



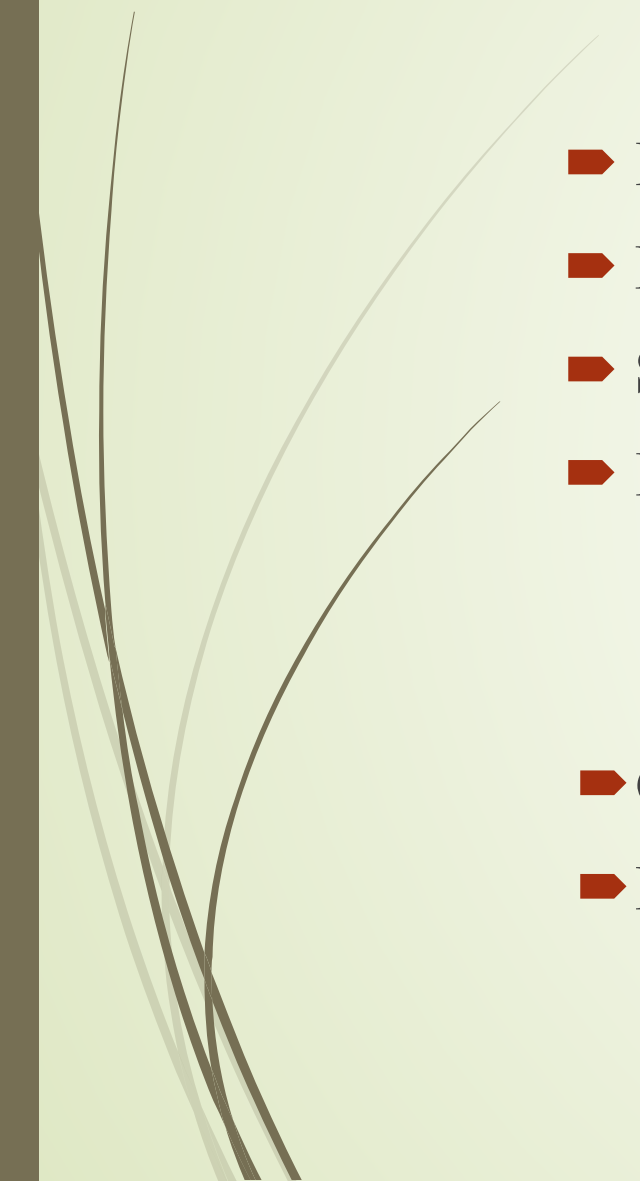
**'Yes, but not that kind of leader':  
*Women heading research projects  
in the Canadian academy  
talk about their work***

**Sandra Acker and Anne Wagner**

**25 November, 2020**



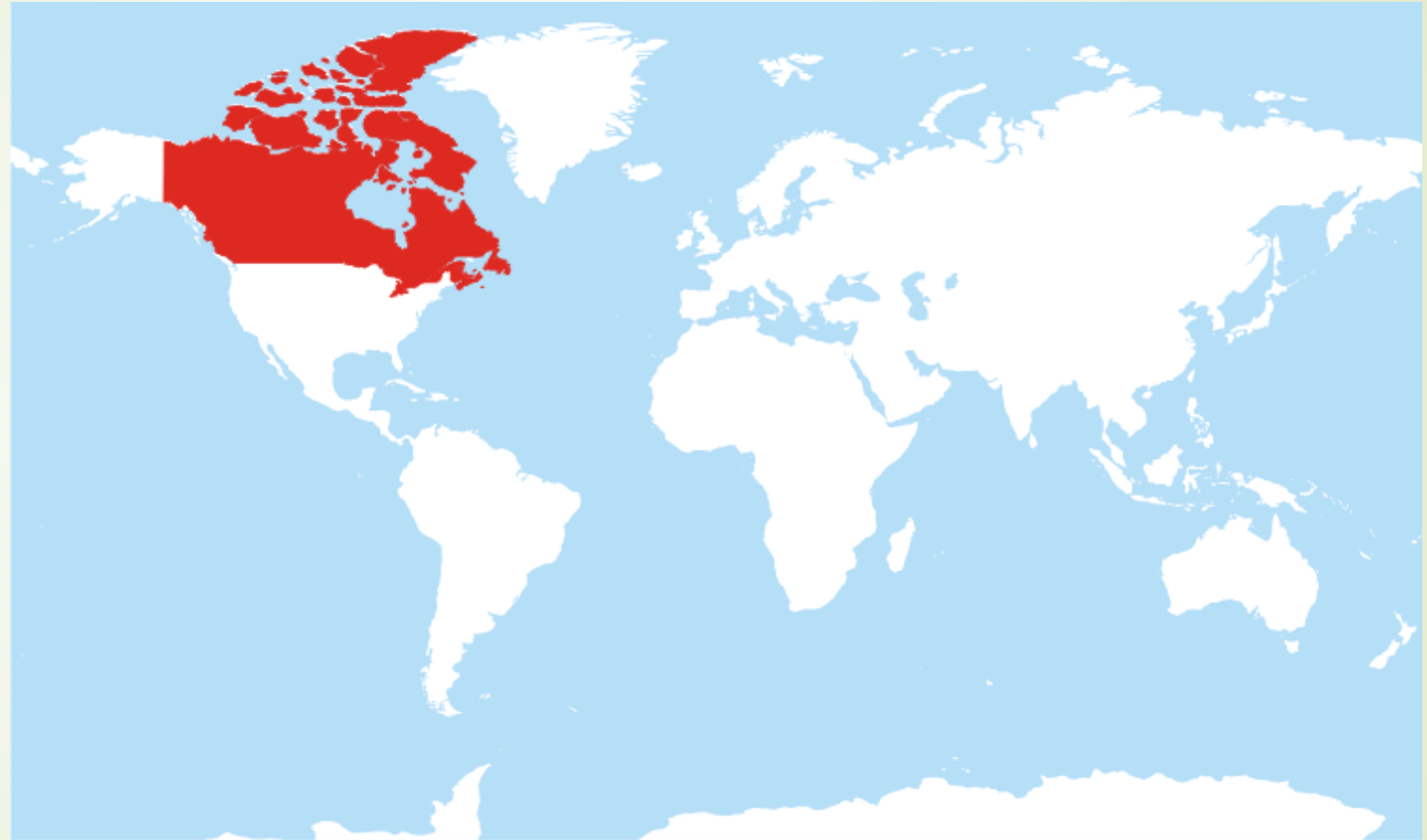
# Outline

- **Background on Canada, Ontario, and aspects of academe**
  - **Description of the project and the participants**
  - **Selected insights from the literature**
  - **Findings**
    - **Project leaders talk about the idea of being a leader**
    - **Project leaders talk about their practice of leadership**
  - **Conclusion**
  - **References**
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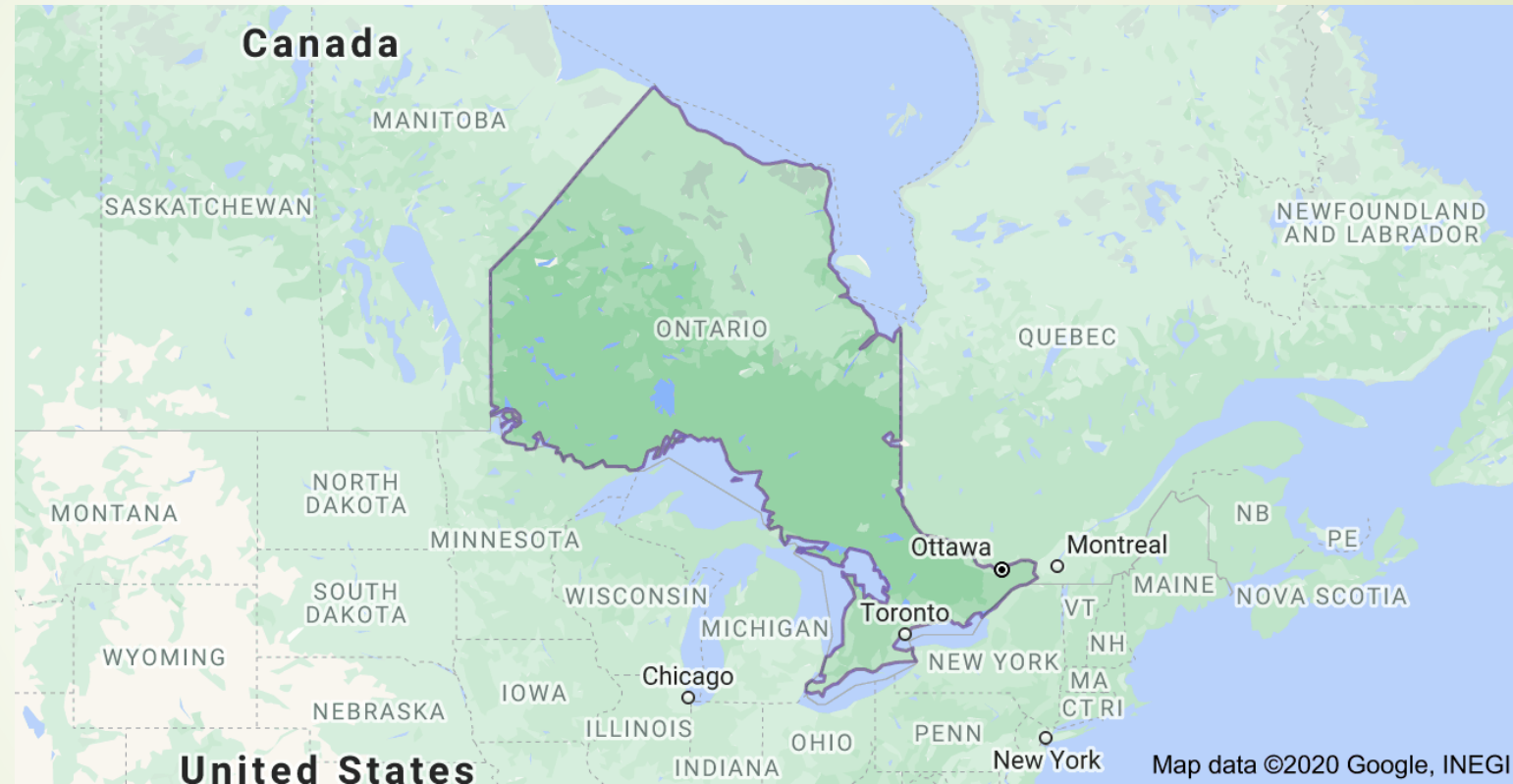
# Background

# Canada



- **Area 9.985 million km<sup>2</sup>**
- **Population 37.7 million**
- **About 100 universities**

# Province of Ontario



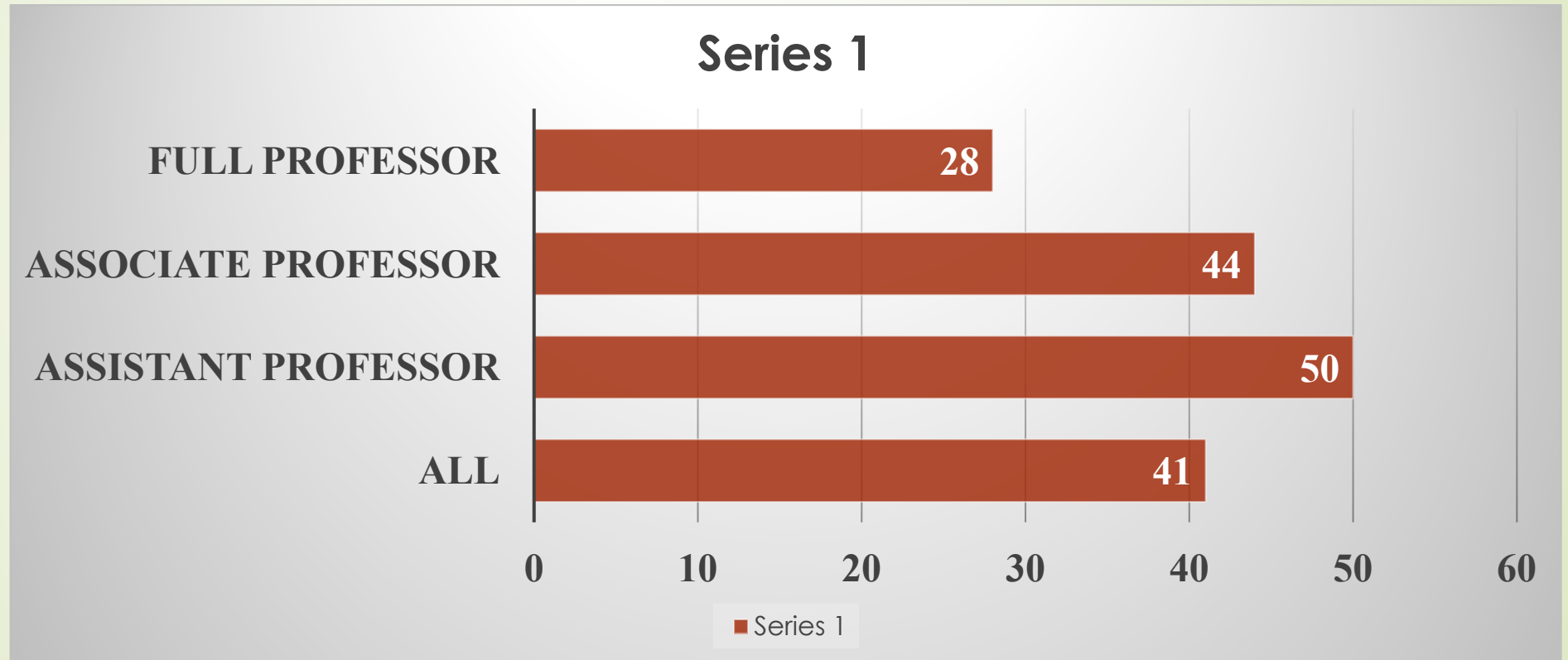
**Population 14.7 million**  
**About 21 universities**



# Canadian Academe

- **Ranks: assistant, associate, and full professor**
- **2/3 of full-time academics are associate or full professors (no quotas)**
- **Tenure and promotion system**
- **Most university academics are unionized**
- **Increasingly, casual or contingent academics are hired for teaching and without job security**

# Percentage of Women at Each Rank, Full-time Academic Staff, 2018/2019





# **Project Description**





## Project Overview

- **24 women participants drawn from Education, Social Work, Sociology and Geography in 7 Ontario universities**
- **Strong research records; Social justice focus**
- *These are academics who are directors of individual projects, usually also with teaching and administrative responsibilities ('Principal Investigators' or PIs)*



# Research Leadership Explored

**The larger project explores the social production of social science research in the context of neoliberalism's impact on universities. Leadership of projects is one strand.**

## **Questions:**

- How do accomplished women researchers (PIs) conceptualize their research leadership?**
- Does research grounded in a social justice agenda result in leadership that differs from conventional understandings?**

# Number and Distribution of Interviews

# Universities of each type	Institution Type	Social Work	Education	Sociology + Geography	Total People
2	Research-Intensive	3	2	4	9
3	Comprehensive	3	4	4	11
2	Undergraduate	2	1	1	4
<b>Totals</b>		<b>8</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>24</b>



# **Observations from the Literature**

# Concepts of Leadership

- **Solo leadership with certain traits**
- **Distributed or shared leadership**
- **Leadership as a process or performance**
- **Leadership in unexpected places**



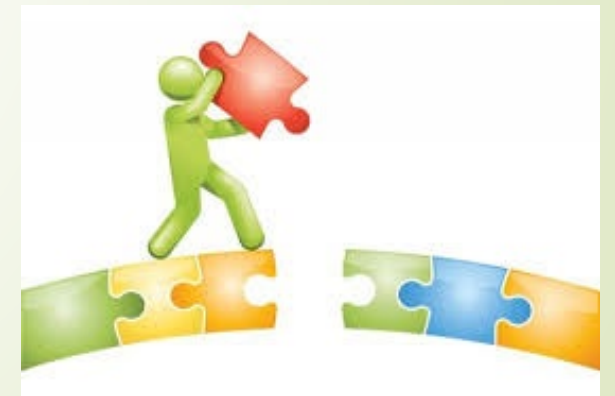
# What does a PI do?

- **Planning the project; applying for funding**
- **Recruiting team**
- **Overseeing timetables and budgets**
- **Networking with other researchers**
- **Keeping up with technology/change**
- **Dealing with unexpected events**
- **Supervising team, managing conflict and morale**
- **Ensuring results are published**
- **Securing and renewing ethics approval**



# Sources of Problems in Research Leadership

- **External factors, e.g. change of government, COVID**
- **Institutional factors, e.g. space, resources**
- **Factors within the project, e.g. conflict, hierarchy, time, personnel changes**
- **Work–work and work–life balance issues**



# Women and Senior Academic Leadership



- **Much literature addresses ‘missing women’ at the top**
- **Contradictory expectations for ‘leaders’ and ‘women’**
- **Women experience ‘glass cliff’ in leadership posts**
- **Might other types of leadership be a better fit?**
- **What about feminist (research) leadership?**





# Findings



## **Do you consider yourself to be a leader? Yes**

**I'm the one you can count on to keep this project in mind. ... You're involved always in many more than one project. If I'm the P.I., I try to say "I'm responsible for noticing things." When there are hard decisions, they have to be the one who answers but also takes responsibility for making the decision. (Denise)**

**I hold myself as responsible for ensuring that we're moving the project along. I keep an eye on what schedules we have set for ourselves, goals and the deadlines. I'm responsible for all the communication within the team to ensuring that everybody is engaged. Facilitating whatever needs to be done to get us interested, engaged, involved in the project. (Tina)**



# Do you consider yourself to be a leader? No

**I see myself as a facilitator. I see myself as a coach. I see myself as an organizer who is bringing a group of people together to start thinking about the gaps in our society. (Mary)**

**I see myself as the most responsible [person]. I see myself as the person who is teaching other responsible people. I see myself as coaching other people to grow. (Crystal)**

**I will feel an imposter before I feel I am a leader...how can somebody who shouldn't be in the academy be in a leader in the academy?... I think genuinely it goes back to being in the British education system as somebody who came from a working class background and that has stayed with me all these years. (Rosemary)**



**Do you consider yourself to be a leader?  
Yes, but...**

**Yeah, I do. But leadership to me is not telling people what to do. It's actually supporting what people want to do. (Wendy)**

**Yes, but a kind of a collaborative leader. (Cheryl)**

**Yes, amongst other leaders. (Christine)**

# Leadership Practices: Collaboration, Community, and Caring



# Collaboration



**In the end, I'm responsible, but in terms of how I tend to manage, I try to keep it as a collaborative kind of atmosphere, not as a hierarchical atmosphere. . . . it's about creating a space in which everybody can throw out their ideas. (Sharon)**

**It's my responsibility to teach and support the people that are also on the team. So certainly that, because I want to pass on what I know to them so that they can do it without me. ... Everybody's got their part to do and they're doing it and they're doing it collaboratively and we're always checking in and sharing and all that kind of stuff. So who's the leader here, it's hard to know. (Debra)**

# Collaboration: Valuing Diversity



**I've been really keen to work with more diverse scholars because I think it isn't just an issue of representation, but it's also what they bring conceptually... they have the conceptual and the experiential background. (Cheryl)**

**[My role is] making whoever is working with me very comfortable ... start seeing themselves as being part of, they start feeling having the ownership ... I'm trying to create a community of learners who have similar language... that will make us comfortable to talk about a topic ... It's trying to collapse the boundaries, the historical boundaries that has prevented us from having frank conversations. (Mary)**

# Community



**Definitions of community included organizations such as NGOs, representatives of a specific agency, individuals or in/formal groups affiliated with the topic of research, or people identified as having relevant lived experience**

**Strong commitment to meaningful inclusion of communities, sometimes as key team members**

- **Crystal frames research in a way that “positions participants as experts in their own lives and asks them to co-theorize with us”**
- **Debra’s team members “don’t work in universities, don’t have degrees like us, but they have a wealth of knowledge in terms of working with the communities and protocols”**



# Caring

**Caring manifested at multiple levels:**

**Being mentored or mentoring others (personal)**

- **I've had wonderful, wonderful mentors in my life. (Julie)**

**Consciously providing opportunities for others (institutional/community)**

- **Part of my mentorship philosophy is to do everything I can to mentor and advance the careers of [people from] equity seeking groups. (Emily)**

**Using one's research to make a difference in the world (societal)**

- **Public sociology is sociology that actually tries to do something productive in social justice ... how to do work that was not just for the academy, how to take it beyond and actually make it meaningful. (Jacqueline)**





# **Discussion and Conclusions**



# Discussion

**Collaborative research approaches in tension with audit and performativity culture embedded in academia**

- **Findings consistent with Cunningham et al.'s (2014) conceptualization of “inhibiting factors”**
- **Neoliberalism fosters individualism and constructs narrow definitions of merit**
- **Granting bodies recognize a single project leader**

**Collaboration, community-orientation and caring leadership result in increased invisible workloads**

- **In tension with priorities of rugged individualism**



# Conclusion

- **Are we describing a “woman’s style” leadership? Feminist leadership? Social justice leadership?**
- **Most of the literature on women and leadership in the academy looks only at senior levels of hierarchical leadership and addresses the “missing women”**
- **We have taken a different approach, more consistent with the notion of distributed leadership. Women are there but unrecognized as leaders, even by themselves**
- **These women researchers are actively engaging in leadership - albeit in forms less likely to be recognized and valued within the logistics of neoliberal individualism of academia**



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# Thank you!

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