

## Research in Practice and Practicing Research: Teaching Women and Leadership Discourse

Amaly Santiago and Mariaelena Bartesaghi  
*University of South Florida*

In this article, we examine the course *Women and Leadership Discourse* as research in practice. As Craig and Tracy have argued (1995; 2021), practical theory examines data from everyday practices and is consequential to social life. The course centers on women's leadership, issues of leadership dynamics, and women's roles in organizations. As scholars and instructors, we move to transform research into embodied awareness, teaching students of all genders to be poised for career satisfaction because they understand how critical encounters in organizations work, and how to navigate them. In discussing course design, we describe the pedagogical ways which facilitate collaboration, engagement, and critical thinking while using a constructive learning framework. In addition, we offer an outline of course practices and assignments that combine research, action, interest, and awareness. This model framework is an understanding of leadership as discursive construction (Fairhurst, 2007), thus providing students with the tools to manage organizational life.

*Once the president said that, I started to stand up in my seat and was going to move toward the front of the stage, which is where I would appropriately be, seeing that this was my project. But before I could even do that—for sake of anonymity, we'll call him Bill—Bill had already bolted from his seat and was halfway up to the stage. And I, I wasn't even sure initially why he was doing that. And then it dawned on me: he's just going to go up there and blatantly take credit for my work. I'm pretty sure he didn't even know a single name of one of the other people involved in this project, but he very boldly stood up on stage. He gave a speech, like it had been planned. The photographers were there. The president shook his hand. It was just so insanely blatant. And I sat back down. I think I sat back down, I can't even remember, and I was fuming. I mean, I think my blood was actually boiling.* (Harvard Business Review Podcast, *Women at Work*)

This account, drawn from the Harvard Business Review Podcast, *Women at Work*, exemplifies an all too familiar situation for corporate women. By calling it a *situation*, we wish to call attention to the contextually bound nature of each of these events, but also to how they organize communication and experience (Cooren et al., 2011), in that they recur across contexts and transcend specific roles. Women find themselves repeatedly in dynamics characterized by lack of support, microaggressions, labeling, and gendered leadership models that are not in their favor. Specifically, notice how dynamics of competitiveness, frustration, self-promotion, and leadership are manifest in this narrative and how it is a man who claims the authority to act as a leader. Approaching communicative actions such as exercising authority, claiming leadership, and assigning (as well as taking up) gender roles in organizations invites an applied and practical approach to leadership. As Barge and Craig (2009) point out, taking a practical approach means learning about research by way of practice with the goal of affecting both, and therefore:

A means by which practical theory can be tested in use but also as a means by which communication problems and practices can be conceptualized and, thereby, contribute to the construction of practical theory (p. 63).

This article is, itself, situated at the intersection of practice, theory, and the discourse of women's leadership. By discourse, we mean both small-d interactional dynamics and the Big-D social norms they create (see Gee, 2014). We, Amaly and Mariaelena, both identify as women, collaborators, and communication scholars. We both study how communication constitutes organizations and examine dynamics of authority and power, much like those discussed in the podcast. Amaly, who is the instructor of the course, was Mariaelena's doctoral student. It is now Mariaelena's time to take a back seat as the second author and to learn from Amaly. In our teaching, we are both committed to process pedagogy (see Cunningham, et al., 2017), which means we conceive of theory as embodied practice. Amaly's professional experience led her to study organizational asymmetries surrounding gender roles and, specifically, how corporate women who write books designed to advise other women about what to do for career advancement unwittingly recreate a metadiscourse of gender binary (Santiago, 2021). Mariaelena studies authority in organizational settings and the consequentiality of asymmetrical relationships. We take the view of gender as a shifting social construct that allows and disallows certain practices and performances (or category-bound activities [Sacks, 1992]), and an "omnipresent background factor that may move to the foreground at any moment" (Schnurr, 2009, p. 105).

When it comes to leadership, gender matters. Traditional ideas about leadership materialize it as a masculine doing (Schnurr, 2009), rendering women's language and discourse practices lacking on the grounds that they are non-masculine or gendered as such (Baxter, 2010; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003).

Because of popular theories of leadership as a matter of different communicative styles<sup>1</sup> as opposed to structural inequities between genders, women join organizations at a disadvantage (Holmes, 2017). Not only is their discourse "style" not valued, but the "different but equal" view may actually hurt how they do leadership. In her doctoral dissertation, Amaly examined how organizations create particular programs and training geared exclusively to prepare women for leadership positions. In turn, these initiatives index a practical metadiscourse of women's potential as leaders because "our ordinary, everyday practices of talking about what we say and do with language" (Craig, 1999, p. 21) are generative: they produce the very behaviors comprised by how we talk about our doings.

In what follows, we will first discuss research about women in the workplace and then move to how course assignments, activities, and discussions allow students to integrate theory into their practices, thus developing critical skills.

### Women's Leadership: A Brief Review

Organizational scholars have examined the barriers encountered by women in corporate leadership positions, documenting their impact on women's careers in terms of gender roles, self-concept, career decisions, threats to the status quo, distribution of unpaid labor, combining work, and caregiving (e.g., Allen et al., 2016). The scholarly literature has established that women develop "normative behaviors" (Takano, 2005) according to their roles within the status quo. According to Kisselburgh et al. (2009), these behaviors begin very early: as soon as the age of two, girls are encouraged and reinforced to engage in "play, academic subjects, and occupations that are gender appropriate" and later on, these result "in different educational exposure and perceived expectations" (p. 387). Even though governments and organizations have implemented programs and policies to avoid unfair practices (Allen et al., 2016), women still face many challenges when pursuing promotions and career advancement (Glass & Cook, 2016).

Women confront more vicissitudes when they exercise authority, and they are perceived more negatively than their male counterparts (Baxter, 2010; Ladegaard, 2011). Managerial positions have thus been associated with masculine attributes: aggressiveness, authoritativeness, competitiveness, orientation to goals, and strong-mindedness (Ladegaard, 2011). When

women do leadership and enact authority, women face the challenge of not being assessed as men, even if both men and women are held to the same leadership strategies (Mullany & Yoong, 2018).

Women are therefore caught in a no-win double-bind. This double-bind limits women's ability to engage in a full range of behaviors, and often being evaluated negatively for this (Fitzsimmons et al., 2014; Carli, 2001, 2006). Specifically, women are judged if they use linguistic characteristics that are considered too "feminine" and, therefore, lenient in their approach to others (Mullany & Yoong, 2018). If women should choose a more masculine speech style, however, they are perceived as overly authoritative (Mullany & Yoong, 2018). It is, therefore, no surprise that women's conversational strategies are characterized in terms of fostering interpersonal connection, humor, acceptance of being teased, mitigated commands, forms of politeness and attention to "face needs," and indirectness (Baxter, 2010). Therefore, the performance of leadership is an additional linguistic and communicative effort for women (something Cameron [1992] colorfully refers to as interactional shitwork).

According to Ladegaard (2011), men's authority is rarely questioned, while women's leadership is challenged; principally, it is male colleagues who challenge it. Therefore, in terms of career advancement, corporate masculinity is present and operates as the norm. As a result, women and men who aspire to grow professionally must adopt a masculine leadership style (Baxter, 2010). Because they are not implicated in the gendered metadiscourse of leadership in the same way, men are not accountable to the same categories and category-bound activities as women (Fairhurst, 2007; Sacks, 1992). For example, women are believed to be caring or polite, behaviors that are not implicated in the masculine leadership model, and thus evaluated and held accountable for behaviors that hinder them from occupying top positions.

Nevertheless, and ironically, a great deal of research proves that both males and females do leadership in similar ways (Baxter, 2010). Likewise, even though the leadership gap continues, research has documented that the most effective leadership incorporates a combination of both "masculine and feminine" traits (Cunningham et al., 2017). In this respect, Holmes and Stubbe (2003) argue that women managers are skillful, have an extensive verbal repertoire, and are flexible communicators. Additionally, women cleverly control the discourse in meetings, pay attention, negotiate agreements, and make decisions (Holmes & Stubbe, 2003).

In the sections that follow, we discuss the course assignments designed for the practical understanding of women's career advancement, leadership, and workplace issues.

## Teaching Leadership as Social Practice

Amaly noticed that our university does not offer enough courses designed to provide tools to women students as they work toward building careers. After working on her dissertation (supervised by Mariaelena), Amaly envisioned creating a course in which the classroom becomes a site of engagement (Jones, 2016) or an opportunity to experience social practice in an embodied, actionable way. In this course, students of all genders may consider their roles in leadership in organizations.

We understand communication as discourse: not merely representational, but constitutive of social relations and practices. Discourse is always action-implicative and “allows us to unveil the mechanisms by which human beings coordinate actions, create relationships, and maintain organizations” (Putman et al., 2009, as cited in Cooren, 2015, p. 12). Along these lines, leadership is a social activity that is surrounded by flows of communication and social understanding with the expectations of effectiveness (Barge, 2020). Thus, Amaly’s creation of a practical theory course offers students who desire to understand how organizations manage gendered leadership, awareness, and resources about the topic, calling particular attention to language and power relations.

### The Purpose of the Course

This seminar aims to create an understanding of leadership and provide students with the tools to manage organizational aspects, especially aspects related to women's career advancement. This course is part of the Enhanced General Education Curriculum offered to the Honors College under the Social and Behavioral Sciences (Ethical Reasoning and Civil Engagement) category. As stated on the syllabus, “this course aims to cultivate an understanding of ethical ideas and practice, evaluate these within specific dimensions of human experience, and develop skills pertaining to the realization of practice or policy within a broad context of civic engagement.”

### Building Awareness

On the first day of class, students are asked to write about their expectations for the course. Here are some of their responses; they want to “learn how leadership theory can be applied to real-life situations,” “understand organizational identities. Participate in thought-provoking conversations, learn about women's powerful roles in leadership and gain the confidence to follow their footsteps. I also want to be prepared for the obstacles women have and continue to face and learn

how to overcome them,” and “to learn how to be a good and respected leader in a company.”

The students who enroll in the class are part of the Honors College. They come from multiple disciplines such as business, engineering, computer sciences, psychology, and mathematics. Their statements are evidence of their interest, curiosity, and enthusiasm for learning more about leadership as an aspect of organizational life, its challenges, and opportunities. According to constructivist thinking (Schunk, 2012), learning is created in the relationship between individual experiences and, specifically, how they are internalized and interpreted. To facilitate this interpretive process, “the key is to structure the learning environment such that students can effectively construct new knowledge and skills” (Schunk, 2012, p. 261). Following this orientation, *Women and Leadership Discourse* sees the instructor as a facilitator who encourages students to think critically and interpret how the research material resonates with their own preconceptions and first-hand experiences.

### Course Assignments

#### *Attendance and Participation Policy*

As the syllabus states, attendance is required, and missing classes will impact students’ final grades. Students are expected to attend every class session, and in the event a student is absent, they should let the instructor know in advance. Students should complete assigned readings before class and participate in seminar discussions. The class engages in debate, workshops, and discussions where everyone contributes. The attendance policy is important because this is a discussion-based class; thus, it is required that students participate in conversations. In addition, the class activities encourage practices of leadership as collaborative.

#### *Reading Responses*

We see it as essential that students participate in the conversations about the readings and the book chapters. Over the course of the semester, the whole class engages in debates, workshops, and commentary on the topics. As a result, the discussion transforms into a collaborative and interactive process of learning about women's leadership discourse. Students submit a reading response every class. This consists of a one-page document where students interpret and discuss the ideas or concepts. Responses are not mere summaries; though they are expected to describe key points in the readings, they are also asked to explain how the issues/ideas of the readings are significant. The reading responses are intended to

help understand concepts and theories discussed by the authors and apply them to real-life professional settings.

### *Writing as Practice*

Cunningham et. al, (2017) state, we agree, that "...writing assignments become opportunities for students to discover wor(l)ds, strategies, and social implications" (p. 382). The reflection paper is a piece of writing that helps students reflect and reframe their own leadership, work, or career experiences. G. H. Mead (1962) states that when individuals use reflexivity, the "whole social process is brought into the experience of individuals involved in it" (p. 134). Students are encouraged to take up ideas of leadership, identity, workplace, and organizational culture by connecting them with their experiences and interpreting their own accounts. For this reason, the reflection paper, which is a more extended assignment of five pages, is a way of engaging in theory and practice as part of the constructive learning process by addressing practical problems and generating new avenues for action (Barge & Craig, 2009). As Barge and Craig point out, "practical theory also can be used retrospectively in the sense that it provides a set of tools" for sensemaking of past occurrences (p. 70). The reflection paper is thus a way for students to situate their own experiences, and to make sense of how best to go forward.

### *Workshops*

Workshops enhance students' knowledge and provide an immediate application. After collectively discussing the readings and the concepts, Amaly selects a series of excerpts as case studies. These excerpts may be transcripts or narratives from other scholars' research, our research, or professional real-life work situations. Workshops center on master narratives, advice, humor, and identity. For example, when talking about humor as a leadership strategy, Amaly selects various transcripts from workplace conversations that present or show this humor strategy. Amaly divides students into small groups of three students to maximize accountability during discussions. Small groups or "peer groups" is an activity that motivates students to become more active, they teach each other, and all participants are involved in the learning process (Astin, 1993 in Bruffee, 1999).

During the workshop, students analyze the transcripts and identify when the humor strategy is used and the purpose of its use. Specifically, we evaluate the goal met (transactional or relational) in that strategy and how this goal is accomplished in that conversation. Students apply concepts/ideas in this interactive activity and amplify their organizational views by examining real-work examples. Workshops are an excellent source of applications and knowledge construction by

identifying concepts and analyzing them. They are an integral part of the pedagogical process and function as collaborative evaluation (Cunningham et al., 2017) of the cases, stories, and narratives we examine, offering the instructor as a facilitator in the critical thinking process.

### *Case Presentation & Writing Analysis*

The case presentation is a group assignment in which students interact with each other by analyzing a case study. Here, students evaluate a narrative of a real-life work situation related to leadership matters. The group participants examine and engage in women's issues regarding the workplace, such as maternity leave, career changes, taking credit, organizational leadership training, and gendered assumptions. This case study permits students to collaborate and exchange knowledge. Readings and class discussions help with the situation analysis by providing the students with the sources of evidence. For this assignment, students submit a written analysis of the case (eight-page paper) and create a PowerPoint presentation to introduce the case to the class. The written analysis authorizes students to put forth arguments in which they critically examine the case to provide immediate concept applications and, in some cases, recommendations or solutions to the situation. For example, students might identify behavioral leadership assumptions against women's leadership skills that do not allow women to advance in their careers.

On presentation day, students show the evidence that supports their arguments by identifying and analyzing the case situation/problem. At this juncture, the group members collaborate to coordinate their views on the case, and they explain how these leadership issues limit women's career advancement. Like Bruffee (1999), Amaly considers that this assignment offers students to take advantage of "the nature and extent of college and university students' influence on one another by finding ways to help them recognize new facts or widened perspectives" (p. 81–82). In addition, as part of the discussion, the whole class engages in a conversation about the case's merits and recommends solutions to improve the case situation. Importantly, this presentation allows students to acknowledge and recognize what women face in organizations and how organizations deal with leadership discourse.

### *Final Project*

This final project is a small-group assignment in which students are expected to interview a professional woman. Students collect data about women's career experiences and offer an analysis focusing on leadership discourse, gender asymmetries, and career advancement,

among other professional women matters. The assignment intends to provide additional insights into women's leadership discourse and career issues. The interviewee should be a professional woman who is 35+ years old and has more than 10 years in her career. One of the purposes of the project is to interpret and contextualize the professional woman's account in relation to themes discussed in the course. For example, students evaluate experiences related to microaggressions, gender disparities, organizational culture, or carrier barriers. In fact, students have the opportunity to interact with professional women who offer their accounts and first-hand experiences. Through this learning experience and interview analysis, the interviewers (group participants) and interviewees (professional women) create the social interaction that constructs this account based on work experiences (Sarangi, 2003). During this social interaction, both the interviewer and the interviewee denote or make sense of the utterances (Sarangi, 2003).

The project also requires a written analysis paper and a presentation in podcast format. The former is a formal 10-page paper in which students present their findings and analyze the woman's account. The latter compiles collaboration, cooperation, engagement, and critical thinking. In creating the podcast, students enjoy their interaction, explain their analysis, and convey all of the project's findings in this digital format. On the day of the presentation, the small groups share their work, and classmates listen to the podcasts. In addition, the whole class engages in a discussion section in which everyone collaborates with the conversation and exchange of ideas. This assignment is grounded in generating new opportunities for meaning-making and action according to a pragmatic understanding of communicative dynamics (Barge & Craig, 2009). These first-hand experiences support what students have learned and provide a direct source of evidence regarding women's challenges in the workplace.

### Discussion and Conclusion

*Women and Leadership Discourse* focuses on a theoretical-practical approach, and the role of the instructor-facilitator is to provide a conceptual model and exemplars to apply what students learn throughout the class. Most of the assignments follow a knowledge-based development of writing in which students transform their knowledge (Jacobs & Perrin, 2021) and acquire an awareness of organizational issues. Every assigned task offers concrete social actions that expand students' understanding of leadership discourse (Jones & Norris, 2005) and its implications.

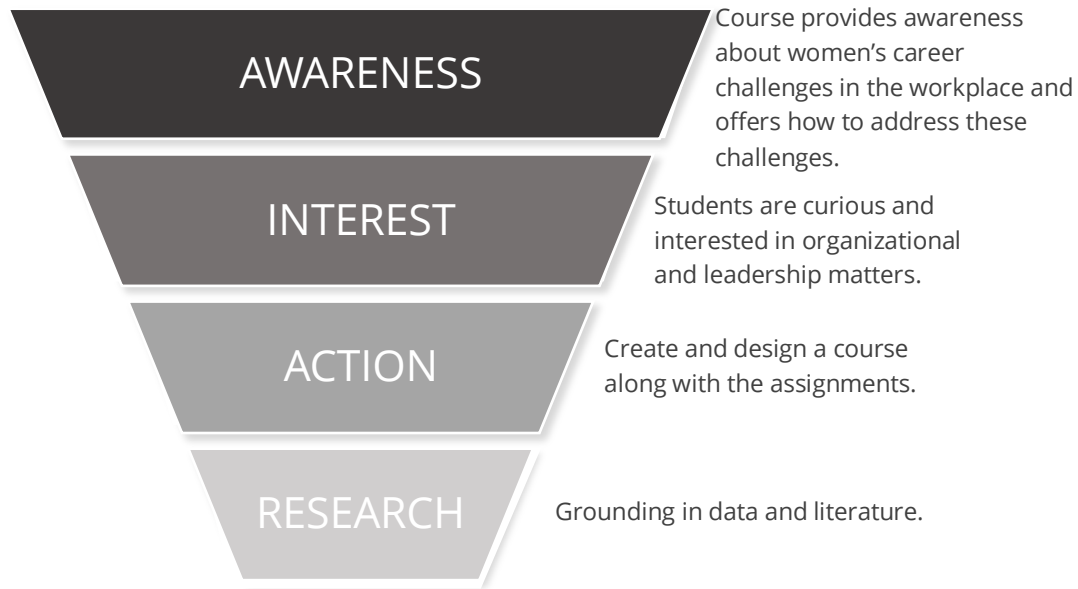
In addition, personal narratives have an important role in our discussions. The stories we study come from corporate women, leadership coaches, and interviewees

and are employed in the case studies, workshops, and interviews we analyze in the course. As Ochs and Capps (1996) argue, personal narratives transform how we pay attention to, and feel about, experiences. These narratives allow us to interact with the social actions of the stories and their application in the workplace. The use of women's accounts is valuable to our analyses and discussions because narratives are an integral part of our lives and our mundane activities, and they are not restricted to novels or tales (Bruner, 1991). Van De Microop (2021) argues, and we agree, that "stories are ubiquitous in human interaction, as people make sense of their lives through storytelling" (p. 2). Hence, real stories provide that insight into real-work situations. Often, these stories are reflections of corporate women, and these reflections are incorporated into case studies and workshops. Furthermore, we examine how these corporate women's accounts offer pieces of advice and popular expressive productions (Dolby, 2005), such as aspects that readers can identify. These personal narratives authorize the class to learn from the stories, analyze their experiences, and often offer alternate solutions.

In addition, the course model has various essential components: collaborative learning, engaging learning, and critical learning. First, the class fosters collaborative learning in the sense that everyone collaborates with each other while exploring the world with them (Bruffee, 1999). This collaboration comes from informal cooperation among students who share experiences, knowledge, and applications. Through the process of the interactive cases and final project, students also find common ground in which they exchange valuable information that applies to their assignments. Second, the course encourages engaging learning because students participate in class, present their case studies, interview professional women, and share their podcasts. This social interaction allows them to engage with constructive knowledge and awareness of women's career issues. Third, the course instructs critical learning because students are taught to analyze "the critical analysis of text in context" (Flowerdew & Richardson, 2017, p. 96). Amaly draws from critical discourse analysis (CDA) to achieve this. Because of their exposure to CDA, students are capable of "denouncing or critiquing forms of power, control, dominance, inequality, or oppression that language use contributes to reproducing" (Cooren, 2015, p. 47). In particular, Amaly teaches students to pay attention to what discourse presents or represents, the power implications of the object, and what is held as knowledge or truth (Foucault, 1972). Specifically, the class navigates tensions, asymmetries, and enactments in women's leadership discourse by making sense of experiences (case studies, interviews) and concepts learned. Most importantly, the course generates critical thinking that may lead to

**Figure 1.**

*Model: Transforming Research into a Practical Course*



concrete social actions to intervene in orthodox ideas about leadership as “masculine” in order to understand women’s leadership discourse as they enter organizational life. In her book *Lean In* and as personal advice, Sandberg (2013) argues that “we [women] need to speak out, identify the barriers that are holding women back, and find solutions.” Thus, women’s awareness is vital to their career progression.

Hence, a core aspect of this course is to adopt a view of awareness. One of the purposes of this seminar is to create an understanding of leadership and provide students with the tools to manage organizational aspects, especially aspects related to women’s career advancement. Throughout the course design, Amaly oversees the following course model: research, action, interest, and awareness.

Figure 1 shows how Amaly includes the most relevant aspects women encounter in organizations, such as microaggressions, career barriers, leadership strategies, mentoring, advice, and leadership authenticity. The applied communication focus (research) intends to apply practical theory in every single aspect of the class by creating opportunities to reinforce the learning process. Action is that tangible contribution to the curriculum in which the course is created and designed to discuss and call attention to women’s leadership discourse aspects. Interest is part of the students’ enthusiasm for learning about leadership and organizational matters that will help them in their careers. Finally, awareness is provided by engaging in

women’s career challenges in the workplace and presenting how leadership encounters are addressed and organized in organizations to the new professional generations. All of these components structure this course as a practical resource to the curriculum.

### **Reflecting on the Course**

Reflecting on the course, Amaly has considered its consequentiality to her future as instructor and academic. First, reading the reflection papers and students’ career concerns invites Amaly to revisit her own work experiences and, from that shared positionality, look for ways of helping students to overcome familiar challenges by providing them with the tools, exemplars, and awareness to manage leadership encounters. Second, the course has added new perspectives to our data analysis of leadership texts, because student accounts of their own experiences tell us that women are still confronted with communicative asymmetries, microaggressions, and career inequalities. Amaly’s research benefits from students’ testimonies since they allow her to explore new avenues related to teaching and advising others about career advancement. Third, at the end of each semester, Amaly is satisfied with having contributed to students’ understanding of how gender is organized in communication and reconstituted in ongoing workplace performances. To us, teaching (and learning) of the ways in which our identity as gendered beings in the workplace are constituted in

communication is opening the door to finding new ways of doing things, and changing dynamics which might hold us trapped, and of which we might not be fully aware.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Tannen for this popular argument (1995); as well as the biting critique of this view by sociolinguists such as Eckert & McConnell-Ginet (2003) and Cameron (1992).

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AMALY SANTIAGO, PhD, serves as an Adjunct Faculty Member at Judith Genshaft Honor College at the University of South Florida. She received her doctoral degree in Communication from the University of South Florida, specializing in organizational communication and relational communication. Her current research includes women’s leadership discourse and advice as relational, constitutive, and highly consequential social practice.

MARIAELENA BARTESAGUI, PhD, is an Associate Professor in the department of communication at the University of South Florida. Her work in discourse studies addresses authority and entitlement to experience in health, crisis, and academic settings. She engages in multidisciplinary conversations on multimodality, the co-implication of material-discursive practices, and the redistribution of agency.