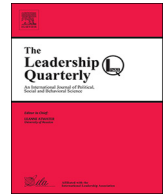




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Paradox versus dilemma mindset: A theory of how women leaders navigate the tensions between agency and communion

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ABSTRACT

A wealth of literature documents that women leaders can face simultaneous and yet conflictual demands for both agency and communion, due to the incongruence of their leader role and gender role demands. However, we still know little about why some women cope with the tensions between agency and communion better than others and what implications are involved. Using a paradox perspective, we develop a theoretical model to explain how women leaders experience and respond to agency-communion tensions, which impacts their intrapersonal and interpersonal outcomes. Specifically, we propose that in response to experiencing tensions fueled by the dual demands for agency and communion, women leaders can adopt a paradox mindset that simultaneously embraces agency and communion, or a dilemma mindset that dichotomizes agency and communion. The paradox mindset helps women leaders build psychological resilience, identity coexistence, and leadership effectiveness, whereas those who adopt a dilemma mindset experience depleted resilience, identity separation, and lowered leadership effectiveness. Further, our model highlights individual, interpersonal, and organizational conditions that shape women's experience and stimulate a paradox mindset versus a dilemma mindset. We conclude by discussing theoretical and practical implications of our model.

Introduction

Despite increasingly egalitarian social norms, women's leadership experience continues to be plagued with gender-related obstacles (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011; Hill, Miller, Benson, & Handley, 2016). Role congruity theory and related research offer explanations for some of these obstacles by suggesting that people hold an agentic construal of the leader role stereotypically associated with the male gender role (such as being aggressive, dominant, and self-confident; Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011), but because women are expected to display more communal characteristics such as being kind, sympathetic, and nurturant (Bakan, 1966; Eagly, 1987), they face incongruities between their gender role and leader role expectations.

The incongruities lead to a dual demand for both agency and communion for women leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Johnson, Murphy, Zewdie, & Reichard, 2008). On the one hand, literature on androgyny emphasizes the possibility and importance of demonstrating both agency and communion (Bem, 1974; Kark, 2017; Kark, Waismel-Manor, & Shamir, 2012). However, on the other hand, such a dual demand can pose a major challenge because agency and communion

can be seen as opposites - higher agency may lead to perceived deficit in communion, and such an opposition is more prominent for women than men (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2004; Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010; Rudman & Glick, 1999). Researchers have labeled this conundrum “double bind” (Jamieson, 1995), “Catch-22” (Rudman & Glick, 2001), and “backlash” (Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkins, 2004) to capture the conflictual and dilemmatic experience women leaders face.

To make sense of both interrelations and conflicts between agency and communion in women leaders' experience, a paradox perspective can be particularly helpful. Paradox is defined as “contradictory, yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time” (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 382). The core idea of a paradox perspective is that tension is ingrained in the system, and thus success depends on attending to contradictory and interrelated demands simultaneously (Smith & Lewis, 2011). This perspective has been used to examine a wide range of phenomena, such as the tensions between exploration and exploitation in organizational strategies (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009), between control and autonomy in technology platforms (Wareham, Fox, & Cano Giner, 2014), and between competing organizational identities (Ashforth & Reingen, 2014). Recently, Kark,

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Preser, and Zion-Waldoks (2016) called for the examination of how paradoxical perspectives play out in women's leadership, and Zheng, Surgevil, and Kark (2018) empirically identified paradox management mechanisms used by top-level women leaders to hold on to both agency and communion. We suggest that paradoxical tensions exist between agency and communion in women leaders' experience, because both contradictions and synergies exist between them. Using a paradox perspective can allow us to go beyond a single lens of agency and communion as either interrelated or conflictual, and explore a variety of ways in which women might respond to both their conflicts and interrelations.

We consequently use a paradox lens to develop theory that aims to explain how women leaders experience and respond to the tensions from the pervasive and paradoxical demands of agency and communion. We propose that a cognitive mechanism - activating a paradox mindset (e.g., Miron-Spektor, Ingram, Keller, Smith, & Lewis, 2017) - is key to diffusing experienced agency-communion tensions and strengthening women leaders' resilience, gender and leader identity coexistence, and leadership effectiveness. In contrast, activating a dilemma mindset exacerbates experienced tensions, weakens resilience, induces gender and leader identity separation, and dampens leadership effectiveness. We present a three-part conceptual model to describe this process. Specifically, in the first part of our theoretical model, we articulate prominent individual and contextual factors that are likely to influence how much latent tensions between agency and communion seep into women leaders' lives and become experienced tensions. In the second part of our theoretical model, we explicate a dilemma mindset and a paradox mindset as alternative ways in which women leaders interpret their experienced tensions. Importantly, we delineate the personal and contextual (interpersonal and organizational) conditions that prompt women leaders to activate a paradox or a dilemma mindset, which is a critical process that leads to constructive or destructive outcomes. In the third part of our theoretical model, we argue that a paradox mindset boosts resilience, gender and leader identity coexistence, and leadership effectiveness by helping women leaders embrace the persistent agency-communion tensions as opportunities, and aiding them to craft creative and flexible ways to manage the tensions and exercise their leadership. Conversely, a dilemma mindset weakens women leaders' resilience, the potential for identity coexistence, and leadership effectiveness, through framing the tensions as threats to be eliminated and as either-or choices where one pole has to be prioritized over the other, which limits the possibilities for women leaders to cope with the tensions and prevents them to meet the dual demands of their leader role and gender role.

Our model makes several contributes to literature. First, in the context of women's leadership research, this is one of the few attempts to understand women's leadership experience by using a paradox perspective as a meta-theoretical framework (for other examples, see Kark et al., 2016; Wood & Conrad, 1983). Using a paradox lens (Putnam, Fairhurst, & Banghart, 2016; Schad, Lewis, Raisch, & Smith, 2016), we zone in on the central challenge to women in leader roles - tensions that can arise from dual agentic and communal demands. Previous work has placed more focus on describing women's experience of agency-communion conflicts (e.g., Cuddy et al., 2004; Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010; Rudman & Glick, 1999) than on their interrelations and possible synergies. Billing (2011) called this tendency "fatalism" as it casts women only as victims (p. 314), and she called for more sophisticated ways to interpret women's experience to enhance our understanding of the complexity of everyday processes. The paradox perspective focuses on both contradictions and coexistence, which allows us to explore a richer range of possibilities women use to cope with the agency-communion tensions.

Second, in the context of leadership research, there have been increasing calls to pay attention to multilevel factors that influence leadership outcomes (Day & Harrison, 2007; Yammarino, Dionne, Chun, & Dansereau, 2005). Although our theory focuses on the experience of

individual women leaders, our model delineate personal and contextual factors that influence women's leader outcomes through impacting what mindsets they adopt to make sense of the tensions they experience, a vital process that carries consequential implications for their leadership outcomes. We explore how mindsets can influence women leaders' experience and outcomes, helping to shed light on why and when some women leaders manage the tensions and carry out their leader roles better than others.

Third, in the paradox literature, most of the attention has been placed on studying paradoxical tensions at the organizational level (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Hahn, Preuss, Pinkse, & Figge, 2014; Smith, 2014). As Schad et al. (2016) lamented, paradox studies "have been relatively silent about individual approaches" (p. 25). Why and how individuals differ in their likelihood to adopt paradoxical thinking, and how organizational conditions influence how this type of thinking is adopted, need to be better explored. Our model thus enriches paradox literature by unpacking individuals' experience of tensions and articulating key processes and conditions that facilitate a paradox mindset to constructively harness paradoxical tensions. This provides a framework for future research on the inevitable individual experience of paradox in organizations.

Women leaders' navigating paradoxical agency-communion tensions

We explain our model in three parts, which together depict the dynamic process through which women leaders experience and respond to agency-communion tensions that stem from the incongruent expectations of their leader role and gender role. First, we discuss the process by which latent tensions between agency and communion become experienced by women leaders, and what might heighten or weaken the intensity of the experience. Second, we explicate factors that activate a paradox mindset or a dilemma mindset with which women leaders make sense of their experienced tensions. Lastly, we explore the impact of a paradox mindset and a dilemma mindset in strengthening or weakening women leaders' resilience, identity coexistence, and leadership effectiveness. Fig. 1 presents our theoretical model.

Part 1: Experiencing agency-communion tensions

Emanating from deeply-embedded societal expectations of the female gender role and those of the leader role, two distinct and sometimes competing sets of demands (agency and communion) are placed on women leaders, which constitute latent agency-communion tensions. With regards to their female gender role, women are expected to display more communal characteristics, such as being affectionate, helpful, kind, sympathetic, interpersonally sensitive, nurturant, and gentle (Bakan, 1966; Eagly, 1987). Men, on the other hand, are expected to display more agentic characteristics, such as being aggressive, ambitious, dominant, forceful, independent, self-sufficient, and self-confident (Bakan, 1966; Eagly, 1987; Kark et al., 2012). At the same time, societal stereotypes of "leader" are based on the premise of "think manager-think male" and are more agentic than communal or neutral (Koenig et al., 2011; Schein, 2001). Thus, women who aspire to and occupy leader roles are often expected to demonstrate agency in order to match the role expectations of leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Johnson et al., 2008). Simultaneously, they also need to demonstrate communion to fit their gender role expectations, without which their agency can lead to backlash to which their male counterparts are not subjected (Johnson et al., 2008; Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010; Williams & Tiedens, 2016).

The dual demands for agency and communion can generate tensions for women leaders, because agency and communion are not always consistent and compatible. At a conceptual level, agency and communion denote "two fundamental modalities in the existence of living

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