Structured Abstract

Purpose: This study explores the individual lived crucible experiences of women leaders in higher education (HE) and business as the catalyst to investigate organisational inequality regimes that prevent women leaders from fully participating, contributing, and flourishing at work. Drawing upon Bolman and Deal’s four-frame theoretical organisational model, this study analyses women’s lived crucible leadership experiences to better understand the organising processes and practices that render intersectionality invisible that reinforce and perpetuate inequality regimes.

Design/methodology/approach: A collaborative autoethnographic research method was selected for data collection. The research team members each selected one significant crucible moment from their professional career and used the Gibb’s six-part reflective cycle to document their narrative and reflect on their leadership experience. A reflexive thematic analysis was used based on Braun and Clarke’s six phases.

Findings: The study features the importance of creating a climate in organizations that acknowledges the need for greater equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) to support women leaders. Four global themes emerged from the analysis of the leadership narratives: Organization, Power dynamics, Emotional distress and perseverance, and Intersectionality. These themes illuminate a greater understanding of organizational life for women and confirm the presence of inequality regimes of gender and race.

Originality: This is the first study to explore the impact of women leaders’ crucible experiences through the lens of the Bolman and Deal’s model that highlights the need to consider an EDI lens as the fifth frame.

Keywords
Women, Leadership, Inequality regimes, Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, Organisational model, Gender, Organisational culture, Organisational structure, Perseverance, Power dynamics
Women’s Crucible Leadership Experiences: Through the Lens of the Four-Frame Organisational Model

Introduction

Crucible experiences that shape leaders are often unplanned, traumatic, and intense, requiring individuals to examine themselves, their values, and assumptions (Bennis and Thomas, 2011). Exploring crucible experiences of female leaders in higher education (HE) and business illuminates that organisational structures are not gender or race neutral (Holvino, 2010). Acker (2006) argues that organising processes produce inequalities and encompass human resources (HR), informal workplace interactions (office politics), awareness of inequalities, policies, and class-based control and compliance. However, in the literature, there is a lack of consideration to gender and race, when analysing organisations perpetuating women’s struggle to navigate leadership roles (Acker, 2012; Ray, 2019). Leaders often rely on popular organisational models such as Bolman and Deal (2014), or Kotter, Lewin, Bullock and Batten (Errida and Lotfi, 2021, p.5) to create knowledge and make sense of organisational dynamics (Habermas, 1971). However, organisational models primarily created by men based on the male leader paradigm often fail to acknowledge or consider business challenges through an intersectionality lens (Healy et al., 2011; Mavin, 2001) which may in part explain the lack of women in leadership positions (Stevenson and Kaplan, 2021) and the challenges they report.

Given more than half of employees in HE and broader business sectors are women (BLS Reports, 2021; Flaherty, 2021), there is urgency to explore gendering organisational processes and the racialized nature of organisations to discover the contributing factors that perpetuate inequality regimes (Corlett and Mavin, 2014; Ray, 2019). One way to illuminate and understand the challenges women leaders face is to explore, through the lens of an organisational model, the
underlying reinforcing structures, politics, power dynamics, symbols, and HR practices and procedures that may create and maintain systems of oppression (Healy et al., 2019).

The purpose of the paper is to explore the individual crucible experiences of women leaders in HE and business by investigating inequality regimes that prevent women leaders from fully participating, contributing, and flourishing at work. This study also explores what thwarts leaders to achieve an integrated view of organisational dynamics that preclude discussion around equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) leaving organisations with mere window dressing (Vassilopoulos, 2017; Fox-Kirk et al., 2020). This study focuses on the organising processes and practices that render intersectionality invisible and reinforce and perpetuate inequality regimes by analysing women’s experiences through the lens of the four-frame theoretical organisational model1 (2014).

The paper is structured as follows: first the literature is considered, then the methodology is presented. The presentation of key findings and discussion is followed by conclusions and recommendations for organisations to adopt an intersectional lens to uncover and make sense of the challenge’s women leaders face, and take steps to address EDI issues.

Literature review

Exploring the experiences of women leaders in HE and business and learning from their crucible moments is vital to addressing the organisational structures, politics, symbols, and HR which reinforce long-standing inequality regimes that challenge women leaders (Acker, 2006; 2012; Ray, 2019). Women encounter a variety of barriers as they strive to advance and succeed in leadership positions. Byrd (2009) concluded that exclusion, lack of support, stereotypical misconceptions about their ability to lead, and disempowerment impede women leaders’ success. Although the

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1 In this paper, the abbreviation four-frame model will be used to refer to Bolman and Deal’s four-frame theoretical organisational model.
number of women leaders is growing, the prevailing organisational climate continues to perpetuate biases due to gender and race, which impedes leadership and the promotion of women to top leadership positions (Barreto et al., 2009; McKinsey & Company, 2012; 2021). Leadership and social ranking are intrinsically woven into a gendered system creating inequality where competence and worthiness are synonymous with men as opposed to women (Ridgeway, 2001; Bullock, 2019). Arguably the nature of organisations is both gendered (Mills, 1988; Acker 1990; Wilson, 1996) and racialized (Ray, 2019). The less understood notions of inequality regimes are complex, particularly when considering intersectionality (Healy et al., 2011).

*Gendered and racialized nature of organisations*

Acker (1990) presents a compelling argument of gendering organisational processes and theory. She explains the divisions of labour through allowed behaviours such as the paid and unpaid work partially supported by organisational practices. Men dominate the highest paid positions and despite legislation for equal pay for equal work (e.g., UK Equality Act, 2010), there remains a lack of women remunerated equally as a man in the same role (Government Equalities Office and Equality and Humans Right Commission, 2013). The construction of symbols and images explains some contradictions within organisations regarding gender. Fotaki (2013) reveals the consequences of women leaders operating within the confines of predominant masculine symbolism at work and report feeling outside of the inner circle, disempowered, excluded, and undermined.

The nature of work, language, dress, and impression management reinforce the gendered organisation, arguably supporting an inauthentic portrayal of self to fit into gendered stereotypes within the organisation (Thompson-Whiteside et al., 2018; 2021). Clegg and Dunkerley (1980) agree with Acker (2009) that gender underlines the assumptions and practices upon which
organisations are built. Ray (2019) expands Acker’s concept arguing that organisations are also racialized, perpetuating inequality regimes by justifying the disparate treatment of non-white female leaders as business as usual adding another burden to impede their success.

When considering how intersectionality of race and gender operate within organisations and how the gendered and racial nature of organisations are continued, Acker (2006, p.443) advances the concept of inequality regimes as an analytical tool for conceptualizing intersectionality. Acker (2006) defines inequality regimes as “loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions, and meanings that result in and maintain gender and racial inequalities within particular organisations”. Inequality regimes, according to Acker (2006), are comprised of six components: “organizing processes that create and recreate inequalities, the invisibility of inequities, the legitimacy of inequalities, and the controls and compliance that prevent protest against inequalities” (Healy et al., 2019, p.1751). Gendered and racialized organisations continue to persist and continue to oppress women despite significant EDI efforts; however, a closer examination of organisational models may provide a key to understanding this seemingly puzzling dichotomy.

HE institutions and businesses have created EDI processes and practices to address inequalities in the workplace. However, these efforts typically do not change the very reinforcing structures, policies and processes that created and continue to maintain inequality regimes (Corlett and Mavin, 2014; Mavin et al., 2004). This phenomenon is referred to as genderwashing by Fox-Kirk et al. (2020, p.588) and is described as the “process whereby organisational rhetoric about equality differs from the lived experiences of marginalized workers creating the myth of gender equality while individuals in the organisation continue to experience persistent gender discrimination due to organisational structure and cultural practices such as policies, procedures
and norms”. Genderwashing is used against women to disregard and discount their experiences in the workplace leaving women to resort to extreme perseverance to find a way to be successful.

Perseverance requires leaders to be able to recover, learn from, and developmentally mature when confronted by chronic or crisis adversity (Reed, 2018). Ely and Rhode (2010) posit women leaders encounter a broad array of behavioural and attitudinal barriers in many organisational settings that create undue pressure and the need to exercise extreme perseverance. Overtime, the lack of support can result in emotional distress and feelings of disempowerment, causing women to question their own resilience on the basis of their gender (Christman and McClelland, 2008). A double-bind situation occurs as women leaders strive to advance and get along by adopting more masculine ways of leading which also drive extreme perseverance. Considering these unseen challenges, and the lack of real progress with EDI efforts, there is an argument to understand the role organisational models can play to highlight and address inequality regimes.

Organisational models

Leadership has long been studied from a myriad of different perspectives and frameworks (Northouse, 2019). How leaders think determines what they give their attention to, how they respond to situations, and the outcomes of their leadership (Schein, 2019). Similarly, organisational behaviour has been studied using a broad array of models and frameworks to help leaders make sense of organisational issues and effect change (Cameron and Green, 2009). Errida and Lotfi’s (2021) literature review analysed 37 organisational models where intersectionality is not included in any of the models studied. The ongoing omission of intersectionality, a critical aspect of organisational dynamics, from leadership theories, organisational models, and even management education (Mavin et. al., 2004) continues to reinforce gender, race, and intersectional
blindness. This gap reinforces intentional gender and race suppression (Wilson, 1996; Linstead, 2002) and keeps the visible largely invisible. Fishman-Weaver (2017, p.2) argues that “gendered organisational theory makes gender bias, discrimination, and privilege more visible within organisations” and lends support for expanding organisational models to include intersectionality as a critical lens for leaders. Consideration for gender in organisational theory serves to broaden the leader’s perspective beyond the four frames of organisation, politics, human resources, and symbols, and the dominant male narrative. When prevailing models that guide leaders and critical organisational decisions do not give voice to marginalized women leaders’ experiences, and where EDI is not on the agenda, how can inequality regimes be understood, and the reinforcing elements effectively dismantled?

The four-frame model is touted as an effective tool for leaders to understand four critical aspects of organisational dynamics. A frame is defined as a mental model of beliefs and assumptions that support sense making to help leaders negotiate organisational challenges. The usefulness of the four-frame model purportedly supports a broad shift to multi-frame thinking, enabling leaders to break out of traditional perspectives, to identify and execute innovative responses to organisational challenges (Vuori, 2018). The four frames in the model are: structure, politics, symbols, and HR (see Table 1).

[Insert Table 1. here]

The structural frame is task-oriented and focuses leaders on strategy, setting goals, roles and responsibilities, clarifying tasks, defining decision rights and reporting lines, establishing metrics, systems and procedures (Scouller, 2011). Whereas the HR frame views employees as social assets with physical and psychological needs and explores how organisations can fulfil human needs (Bolman and Deal, 2014). The political frame sees organisations as political arenas under the
influence of power struggles where coalitions consist of various interest groups, creating a political atmosphere of negotiating networks (Bolman and Deal, 1992). In the symbolic frame, leaders aim to create a common mindset around rituals, ceremonies, stories, and other symbolic values (Bolman and Deal, 2014) which hold an organisation together.

Despite the prevalence of the four-frame model to understand the complexities of organisations, it is not without its shortcomings (Cole, 2010; Habermas, 1971; Pullen and Vachhani, 2020; Streufert and Nogami, 1989). In the few instances where gender is discussed in relation to the model, the research focuses on whether women and male leaders equally use the same frames citing there is no difference (Thompson, 2000). In other studies, the discussion centres around women leaders who face barriers due to power and politics, and recommend women leaders must develop tactics to navigate the male-dominated organisation (Omachonu, 2012), inferring the problems lie with the women leaders’ approach and not at the organisational level.

The most notable limitation is the interplay of knowledge and power within the leadership of the organisation (Palmer and Dunford, 1996). Thus, the leadership of the organisation may overlook and reinforce the status quo within the confines of the model. Such constraints may prevent leaders to literally see the visible inequities and the ways gendered and racialized organisations continue to marginalize women leaders (Lindstead, 2002). There is an argument to be made that the four-frame model does not include the reframing of inequality regimes and potentially reinforces male dominance within the organisational structure. Thus, a gap within the model is clearly exposed in terms of EDI and requires further investigation.

**Methodology**

A collaborative autoethnographic (CAE) research method was selected for data collection (Bochner and Ellis, 2016; Chang et al., 2013; Devnew et al., 2017). CAE is an approach “that
engages two or more autoethnographers in a research team to pool their lived experiences on selected sociocultural phenomena and collaboratively analyse and interpret them” (Hernandez et al., 2017, p.251). The interpretive process of analysis allows research team members to be engaged as critical peers. As Hernandez et al. (2017, p.252), noted, “as multiple perspectives and experiences are contested, the singularity of individual perspectives is tamed through intersubjectivity and multivocality”.

This article reflects six women’s collaborative efforts to understand the impact of crucible experiences on their leadership. This global research team collected, interpreted, and interrogated data from their own crucible experiences as diverse scholars. The lived experiences and feelings were primary data, transformed into individual and collective narrative(s) to further study leadership challenges of women. Study participants share a research interest regarding women and leadership and represent a diverse group of women born in four different countries (Poland, the US, Paraguay, and the UK), currently live in three different countries (the US, Japan, and the UK). The authors represent a rich expression of intersectionality and diversity of races, sexual orientations, generations, and possess leadership experiences across diverse disciplines and industries. The narratives capture a range of perspectives regarding racial and ethnic identification, from the U.K.’s terms of minority ethnic and White British to the U.S.’s terms of Black, Latina and women of colour. The words used to capture a commitment to collaborative work on social justice also vary by continent, DEI versus EDI. The British acronym of EDI (equality, diversity and inclusion) is used in this paper.

There were four research stages. Firstly, a broad question explored the experiences of women leaders in HE and business, trying to investigate the barriers that women face as leaders. Desk research was conducted to develop a greater understanding of leadership experiences, in
search for theoretical organisational models that will explain and/or encapsulate these experiences fully. Bolman and Deal’s four-frame model (2014) was chosen to analyse women leaders’ crucible experiences due to its broad application in HE and business.

The overarching research question of this paper is: *What are the individual lived crucible experiences of women leaders in HE and business?* which serves as the catalyst to explore organisational inequality regimes that prevent women leaders from fully participating, contributing, and flourishing at work. Drawing upon the four-frame model, this study attempts to understand organisational dynamics that renders intersectionality invisible and reinforces and perpetuates inequality regimes.

Secondly, three brainstorming sessions were held to discuss the individual experiences of being female leaders. Transcripts were created after each session to accurately collate the challenges. Before the next meeting, each researcher analysed the transcripts to inform the next brainstorming session, by developing an in-depth understanding of individual leadership experiences and noting any commonalities between experiences. Each research team member selected one significant crucible moment from their professional career and used Gibb’s 6-part reflective cycle (1988) to document their narrative and reflect on their leadership experience through: description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion and action plan. The crucible narratives were shared with team members who posed clarifying questions and provided comments.

Thirdly, a reflexive thematic analysis (TA) was used based on Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six phases, to analyse themes. Each research team member coded individual transcripts, reviewing each narrative several times. The individual coding outcomes were then compiled into one document. The resultant codes were analysed to generate themes and then further developed,
reviewed and refined. Several organising themes surfaced from the coding process and were discussed in further iterations (see Table 2.). Four global themes emerged: Organisation, Power dynamics, Emotional distress and perseverance, and Intersectionality.

[insert Table 2. here]

Fourthly, the resultant global themes were analysed using the four-frame model as a lens to illuminate the themes further. The research team met twice to discuss the global themes in the context of the four-frame model to consider how the model may explain the women leaders’ experiences. The process included considering the degree of connection, if any, between the global themes and the four-frame model.

Findings

The findings utilize excerpts from the reflective accounts to highlight the crucible experiences of women leaders within HE and business. The four global themes identified during the analysis are presented through a series of quotations from the narrative accounts.

Organisation

Healy et al. (2011) points out in the UK and Acker (2006) in the US gender and race discrimination and oppression become legitimized and essentially woven throughout the organisational structures resulting in stereotyping. HR management including wage setting, recruitment and promotional decisions, informal interactions, constitute the very fabric of organisational dynamics may also be steeped in practices and ways of working that become the shackles for inequality regimes:

I had to fight with misconceptions about female leadership - that females can supervise and have good ideas instead of only assisting. I feared taking the position that required
leading men (senior to me in age and experience) and controlling and monitoring what they do and whether they deliver.

The culture of any organisation is comprised of the values, beliefs, norms of behaviour and habits of the people within that organisation. Organisational culture is socially constructed and reinforced by structures, policies, procedures, and by daily formal and informal interactions within each organisation (Schein, 2019). The dominant culture reinforces and perpetuates the way individuals are treated by their peers and by leaders which can disadvantage women leaders who are often in nondominant groups:

The social structure at this organisation was taken for granted that the male leaders were held in high regard and women less so when they spoke up and challenged the status quo.

Women leaders described the lack of support that occurred during crucible moments:

I wanted leadership to support my decision and to uphold the same academic integrity that I was modelling and promoting in the department.

I did not feel supported by leadership. After my decision was overruled, I did not feel that my goals for changing the climate and culture around academic integrity in the department were supported. This was frustrating and made it quite difficult to feel empowered and motivated to continue to work for the institution.

The global theme of organisation played a significant role in the women’s crucible experiences. The prevailing structure of male domination and unequal treatment of women was evident in each narrative and suggests that this is the way organisations typically operate, regardless of whether in HE or business. Women leaders in this study were rendered powerless when the way of working favoured male dominance which connects to the second global theme of power dynamics.

Power dynamics
For this paper, the definition of power draws upon Schwarzwald and Koslowsky (1999) conceptualization of power as socially derived and represents the range of power available to an individual. Power dynamics play out in organisational change efforts (Munduate, Bennebroek and Gravenhorst, 2003). Power is inextricably tied to privilege and domination and creates a challenging dynamic (Corlett and Mavin, 2014) where women leaders must navigate carefully amidst the often male-dominant discourse. Women leaders often find their social power is woefully inadequate to overcome power dynamics. Acker (2006) points out that oppression, fear and intimidation, and dominant power differential reinforces inequality regimes in organisations.

And for women leaders and women of colour multiple layers of inequality regimes operate:

*His gender was a weapon where he wielded ultimate power while erasing my positional power on a daily basis, while other colleagues were supportive partners and followed the HR guidelines.*

*International faculty members were more open to building collegial relationships, however the power differential imposed by being in a foreign country silenced some individuals.*

The lack of social power played a heavy role in the crucible experiences of women leaders and was evident in the sense of the “in and outgroups”:

*The administration’s decision was reversed with little to no consultation with me. I was clearly outside of the inner circle.*

Power plays in organisations can disempower women leaving them with no voice or agency to influence outcomes stripping them of social power:

*I navigated ongoing assaults that called into question the legitimate authority of the human resources function including disregard to policies and procedures. I was caught in an unfamiliar and most uncomfortable situation.*
Additionally, organisational power dynamics are replete with political moves that render women vulnerable and powerless:

*I realized how little I had considered the politics involved. The politics I had underestimated...this document and the details would be known outside my faculty and put the senior leadership team in a negative light. Nobody wants to really be presented with the truth when it is negative. One of the executives commented it wasn’t personal but of course my reaction was deeply personal.*

The women leaders in this study similarly described the challenges of working in environments where power, primarily from men, often peers, was used as a weapon against women. The combination of the global themes of organisation and power dynamics led to the third global theme of emotional distress and the need for perseverance to survive at work.

*Emotional distress and perseverance*

The crucible experiences clearly highlight the emotional distress experienced by woman leaders. They led in oppressive systems as result of organisational structures, destructive power dynamics, and the factors of intersectionality that created, reinforced, and perpetuated inequality regimes (Travis *et al.*, 2016). On one hand, women felt pressure to perform while simultaneously their authority or position was undermined. This led to feelings of isolation and loneliness creating relationship tensions. Self-doubt led to spiralling confusion about how to be effective in the face of adversity. The experience of being silenced, the lack of confidence, and inability of woman leaders to feel empowered to do their job were most striking. Disempowerment leaves women in a situation where they have no voice or agency to influence outcomes:
I’d like to think that if faced with a similar situation, I would “call out” what I was observing regarding issues of race and gender, but I am not convinced I will. This saddens me, but it is the truth. I also question or wonder how “loudly” I will speak out against injustices. Women and women of colour are conditioned not to “pull out the race” card or the “gender card.” My guess is that I will be more likely to speak up after what I experienced in this situation, but I will choose my battles.

The women in this study reported feelings of disempowerment, anger, and frustration. Additionally, women leaders mentioned facing ethical dilemmas when dealing with the leadership team and staying on the expected course clashed with their value systems. The battle for integrity was evident:

My feelings ran from initial shock, hopelessness to anger to hurt and guilt for letting my colleagues down in the group. The hurt was certainly related to how I felt my integrity and honesty were in some way being questioned.

I did not feel supported by leadership. After my decision was overruled, I did not feel that my goals for changing the climate and culture around academic integrity in the Department were supported. This was frustrating and made it quite difficult to feel empowered and motivated to continue to work for the institution.

To counteract the loss of influence it was clear that the women leaders had to use extreme perseverance to survive:

I persevered and tried many different approaches to be successful. I was a strong role model in the face of adversity, and I continued to advocate for the HR function, my team and for myself. (...) I also did not stoop to my colleague’s extreme passive aggressive
behaviour or try to undermine him. I promoted his efforts publicly in meetings and I did not quit!

I had to fight my own internal battle - for higher self-confidence... With time on the job, I had to convince myself that even though I felt that I might not be ready to take on a more senior job that involved taking more responsibility and managing [men]people, I had the attitude and skills to succeed.

The findings from this research make it clear that perseverance was fundamental in coping with challenging situations that frequently caused reflection during the situation and rumination long afterwards. Women reported experimenting with various coping and resolution strategies, and as a result, women leaders became more resilient. The early fear of failing was balanced with conviction of possible recovery and achieving desired outcomes:

*This experience proved to myself that I can aim high. It helped me grow and uncover what type of positions I can fulfil.*

Emotional distress and perseverance, while extreme at times, appear to be the by-products of male-dominated organisational structure and power dynamics. Upon further examination, gender and race were also seen as major contributors for differential treatment and the challenges women leaders faced at work. The intersection of gender and race emerged as a final global theme.

*Intersectionality*

All subjects experienced differential treatment due to gender and some due to race and sexuality and a combination of these factors as noted in the excerpts below, resulting in power struggles and disempowerment. One of the themes that underpinned all women leaders’ experiences concerns the stereotypical male-female identity roles and organisationally sanctioned interplay between gender and expectations for how gender for leaders is displayed in the workplace:
I was asked to acquiesce to my male colleagues' approach to the conflict, to be more reasonable and cooperative, basically to allow them to dictate the rules of engagement which were authoritative and disempowering. This style of command-and-control instilled fear in the staff and I was pained by it. The strategies I was being asked to accept violated my integrity and sense of self-worth.

One leader in this study straddled dual identities of stereotypic female and male gendered behaviour attempting to do gender differently and well (Mavin and Grandy, 2012):

At times I behaved in a typical male way of dealing with the situation [with a male colleague] head on with directness and humour with no better outcome than when I behaved in a more female typical way using kindness and deference. Despite... all of my efforts, I was not successful.

The differential treatment due to gender is clearly articulated. The narratives provide strong support that male leaders were greatly valued, by default, diminishing the contribution and worth of women leaders. The sense of unfairness and lack of ability to change the situation was a source of ongoing angst and frustration:

I had also witnessed inequities and differences in how female deans and other female administrators were treated as compared to their male counterparts. I experienced this myself on several occasions prior to the administration’s decisions about our programs. I also see the gender dynamics of power and control played a much more significant role. His behaviour was tolerated as acceptable while the actual treatment me and the HR team experienced was ignored.
The feelings noted by the women echo and contribute to the first theme of disempowerment. However, their perceptions were clearly aligned to a gender focus, albeit reluctantly, as exemplified in the following:

Faced with this untenable situation, I was unable to fully understand while embroiled in it, how it all came to be. Looking back, I never deeply entertained the gender dynamic; nor did this come up as a discussion point with either the coach or CEO, coincidentally who are both men. I recall being reluctant to give gender and power the attention it deserved. I was hesitant to play the gender “card” and suggest that my male colleague’s behaviour could have a gender basis.

The experience of being silenced which undermined women leaders and left them disempowered to do their job was most striking. Disempowering women leaves them in a situation where they have no voice or agency to influence outcomes. Gill (2010) described unmanageable and then unspeakable inequalities where, speaking up, was akin to career suicide:

Women and women of colour are conditioned not to “pull out the race” card or the “gender card”.

In contrast, some of the experiences were more overt and the women noted their recognition of the gendered nature of their experiences:

I’m convinced that my being a woman and woman of colour contributed to my slowly being edged out and moved out of the inner circles concerning the decisions regarding my college’s programs.

The concept of saving face was very present and I was unfamiliar with the expectations held for a foreign female in a Japanese university. I was working with men that had never worked with a woman in a leadership position.
Invisibility of inequality regimes or unwillingness to see intersectionality at an organisational level also surfaced in the narratives:

*I had seen him present with our president on EDI and I found both to lack understanding and knowledge of these issues at our university. At one of these presentations the president went as far as to say there were no EDI problems at the university even though there had been numerous issues across the university at multiple levels.*

Evidence from this study points to how intersectionality, in particular gender and race, impedes leaders and organisations from understanding the challenges women leaders encounter in the workplace across organisational culture and structure, power dynamics and emotional distress and perseverance. Proactively acknowledging intersectionality through an organisational model can support identifying, understanding, and addressing inequality regimes.

**Discussion**

To answer the research question and to develop further understanding of the themes, the four-frame model was considered to make sense of the findings. Organisational life is socially constructed in that the elements comprising the four frames are created and perpetuated by the dominant narrative (Palmer and Dunford, 1996). Organisational structure, politics, symbolism, and HR practices legitimize the dominant culture and reinforce who gets to participate and in what ways.

Considering the findings of this study through the lens of the four-frame model (Bolman and Deal, 1992) serves to further illuminate the global themes of organisation, power dynamics, emotional distress and perseverance, and intersectionality. The structural frame of the four-frame model maps to the organisation global theme in this study. This frame focuses on strategy, clarifying tasks, rules, and roles, and creating systems and procedures, which is intended to align
individual efforts to organisational goals; however, in these crucible experiences, the purported purpose is limited and serves to suppress women leaders. The organisation theme demonstrated how the embedded ways of working, through processes and procedures, contributed to the unequal treatment women leaders described. The study findings further highlight the importance of creating a climate in organisations that acknowledges the need for greater EDI to support women leaders. The structural frame does not direct leaders to consider whether the rules, roles, and goals may inadvertently or intentionally place women leaders at a distinct disadvantage given the number of women in the workplace is at par with men, pointing to a gap in the four-frame model.

The global theme of power dynamics is directly connected to political frame of the four-frame model where the power-base men held was used against women leaders and impeded their success. Power and organisational politics, as viewed through the political frame, served to disempower and silence women, not to unlock or distribute power equally. The exercise of power was experienced as an ongoing affront, where women were positioned as losers and men as the winners, thus reinforcing the imbalance of power. Clearly the narratives point to the ways of working that usurped women leaders’ agency and voice. While the political frame focuses on power, it is silent on power dynamics that are gender and racially motivated and reveals a gap in the four-frame model.

The third global theme of emotional distress and perseverance is also seen as an outcome of organisation and power dynamics, where women leaders’ experiences fell outside of the four-frame model highlighting a gap. At first glance the HR frame may be viewed as naturally encompassing this element. However, the HR frame focuses on people having the skills and the relationships to do their jobs. The HR frame also assumes that the needs of the individuals will be met and that organisations exist to meet these needs. The experiences of women leaders in this
study reflect the absence, mismatch, and at times complete disregards for their needs, leading to emotional distress. The HR frame does not compel leaders to view organisational challenges through the lens of women leaders or women of different ethnicities and as such may contribute to the ongoing invisibility of the visible inequality regimens women experience at work.

The symbolic frame includes culture and meaning at work (Bolman and Deal, 1992). In this study, organisational culture favours male leaders, while it also silences, sanctions, and renders women leaders powerless and ineffective causing emotional distress and the need for extreme perseverance due to gender and race. Through actions and words, women leaders found challenges and lack of support suggesting that culture reinforced and perpetuated inequality regimes. While the symbolic frame was evident, it did not push leaders to consider the impact of the organisational culture on women leaders (Fotaki, 2013) pointing to another gap in the four-frame model. Overall, the four-frame model does not include the notion of EDI. One could argue EDI is downplayed, mismanaged, or misinterpreted. Inequality regimes persist even in organisations claiming to pursue an EDI agenda.

The global theme of intersectionality is not directly reflected in any of the four-frames. While intersectionality may be implied, women leaders and women of different ethnicities report evidence of inequality regimes. The theme of intersectionality, through the lens of the four-frame model, reveals a gap that may in part explain why organisations have made little progress in EDI efforts (Vassilopoulos, 2017; Fox-Kirk et al., 2020).

It is not just the development of various frames, but an acknowledgment of the conditions under which some frames or perspectives can be activated without being dominated by others within organisational contexts (Perry et al., 1994). It is not enough to use the four frames as a lens to remedy organisation change if the dominant narrative is immune to recognizing that the
structure, politics including, power dynamics, symbols and human resources practices may already exclude some players from participating fully or at all. Prevailing frame dominance of majority leaders, perceptions of agency, and access to knowledge and power within the four-frames may leave female leaders, specifically female leaders of different ethnicities, at a significant disadvantage (Acker, 1990; 2012; Pullen and Vachhani, 2020).

The four-frame model does not explicitly direct leaders to consider EDI as an important lens. However, EDI has become an urgent strategic imperative for success and excellence in higher education and business as organisations develop plans to embrace the fullness of organisational life in all its true diverse potential (Claeys-Kulik et al., 2019). Also, the study uncovered that women leaders’ experiences were not wholly reflected in the four-frame model and the good practice was not there to guide women or the organisations they worked for. Therefore, we argue the four-frame model must be expanded to include EDI as a fifth frame to address the gaps this study uncovered (see Table 3).

[insert Table 3. here]

Good EDI programs add meaning to slogans through their actions. Seventy-five percent of companies with diverse and inclusive teams are predicted to exceed their financial targets in 2022 (Compton, 2022). Much of what drives successful and sustainable EDI is around understanding organisational culture. One strategy to help advance the effectiveness of EDI in the workplace is to focus on emphasizing allyship within the organisation. According to McKinsey research (2022) women of different ethnicities who have allies have more positive experiences at work and fewer negative experiences at work and they report having the same experiences of all employees (McKinsey Insights, 2022). The literature also suggests practices such as holding regular listening
sessions, setting up anonymous hotlines for reporting concerns, and making daily “to be” lists of specific ways to operate inclusively (Dukach, 2022).

The noted shortcomings of the model (Cole, 2010; Habermas, 1971; Pullen and Vachhani, 2020; Streufert and Nogami, 1989) and the findings of this study support the argument to add an EDI frame is critical to analyse organisational challenges and recognize gender and race, as legitimate dimensions of organisational life. The addition of the fifth frame would invite leaders to engage in long overdue discourse about visible inequities as significant drivers of organisational issues that women leaders face in the workplace. Leaders can use the five-frame model for an expanded analysis, challenge their deeply held assumptions, to address accountability and enable transformative change. The fifth frame can support leaders to tackle intractable organisational challenges of power inequities, gain novel insights to remove barriers that silence and prevent women from participating, and thereby embrace the inherent richness of organisational life committed to equity, diversity and inclusion.

For over 20 years, various researchers have discussed consistent experiences echoing the same sentiments as the women leaders in this study (Acker, 2006; 2012; Powell, 2012; Rhee and Sigler, 2015; Weyer, 2007) and yet the situation is largely unchanged. This research advances the conversation of gendered and racialized organisations and how significantly gender and race impact the experiences and opportunities for women leaders.

Conclusions

This CAE study explores the lived crucible experiences of six female leaders and exposes the challenges women leaders face navigating inequality regimes embedded in organisation structures, power dynamics, intersectionality including gender and race, which oppress women in HE and business and is the source of emotional distress. This study provides women leaders a critical
This study serves as a call to leaders around the globe to action and add EDI into their tool set to analyse and understand a long ignored and critical dimension of organisational dynamics. Poor diversity management negatively influences how organisations are perceived and how women leaders are treated. Developing a system for change can help with implementing EDI as the fifth frame. Adopting a systematic way to review leadership and challenges within an organisation through the proposed expanded five-frame model, compels leaders to step back and question organisational structures, HR, politics, and symbolism from a new intersectional perspective. Leaders also must challenge their own leadership practices to make visible ingrained inequities that continue to marginalize women leaders.

Limitations and future research

Scholars are encouraged to expand upon this study with diverse women leaders representing additional intersectional identities from different industries and countries. This study provides an opportunity to learn more about leadership challenges that women face through the EDI lens which is particularly important currently for many organisations. Further research with larger samples of employees’ lived experiences from diverse cultural backgrounds and work experiences from an
intersectionality lens would be valuable to understand the impact of EDI in organisations supporting women leaders. Scholarly research on organisational models and the impact of intersectionality offers an opportunity to explore a novel area of inquiry.

**Ethics statement**

CAE research involves the study of the pooled lived experiences of at least two autoethnographers and analysis of self-generated documentation where subjects are both researchers and participants. Considering the lack of systematic investigation of human subjects or data pertaining to others, institutional review board approval was not required.
Appendices – two tables (see separate Word document)

Table 1. Four-frame model

Table 2. Organizing themes and global themes for primary data

Table 3. Four-frame model with the proposed fifth frame: EDI
References


Habermas, J. (1971), Knowledge and Human Interests, Beacon Press, Boston, MA.


Table 1. Four-frame model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metaphor for organisation</th>
<th>Structural</th>
<th>Human Resource</th>
<th>Political</th>
<th>Symbolic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Factory</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Jungle</td>
<td>Temple, theatre</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Organizational culture      | Needs, emotions, skills, relationships | Power, conflict, competition, organisational politics | Culture, meaning, metaphor ritual, stories, heroes/heroines |
| Organizational structure    |                                         |                                                      |                                                          |
| Importance of mentorship    |                                         |                                                      |                                                          |
| Communication               |                                         |                                                      |                                                          |

| Central concepts            | Rules, role, goals, policies, technology, environment | Neat, emotions, skills, relationships | Power, conflict, competition, organisational politics |
| Politics                    | Needs, emotions, skills, relationships             | Power, conflict, competition, organisational politics | Culture, meaning, metaphor ritual, stories, heroes/heroines |
| Position of power           | Needs, emotions, skills, relationships             | Power, conflict, competition, organisational politics | Culture, meaning, metaphor ritual, stories, heroes/heroines |
| Power play and struggle     | Needs, emotions, skills, relationships             | Power, conflict, competition, organisational politics | Culture, meaning, metaphor ritual, stories, heroes/heroines |

| Image of leadership         | Social architecture                             | Advocacy and political savvy                  | Inspiration significance |
| Social architecture         | Social architecture                             | Advocacy and political savvy                  | Inspiration significance |
| Empowerment                 | Social architecture                             | Advocacy and political savvy                  | Inspiration significance |

| Basic leadership challenge  | Attune structure to task, technology and environment | Align organisation with human needs and talent | Develop agenda and power base |
| Attune structure to task, technology and environment | Align organisation with human needs and talent | Develop agenda and power base | Create faith, hope, meaning and belief |

| Basic leadership challenge  | Attune structure to task, technology and environment | Align organisation with human needs and talent | Develop agenda and power base |
| Attune structure to task, technology and environment | Align organisation with human needs and talent | Develop agenda and power base | Create faith, hope, meaning and belief |


Table 2. Organizing themes and global themes for primary data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organizing themes</th>
<th>Global themes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organizational culture</td>
<td>Organization</td>
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<td>Organizational structure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Importance of mentorship</td>
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<td>Communication</td>
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<td>Politics</td>
<td>Power dynamics</td>
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<td>Position of power</td>
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<tr>
<td>Power play and struggle</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling disempowered and silenced</td>
<td>Emotional distress and perseverance</td>
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<td>Authority undermined or challenged</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pressure to perform while feeling powerless</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Professional values of integrity and honesty challenged</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strategies to cope</td>
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<tr>
<td>Taking on leadership role</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender lenses</td>
<td>Intersectionality</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gendered structure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male and female relations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Not be hesitant to play the race/gender/sexuality “cards”

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 3. Four-frame model with the proposed fifth frame: EDI

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Metaphor for organisation</th>
<th>Central concepts</th>
<th>Image of leadership</th>
<th>Basic leadership challenge</th>
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<td>relationships</td>
<td>organisational</td>
<td>heroes/ heroines</td>
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<td><strong>Social architecture</strong></td>
<td><strong>Empowerment</strong></td>
<td><strong>Advocacy and</strong></td>
<td><strong>Inspiration</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>political</strong></td>
<td><strong>political</strong></td>
<td><strong>significance</strong></td>
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<td><strong>savvy</strong></td>
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<tr>
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<td>Align organisation</td>
<td>Develop agenda and</td>
<td>Create faith, hope,</td>
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<tr>
<td>technology and environment</td>
<td>with human needs and talent</td>
<td>power base</td>
<td>meaning and belief</td>
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