature on gender and women's leadership, well-being (including stress) and women leaders, women leader/ship development and mindfulness; and
- (2) to propose mindfulness as a fruitful addition to women leader/ship development programs, outline avenues of research in this area and consider the implications for practice.

There is considerable research on leader/ship development generally (Dinh *et al.*, 2014), yet gender considerations (e.g. management and leadership as historically and culturally associated with masculinity and men (Connell, 1987; Gherardi, 1994)), are rarely acknowledged or problematized in such research. Thus, complexities faced by many women leaders (e.g. double bind; discrimination) are rarely addressed in leader/ship development programs (Ely *et al.*, 2011; Hopkins *et al.*, 2008; Stead, 2014a; 2014b). Our look at mindfulness as an addition to women's leader/ship development programme does not address gender bias directly, rather we suggest it offers a means through which negative health outcomes that some women may face as a result of gender bias are minimized. We acknowledge that women leaders are not a homogenous group and the experiences of women leaders are diverse. Our intent is not to suggest that mindfulness is *the* way to address the myriad of gender-organization-system (Fagenson, 1990) complexities that *some* women leaders may face. We are also aware that our exploration may unintentionally serve to "perpetuate stereotypes about possible differences between women and men leaders" (Stead and Elliott, 2012, p. 388), and this may not reflect the "real" experiences of some women leaders. Our intent is to propose *one way* through which women leaders, whose experiences do involve

navigating through such a “labyrinth” (Eagly and Carli, 2007), might mitigate some of the negative health and well-being outcomes resulting from said complexities.

In integrating three streams of literature to propose mindfulness as a fruitful way forward for women leader/ship development our contribution is threefold. First, we contribute to the limited body of research on women leader/ship development and programs. We use the work of Ely *et al.* (2011), Stead and Elliott (2012) and Stead (2014a; 2014b) as a springboard from which to direct attention to mindfulness as an area of consideration for women leader/ship development. Second, we advance Muhonen (2011) and Auster and Ekstein’s (2005) research on stress and women leaders and suggest mindfulness, a relatively understudied but potentially effective means, as an avenue through which to recognize and address negative health-related effects that some women leaders experience. Third, we extend the emerging body of work in organization studies on mindfulness and leadership (Ladkin, 2014; Roche *et al.*, 2014; Wasylkiw *et al.*, 2015).

In what follows we first review literature on women’s leadership to highlight some of the complexities that women leaders may experience. Following that we review the literature on women leader/ship development. We then propose mindfulness as a way forward for women leader/ship development and outline an agenda for future research in this area.

Complexities facing women leaders

We understand gender to be a complex socially constructed, historical, cultural, (micro) political and embodied praxis that informs our (and others) perceptions and enactments of masculinity and femininity (Mumby and Ashcraft, 2006; Stead, 2014b; West and Zimmerman, 1987). Gender is an ongoing accomplishment with material effects and women leaders do gender in ways that both challenge and sustain a gendered order^[1] (Mavin and Grandy, 2016a):

Like gender, femininity is socially constructed and contextual; it changes over time, has multiple permutations and “acceptable” femininity may be perceived differently on the basis of, for example, race and sexual orientation (Chow, 1999) (Krane *et al.*, 2004, p. 316) (Mavin and Grandy, 2016b, p. 381).

We accept that understandings and experiences of gender, masculinity and femininity are fluid (Due Billing, 2011; Mavin and Grandy, 2012). At the same time, we align with Mavin and Grandy (2012) and contend that while gender binaries can be challenged and unsettled, a binary divide is pervasive and continues to inform and restrict how men and women do gender.

Feminist scholars in organization and management studies have long argued that historical and cultural associations of masculinity (e.g., self-centered, rational, strong willed, decisive, achievement/progress oriented, disembodied) continue to underpin mainstream management and leadership research and education, as well as the practice of what is perceived to be effective leadership (Dever and Mills, 2015; Gherardi, 1994; Kilgour, 2015; Mavin and Grandy, 2012; 2016a; 2016b; Schein, 1973; 1975). Such researchers also highlight how these taken-for-granted assumptions have implications for women’s career advancement, how they do gender and how they learn to become leaders. Women leaders “operate within gendered contexts whereby patriarchy as socio-structural practices (Walby, 1989) shapes gendered relations” (Mavin and Grandy, 2016b, p. 381). Women leaders must learn to negotiate practices and processes within a context of gendered power that reinforces a masculine norm (Mavin and Grandy, 2016a; Mumby and Ashcraft, 2006; Stead and Elliott, 2012).

Leadership is a relational and gendered process of becoming (Mavin and Grandy, 2016a). In the context of this research, we consider women leaders to be not only those holding formal positions of authority but also those “aspiring” women leaders who are precariously navigating what can be a confusing, misleading and treacherous path toward elite, power-based, positional leadership.

Research has revealed that women are as effective as men in leadership, and women may even experience a “female leader advantage” (Eagly and Carli, 2003; Rosette and Tost, 2010). There is also evidence to support the notion that perceptions of gender-stereotyped traits/behaviors are evolving (Bosak and Sczesny, 2011). Yet, women remain significantly under-represented in executive leadership roles (Glass and Cook, 2016; O’Neil *et al.*, 2015) and despite some progress and more women accepting leadership roles, women continue to face “second-generation bias” (Ely *et al.*, 2011). Ely *et al.* (2011) describe second-generation bias as “powerful yet often invisible barriers to women’s advancement [...] aris[ing] from cultural beliefs about gender, as well as workplace structures, practices, and patterns of interaction that inadvertently favor men” (p. 475). These barriers manifest in various ways and can have significant negative outcomes for women.

In their literature review on the intersections of women’s career development, women’s intra-gender hierarchical relationships at work, and gender equity, Hurst *et al.* (2016) speak to the gender biases of what is perceived as “men’s” work, or that which is task and production oriented, versus “women’s” work, which is more interpersonal in nature, and the impact this has on the career trajectory of women leaders. Women’s careers tend to be less intentionally planned and include a greater number of interruptions (Hurst *et al.*, 2016). Women are also often less inclined to engage in networking opportunities, feeling that they are using others and being inauthentic (Hurst *et al.*, 2016). In advocating for women only leader/ship development programs, Ely *et al.* (2011) suggest that women leaders also have to make sense of their *a priori* beliefs about gendered stereotypes, the perception and undervaluing of their own skills and abilities, as well as felt dissonance between expected and actual roles.

Through a review of relevant studies of managerial and working women, Nelson and Burke (2000) explore executive women’s health. They contend that women have fewer developmental and advancement opportunities and lack equal access to the influential mentoring relationships from which their male counterparts benefit, a notion further supported by the recent work of Holton and Dent (2016). Holton and Dent (2016) conducted 20 interviews and surveyed 1,402 senior women leaders from a range of sectors and countries to better understand their career experiences. While more than half of those surveyed perceived they were evaluated fairly in the area of promotion (relative to men), overall, the women in their study reported confronting more barriers than men and being judged differently in regards to their behaviors and leadership abilities. The research revealed gender-related bias in career development structures persists and that a masculine norm continues to inform understandings of leadership, management and leader.

As it relates to mentoring and career advancement, Ibarra *et al.* (2010) suggest that while women do have access to mentoring relationships, these relationships are often less effective and have less impact on their career trajectories, given that their mentors tend to come from lower, less influential ranks. They also conclude that men are more likely than women to have mentors who serve as sponsors, using their influence to advocate for their mentees. Ibarra *et al.* (2010) interviewed 40 “high potential” men and women participating in a company-based mentoring programme of a multinational firm. They also analyzed the result of a Catalyst 2008 survey of more than 4,000 “high potential” men and women.

Much of the discourse around women's leadership continues to focus on the ways in which women are perceived to lead (in comparison to men) and the sex role stereotyped expectations held of women (Eagly and Carli, 2007; Eagly and Johnson, 1990; Hovden, 2010; Kawakami *et al.*, 2000). Women leaders are often described as more democratic or communal (versus agentic), e.g. relational, empathetic, cooperative (Carli, 2015; Hurst *et al.*, 2016; Rhee and Sigler, 2015). Mavin *et al.* (2004) argue that rather than seeing increasing numbers of women in management and leadership roles, men are instead being asked to "feminize" their styles. Furthermore, the glass cliff phenomenon suggests that women leaders assume and are seen to be fitting for senior positions in failing organizations, thereby increasing the likelihood of women leaders' "failure" and sustaining beliefs that women are ill suited for leadership roles (Cook and Glass, 2014; Haslam and Ryan, 2008). We suggest that the pervasive undertone across the literature is one of a double bind faced by women leaders. Women must navigate within a gendered order where masculinity (read men, not women) are valued and promoted, and effective leaders (read men) enact agentic qualities such as confidence, assertiveness and dominance (Bosak and Sczesny, 2011; Debebe *et al.*, 2016; O'Neil *et al.*, 2015):

Women leaders find themselves in a double bind [...] if they are highly communal, they may be criticized for not being agentic enough. But if they are highly agentic, they may be criticized for lacking communion, (Eagly and Carli, 2007, p. 66).

This leaves women leaders in the position of being negatively evaluated, regardless of the course of action taken (Debebe *et al.*, 2016). In effect, women leaders are expected to "do gender well" in alignment with aspects of femininity (e.g. communal), yet may be punished for violating norms of perceived effective leadership (e.g. agentic) (Mavin and Grandy, 2012). At the same time, women leaders are also expected to "do gender differently" (e.g. agentic), but in doing so risk being seen as norm violators, by not conforming to gender role stereotypes (Mavin and Grandy, 2012).

These gender-based complexities are further compounded when we consider more generally the extensive demands (e.g. on time) and expectations (e.g. meeting the diverse needs of stakeholders) placed on *both* men and women in doing leadership. A report published by the Center for Creative Leadership on the stress of leadership concluded that nearly 90 per cent of those surveyed (mostly men) indicated work is a primary source of stress and that holding a formal position of authority (re: leadership role) increases the level of stress (Campbell *et al.*, 2007). Workplace stress is therefore not limited to women leaders, but research reveals that the sources (and manifestations) of stress for women can be different and that they are often gender-related (Burke, 2002; Gyllensten and Palmer, 2005; Lundberg and Frankenhaeuser, 1999; Nelson and Burke, 2000; Rivera-Torres *et al.*, 2013). For example, in their work on executive coaching and women's leadership development, O'Neil *et al.* (2015, p. 256) suggest that "trying to balance and/or integrate work and life responsibilities has been repeatedly noted as a primary concern for women in leadership roles" (Sandberg, 2013; Slaughter, 2012).

Nearly 35 years ago, Cooper and Davidson (1982) indicated that 71 per cent of the 135 women executives they studied revealed workplace stress was negatively affecting their health; both psychological and physical well-being, with the former reported more often. Stress in women is more predominantly manifested in the form of anxiety and depression (Beatty, 1996; Rivera-Torres *et al.*, 2013). Glass and Cook (2016) report that the effects of increased scrutiny and negative evaluation of women leaders results in lower job satisfaction, higher rates of depression, turnover and withdrawal. Muhonen's (2011) research with 38 women managers and professionals ("higher" and "lower" level positions)

working in banking, engineering, social welfare work and urban planning reveals that these negative effects can manifest in a myriad of ways including: burnout, exhaustion, heartburn, ulcers, migraines, weight gain and insomnia. Muhonen (2011) concludes that the “healthy” women leaders in the study were characterized by stability in their work *locus* of control beliefs.

Women have also been shown to use different coping mechanisms than men (Nelson and Burke, 2000; Watson *et al.*, 2011). Men frequently engage in “action-oriented” coping responses (e.g. sports, exercise), whereas women more frequently engage in “emotion-focused” strategies (e.g. venting, avoidance), relying more heavily upon social support networks both within and outside of the workplace (McKeen *et al.*, 2000; Nelson and Burke, 2000). Yet, as noted earlier, women (leaders) often do not have the time or opportunity to invest or engage with these networks to fully capitalize on their benefits either personally or professionally (Eagly and Carli, 2007; Holton and Dent, 2016).

In summary, women’s leadership takes place within an intricate and complicated web of considerations. We contend that navigating through this web has a number of material effects that extend beyond the lack of women promoted to senior leadership roles; it can negatively affect women leaders’ well-being. As such, following Ely *et al.* (2011) and Stead (2014a; 2014b), we suggest leader/ship development for women should take into account gender considerations and in turn search for ways through which to enhance traditional “one-size fits all” leader/ship development programs.

Women leader/ship development: the need for a different approach?

While our overall intent with this paper is to propose the addition of mindfulness “training” in women leader/ship development as a means through which to prevent and mitigate negative health outcomes, it is important to establish a backdrop where the need for and value of women only leader/ship development is outlined. We suggest that leader/ship development programs need to be designed and delivered in ways that take into account the complexities of women’s leadership. Ely *et al.* (2011) assert:

Practitioners and educators lack a coherent, theoretically based, and actionable framework for designing and delivering leadership programs for women. Lacking such a framework, many adopt an “add-women-and-stir” approach (Martin and Meyerson, 1998, p. 312), simply delivering the same programs to women that they deliver to men. This approach assumes that gender either does not or should not matter for leadership development (p. 475).

Based on their experiences of designing and delivering more than 50 women’s leadership development programs, Ely *et al.* (2011) outline particular approaches to 360-degree feedback, coaching, negotiations, leading change and career transitions intended to:

[...] give participants a more nuanced understanding of the subtle and pervasive effects of gender bias, how it may be playing out in their development as leaders, and what they can do to counter it (p. 486).

Similar to Ely *et al.* (2011), we are not advocating for a “fix the women” approach (Ely and Meyerson, 2000) to leader/ship development, rather space that takes into account the diverse experiences of women.

O’Neil *et al.* (2009; 2015) contend that a gender-neutral or gender-free approach “for developing women does not adequately address women’s specific developmental needs or take into account the gendered contexts in which women work” (O’Neil *et al.*, 2009, p. 76). Others have argued that gender blindness in management education has a marginalizing and thus detrimental effect on women (leaders) (Mavin *et al.*, 2004; McKeen *et al.*, 2000;

Smith, 1997; Stead, 2014b). While Bhavnani (1997, p. 149) asserts that women-only “training” may “reinforce traditional gendered roles”, she also contends “alternatively it can actively challenge the subordination of women”. A 1995 task force report originating out of Australia, known as the Karpin Report (Smith, 1997), identified gender-based effects in management education delivery and learning, in turn, negatively impacting women’s progress and career trajectory. The report went on to recommend that organizations target women specifically and ensure greater attention be paid to gender and diversity in leadership development.

Debebe *et al.* (2016) acknowledge that there may be limitations to same-sex leader/ship development programming; however, they also argue there are advantages. They go on to state:

Leadership development programs have the potential of fostering transformational change by creating learner awareness of problematic habitual patterns and providing a safe space for envisioning and practicing alternative patterns. If these changes are sustained after the leadership development program, the new patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving mature and contribute to increased leadership effectiveness (Velsor *et al.*, 1998; Wexley and Baldwin, 1986; Debebe *et al.*, 2016, p. 233).

We concur that leader/ship development programs should be designed to address the varied development needs of women, and of particular interest to us is incorporating aspects that pertain specifically to improving wellness (e.g. reducing stress).

Mindfulness as a way forward for women leader/ship development

Mindfulness is often described as focused, present moment attention or awareness. Through the use of a given practice, or combination of practices (e.g. yoga, meditation), it is argued that a leader develops a capacity for continual redirection of attention, divestment in outcome, and an increased ability to respond to situations, thoughts and feelings, rather than habitually react; developing skills that allow leaders to improve focus, and relationships, reduce stress and respond in a more competent and thoughtful manner (Apple, 2015; Fries, 2009; Hunter and Chaskalson, 2013; McKee *et al.*, 2006; Roche *et al.*, 2014; Sauer and Kohls, 2011). Dhiman’s (2009) review of mindfulness and leadership provides a historical look at the origins and evolution of mindfulness. While there are many approaches to mindfulness, mindfulness-based training and programming are often grounded in the work of Jon Kabat Zinn who, in the 1980s, popularized the concept through the secular application to stress reduction and pain management within clinical populations (Dhiman, 2009).

Kabat Zinn’s mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) programme, originally designed as an alternative medical treatment programme, has been widely studied and, in many instances, has shown to have positive effects related to psychological symptoms, perceived stress and well-being (Baer, 2003; Carmody and Baer, 2008). Carmody and Baer (2008) studied symptoms of mindfulness and well-being in 174 adults reporting a series of stress-related problems, illness, anxiety and pain. They found significant positive effects of mindfulness practice (e.g. a traditional MBSR eight-week programme involving formal and informal practices of yoga, body scan and meditation) on mindfulness traits, resulting in an overall positive effect on well-being (e.g. psychological and medical symptoms, perceived stress, psychological well-being). These findings are consistent with those of Grossman *et al.’s* (2004) meta-analysis of health-related MBSR programme studies. Across 20 empirical studies of MBSR use with clinical populations, findings reveal “mindfulness training might

enhance general features of coping with distress and disability in everyday life, as well as under more extraordinary conditions of serious disorder or stress" (p. 39).

Table I provides an overview of a sample of studies related to traditional MBSR application.

Indeed, much of the research related to the application of mindfulness practices has been conducted within clinical symptom and pain management contexts. We acknowledge that in providing this historical account of mindfulness in such settings and advocating for women leader/ship development which incorporates mindfulness, we may risk sustaining the

Study (year)	Intervention	Participants	Key findings
Bazarko <i>et al.</i> (2013)	8-week telephonic MBSR (tMBSR) programme	<i>N</i> = 36 nurses	Improvements in general health decreased stress, work burnout
Carmody and Baer (2008)	8-week MBSR group programme + at home exercises; body scan, yoga, sitting meditation	<i>N</i> = 174; mixed clinical diagnosis - illness-related stress, chronic pain, anxiety, and personal and employment-related stress	MBSR participation increases in mindfulness and psychological well-being decrease in medical and psychological symptoms, perceived stress Degree of home practice significant effects in all areas (mindfulness, psychological symptoms and well-being, perceived stress), with the exception of medical symptoms
Chiesa and Serretti (2009)	Review & meta-analysis of MBSR and impact in 'healthy' people	10 studies involving "healthy" subjects	decrease in stress enhance spirituality values decrease in ruminative thinking and trait anxiety increase empathy and self-compassion
Kabat-Zinn, <i>et al.</i> (1992)	8-week MBSR course + 1 day silent meditation retreat	<i>N</i> = 22; generalized anxiety or panic disorder	decrease in scores of anxiety and depression effect persisted during three-month follow-up period
Kristeller and Hallett (1999)	6-week MBSR; 3-week post-treatment follow-up	<i>N</i> = 18; binge eating disorder	decreased frequency of binge eating increased sense of control decreased rates of depression and anxiety resulting in a better sense of overall well being
Majumdar <i>et al.</i> (2002)	8-week MBSR + 30 minute daily exercise routine + 1 day silent retreat; 3-month follow-up; meditation, yoga, body awareness	<i>N</i> = 21; chronic physical, psychological or psychosomatic illness	increase in emotional and general physical well-being significant improvements related to psychological distress, quality of life, and health enhanced sense of personal responsibility
Pipe <i>et al.</i> (2009)	Condensed 4-week MBSR	<i>N</i> = 33; nurse leaders	reduction in self-reported stress symptoms
Shapiro <i>et al.</i> (1998)	8-week MBSR; sitting meditation, body scan, yoga	<i>N</i> = 78; pre-medical and medical students	decreased rates of self-report anxiety and distress increase rates of empathy and spiritual experience

Table I.
Sample of MBSR studies

“taint” of women as inadequate for leadership. We would, however, like to draw more attention to the emerging evidence of the effectiveness of mindfulness in “healthy” subjects (Bazarko *et al.*, 2013; Chiesa and Serretti, 2009; Pipe *et al.*, 2009), in leadership and organizational contexts (Roche *et al.*, 2014), and more specifically in relation to the positive perception and favorable evaluation of mindful women leaders (Kawakami *et al.*, 2000). In the context of leadership, Ladkin (2014, p. 231) discusses the benefit of conscious breathing to tackle the physiological strains of leadership – the toll that leaders pay both emotionally and physically due to the demands of the work. She notes that conscious breathing increases one’s sense of calmness, access to one’s emotional state and a reorientation into the present moment; ultimately “quieting the mind and allowing a deeper understanding of the current situation to arise”. Similarly, Roche *et al.*’s (2014) work on how mindfulness and psychological capital impact the well-being of leaders across four samples comprising managers and entrepreneurs indicates that mindfulness is negatively related to various outcomes such as anxiety, depression and burnout.

Beach *et al.*’s (2013) research with a sample of 45 clinical-leaders also demonstrates that increased self-reported mindfulness traits[2] resulted in an increase in patient-centered communication and higher levels of patient satisfaction. In turn, this resulted in more resourceful, present and skilled leaders, simultaneously increasing performance, satisfaction and quality of life, while decreasing rates of burnout. Krasner *et al.* (2009) found similar effects from a study of an eight-week MBSR intervention with 70 primary care physicians. Post-intervention, participants reported increased scores in mindfulness and personal accomplishment, and improvements across a burnout inventory. Congruent with Beach *et al.*’s (2013) findings, Krasner *et al.* (2009) also found increased rates of patient-centered empathy.

Further empirical evidence demonstrates the impact of mindfulness across the following areas: anxiety reduction, higher-order learning, judgment accuracy, problem solving, managing uncertainty and bettering the performance of followers (as cited in Wasylkiw *et al.*, 2015). In a study with 11 mid-level health-care managers, Wasylkiw *et al.* (2015) found that post-intervention, leaders showed sustained positive changes related to perceived stress, mindfulness and effectiveness. They measured pre- and post-intervention perceived stress, as well as conducted interviews with participants and their subordinates. Changes in leader transparency and balanced processing were reported both by the leader and others.

Mindfulness training often results in improved leader capacity for reflection, increased attendance to self and others, and an increase in emotional intelligence contributing to a higher positive affect, and lower negative affect (Dhiman, 2009; Reb *et al.*, 2014; Wasylkiw *et al.*, 2015); critical traits for a leader facing a complex and ever-changing landscape. Sinclair (2015, p. 6) describes this as “bringing a state of awareness to whatever we may be doing”, contending that “mindfulness has such potential for leadership: because it can be practised in the thick of whatever we are doing or wherever we happen to be”. Given the benefits of mindfulness, leader/ship development programs that incorporate mindfulness, whether intended for men and/or women, are worthy of serious consideration. Our focus here is primarily upon women’s leader/ship development.

There is some evidence to suggest mindfulness practice offers benefits specifically to women, as it relates to the gender-based challenges they may confront. Kawakami *et al.* (2000) conclude that negative perceptions of women leaders’ effectiveness as it relates to violating gender norms, by men, may be minimized when women lead mindfully. In their two experimental design studies with college-aged men, and middle-aged business men, Kawakami *et al.* (2000) looked at whether women who were mindful (e.g. unscripted distinctions in delivery each time) when demonstrating more traditionally masculine traits

would be perceived as more effective, thus escaping the traditional gender paradox. After viewing a series of video clips, subjects in both studies rated the women on their perceived effectiveness across three domains: leadership, genuineness and warmth. By using strategies which allowed them to be “in the moment” and not focused on outcome, women were perceived as being more genuine, charismatic and overall, were rated as better leaders by the men in the studies. Coupled with this, [Olano et al. \(2015\)](#) found when they looked at 2002, 2007 and 2012 National Health Interview Survey (NHIS) data on the engagement in complementary or alternative medicine practices of US adults, that women were twice as likely than men to engage in an exercise with a mindfulness component (e.g. yoga, tai chi, qigong, meditation). The samples of other mindfulness studies implicate similar trends. For example, in [Bartlett et al.'s \(2017\)](#) study, they explored the acceptability and feasibility of a mindfulness programme, as well as the impact of mindfulness on stress, mental health and productivity, in the context of a public sector organization. In total, 95 per cent of those in the intervention group ($n = 20$) and 80 per cent of the randomized control group ($n = 100$) were women.

Other work reveals that women are more likely to experience greater benefits than men by engaging in mindfulness practices ([Katz and Toner, 2013](#); [de Vibe et al., 2013](#)). [Katz and Toner \(2013\)](#) systematically reviewed the literature related to mindfulness-based treatments and substance use disorders, and while noting that not all pointed to gender differences, several quasi-experimental studies did in fact support the notion that women show a greater tendency to self-select a mindfulness practice, while also showing greater benefit (e.g. lower substance use, craving and withdrawal at post treatment and follow-up). [de Vibe et al. \(2013\)](#) sampled 288 Norwegian undergraduate medical and psychology students (76 per cent women) using pre- and post-intervention self-report measures following a seven-week MBSR programme. They found that women students reported significant positive impacts in the areas of distress, stress, well-being and mindfulness (specifically the facets of non-reacting and non-judging, as measured by the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire).

We bridge the aforementioned work on mindfulness and women with [Debebe et al.'s \(2016\)](#) work on women's leader/ship development programs. They argue there is a need for appropriate space and mechanisms through which to challenge and reframe habitual thought and behavioral patterns, and we propose that mindfulness practices may provide this needed space. Further, anecdotal evidence presented by [Sinclair \(2015\)](#) suggests that mindfulness can assist in addressing some of the specific challenges, such as work-family role conflict, that which is experienced more often by women and women leaders ([Bararko et al., 2013](#); [Holton and Dent, 2016](#)).

Future research and in-practice considerations

Much of what the literature has shown in relation to positive leader development is the ability to learn, practice and sustain change to both internal thoughts and beliefs, and external actions and behaviours ([Dhiman, 2009](#); [Reb et al., 2014](#); [Wasylikiw et al., 2015](#)). We propose here that one way in which positive women leader/ship development may be supported and extended is through the introduction of mindfulness practices, creating a mechanism by which a leader can both internally and externally respond with present-moment awareness. To date, there is limited empirical research that looks specifically at gender and mindfulness practice, but there are indicators that this is worthy of closer examination. In this section, we outline five avenues for future research, the first three pertain to women's leader/ship development specifically and the latter two to leader/ship development more broadly.

First, whether women are more likely to engage in mindfulness activities is worthy of closer examination. Not only is mindfulness practice an effective means by which to reduce stress, distress, anxiety and depression (Khoury *et al.*, 2015), women appear to be more likely to engage in mindfulness practices relative to men (Olano *et al.*, 2015), and to experience greater benefits (Katz and Toner, 2013; de Vibe *et al.*, 2013). In addition, empirical studies conducted in a nursing context with “healthy” participants include samples comprised entirely of women (Bararko *et al.*, 2013; Pipe *et al.*, 2009). Similar questions arise from Bartlett *et al.*'s (2017) study on the acceptability and feasibility of a mindfulness programme in a public sector organization where the sample was overwhelmingly comprised of individuals who identified as women. The participation rates of women in such studies is, at least in part, a reflection of gender segregation in such professions as nursing and public sector organizations; however, it does raise interesting questions about whether women are more likely to engage in mindfulness practices and thus its suitability for women's leader/ship development programs. Further qualitative research to explore women leaders' views and experiences of mindfulness is warranted to better understand the reasons and felt benefits of mindfulness. In addition, more research is needed to better understand the extent to which women leaders do engage in mindfulness practices, and the psychological (e.g. stress perceptions) and biological (e.g. changes in salivary cortisol levels, blood pressure) benefits. Research such as this will allow us to more fully understand the potential outcomes of mindfulness in women leader/ship development.

We are cautious in assuming that all women leaders will have enough autonomy in their schedules to prioritize mindfulness as part of their leadership practice. Thus, another avenue for future research relates to unpacking the extent to which occupational role/level intersects with the likelihood of women to engage in mindfulness practices and its effects. Rosette and Tost's (2010) experimental design using undergraduate and graduate studies revealed that women in senior executive roles benefit from a “female leader advantage”. They propose that women in senior executive roles may experience less gender bias and have more leader “agency” than those in lower organizational levels, as it relates to role (in)congruity (e.g. women in leadership violating gender role stereotypes). Further, senior leaders experience a greater span of control within their job role (Burke, 2002; Grönlund, 2007), and by extension, we wonder if they may have more opportunity to incorporate alternative well-being and stress-management strategies within their day-to-day working environment. In a related vein, acknowledging that women leaders are not a homogenous group, future research should also consider how age, culture and race might intersect with gender and mindfulness practice and outcomes.

Adopting a more critical lens, we also suggest that future research consider how advocating for women only leader/ship development and mindfulness as part of leader/ship development might lend itself to an overemphasis on individualism and a neglect of “structural accounts of inequality” (Gill *et al.*, 2017, p. 227). A critical examination of how such well-intended agendas may create and sustain a postfeminist agenda which incorporates neoliberal governmentality and where women leaders assume responsibility for their own success to the extent that social and collective justice issues are erased (Mavin and Grandy, 2018; Rottenberg, 2014) is worthy of further consideration.

Shifting focus to mindfulness and leader/ship development more broadly, as discussed earlier, there is also some evidence to suggest that women and men may experience and manifest stress differently. Watson *et al.* (2011) propose a key gender difference in the onset of a stress reaction. They suggest that women experience stress immediately after perceiving a threat, whereas stress in men does not arise until after having assessed their resources with which to handle the threat. We believe further qualitative research is needed

to first more fully understand if there are differences in the onset of a stress reaction and the contextual circumstances which might contribute to those differences (e.g. in which types of situations are threats perceived and are the resources perceived to be available the same for men and women). We therefore contend that this possible difference in situational stress reaction is another reason to consider mindfulness as a worthwhile addition to leader/ship development more broadly and to further explore if mindfulness is more effective at reducing specific potentially gender-based stress responses. Given the *possible* different women–men cognitive responses to stress and results (albeit there are limited studies) that indicate that mindfulness positively impacts leaders' well-being (Roche *et al.*, 2014), more research is needed on mindfulness, stress response types and gender, as it relates to the experiences of leaders.

Finally, as for suggestions for what leader/ship programs can include as mindfulness “training” and what organizations might do to provide space for developing mindfulness practices, there are a number of ways forward. Silent meditation retreats offer an extended period of time for reflection, while sitting meditation, yoga, conscious breathing exercises and body scan all offer ways forward that require a smaller commitment of time. Recent clinical studies reveal that even brief mindfulness meditation training (e.g. 25 min for three consecutive days) positively impacts both psychological and biological stress responses (Creswell *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, hybrid MBSR programs (telephonic) better suited for off-site employees and multi-site organizations also reveal positive outcomes (Bazarko *et al.*, 2013). It is important to note, however, as reported in Wasylikiw *et al.*'s (2015) study, while leaders experience benefits from mindfulness, sustaining practices over time appears to be difficult. We propose that encouraging participants to journal their mindfulness practice over a period and providing coaching opportunities will help individuals develop a regular practice. Websites such as headspace.com have popularized meditation and offer novel and user-friendly ways to introduce and sustain meditation practices. We suggest that organizations also need to provide ongoing support such as encouraging and facilitating dedicated daily time in working schedules for mindfulness practice.

Conclusions

This paper set out to explore the possibilities of mindfulness as part of women leader/ship development. Our starting point is that organizations and leadership are gendered, women leaders are likely to experience a number of unique challenges, some of which contribute to negative health outcomes, and leader/ship development programs rarely take into account such complexities. At the same time, we acknowledge that not every woman will confront such challenges or in the same way, as a result of these gender-organization-system (Fagenson, 1990) considerations. Mindfulness is a relatively understudied area of research in management and leadership studies; however, we have demonstrated here that there is a growing body of research stemming from clinical studies and some early work in the area of leadership, which indicates the positive psychological and biological effects of mindfulness practices on well-being (e.g. stress reduction and responses). We have also discussed research that indicates women are more likely to engage in mindfulness practices (Olano *et al.*, 2015) and experience greater benefits (Katz and Toner, 2013; de Vibe *et al.*, 2013). To date very few leader/ship development programs consider that leader development needs of women *may* be different than men (Ely *et al.*, 2011). Here we propose integrating mindfulness into leader/ship development programs designed for women as one way to take into account such needs, and through which women leaders, whose experiences do involve navigating through a “labyrinth” (Eagly and Carli, 2007) of challenges, might mitigate some of the negative health and well-being outcomes resulting from said complexities.

Notes

1. Mavin and Grandy (2016b) note there are various gendered orders and offer the following as an example: organizations as patriarchal contexts where men are perceived as in their “rightful place” in various hierarchies of power.
2. In Beach *et al.*'s (2013) study, mindfulness traits were measured using the 14-item Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS).

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