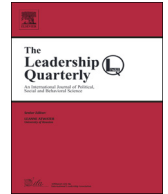




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Identities under scrutiny: How women leaders navigate feeling misidentified at work

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ABSTRACT

The identities of women leaders can fall under intense scrutiny; they are often confronted with other's perceptions of them—perceptions that may not be wholly accurate. Through in-depth qualitative interviews of senior women leaders working in male-dominated industries, we explore how they experience and respond to feeling misidentified (internal identity asymmetry; Meister, Jehn, & Thatcher, 2014) throughout their careers. Employing grounded theory methods, we uncover how women are likely to experience asymmetry, and discover it becomes most salient during personal and professional identity transitions. We build theory with respect to how women leaders navigate feeling misidentified, and find with time and power the experience becomes less salient. Our study draws together and contributes to both the identity and leadership literatures by exploring an important identity challenge facing women leaders in industries that are striving for a greater gender-balance in senior positions.

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“When you're in the spotlight as a woman, you know you're being judged constantly. I mean, it is just never ending.”

[Hillary Clinton, Interview with ABC, 2014]

Introduction

In organizations, leaders learn that it matters how those they work with perceive them. From the ever-expanding body of management literature imploring leaders to create, present, and manage their leadership identities (e.g., George, 2003; Goffee & Jones, 2005; Irvine & Reger, 2006; Sinclair, 2013), to the rising use and sophistication of feedback instruments that provide leaders with insight into how others see them (Peiperl, 2001; Zenger, Folkman, & Edinger, 2011), modern leaders are compelled to acknowledge how they are perceived. Further, as recent scholarship highlights how mere appearances can influence how people select and evaluate leaders at work (e.g., Geys, 2014; Little, 2014; Poutvaara, 2014), leaders may become prone to considering and managing how others see them at work.

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As our quote above depicts, women in leadership roles can face additional struggles with respect to navigating and managing the perceptions of others. For example, literature shows that while women and men leaders may behave and perform similarly when in comparable leadership roles (Vecchio, 2003), women still tend to be perceived less favorably as potential candidates for leadership roles, and when performing these roles, their behavior is also judged less favorably (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Riggins & Winkel, 2011). This is because leadership is often conceptualized as a stereotypically ‘masculine’ endeavor requiring agentic qualities, bodies and behavior (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Kark & Eagly, 2010; Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011; Sinclair, 1998). Women who conform to the behavioral requirements of the role can be seen to be violating the communal ‘warm and kind’ female societal role expectations (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman & Parks-Stamm, 2007; Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkins, 2004; Johnson, Murphy, Zewdie, & Reichard, 2008). These harsher judgments can lead to women leaders being labeled ‘dragon lady’, ‘battle axe’, ‘honorary men’ or ‘flawed women’ (Etzkowitz, Kemelgor, & Uzzi, 2000; Tannen, 1994). Consequently, women may discover that their identities as leaders—particularly those who work as minorities in traditionally male professions—can be subject to intense scrutiny (Bell, Sinclair, Broadbridge, & Broadbridge, 2016; Kanter, 1977; Mavin, Bryans, & Cunningham, 2010; Mavin & Grandy, 2016), and they may be confronted with how others perceive their identities—perceptions that may be inaccurate. They may subsequently feel pressured to invest thought, time and effort into managing other’s perceptions, and to develop coping responses to navigate this experience (Bell et al., 2016; Meister, Jehn, & Thatcher, 2014; Swann, Johnson, & Bosson, 2009). Drawing together the identity, gender and leadership literatures, we thus seek to examine how and when women leaders in male-dominated organizations experience this scrutiny of their identities, and the coping processes in which they engage to navigate the experience.

To accomplish this, through qualitative research we explore women’s experiences of feeling misidentified by their colleagues throughout their careers. Also called ‘internal identity asymmetry’, feeling misidentified at work is experienced when an individual believes that others ascribe incorrect or unwanted identities to him or her, neglecting identities that might be highly salient to him or her (Meister et al., 2014). This is grounded in research that suggests that it is an individual’s perceptions of a phenomenon that ultimately drives their responses (e.g., Burns & Vollmeyer, 1998; Homan, van Knippenberg, Van Kleef, & De Dreu, 2007; Jehn, Rispens, & Thatcher, 2010). We thus suggest that a woman’s belief that asymmetry exists drives her experience at work, despite whether it exists in reality. This perceived misalignment ignites the need to re-negotiate one’s self-identities with oneself or with the other, in order to reduce discrepancies (or dissonance) and move toward congruence (Festinger, 1957; Swann, Rentfrow, & Guinn, 2003; Swann et al., 2009). The concept of asymmetry captures experienced misalignment between perceptions without predetermining whether the experience is harmful or not—asymmetries may be interpreted as either negative or positive, and this valence assessment may influence differential outcomes (Meister et al., 2014). Further, an asymmetry may be based on any of an individual’s self-identities, which may or may not include experiences of stereotype. For example, while an asymmetry could be based on gender stereotypes, it could also be based on how a woman thinks that others see her professional role at work (e.g., “others see my role incongruently to how I see my role”).

In exploring internal identity asymmetry with women leaders, our article makes several contributions to scholarship. First, we contribute to the identity literature with an in-depth empirical study of internal identity asymmetry with women leaders. While the concept has been identified as theoretically important to individuals at work (e.g., influencing well-being and relationships; Meister et al., 2014), we still have little understanding of *when* it may be most likely to happen, *how* individuals (in our case, women leaders) experience it, and the specific identity negotiation and coping processes they might use to navigate the experience. By exploring this phenomenon qualitatively, we provide empirical depth (Conger, 1998) and build theory regarding how and when women leaders in male dominated industries might be most likely to experience being misidentified. We draw on several bodies of literature to explore the ways they navigate the experience, including the deliberated strategies they volunteer as well as those that are emergent and given meaning retrospectively. In doing so, a richer and more nuanced understanding of the experience of asymmetry emerges, providing a basis for future empirical work.

Second, we answer recent calls in the leadership literature for exploration into how leaders “see and define themselves, as well as understanding the complex ways in which these self-definitions develop, change, and are influenced by leader-follower interactions and contexts” (Epitropaki, Kark, Mainemelis, & Lord, 2016 p. 1). Our research does this by exploring how women leaders’ beliefs that they are misidentified might influence their experience at work. This is important, because despite the many initiatives to support women in corporate leadership in the past decades, there remain comparatively few women who occupy senior leadership roles, particularly in male-dominated industries such as engineering, construction, and finance (Kark & Eagly, 2010). Previous research has identified numerous factors contributing to women’s exclusion from the top, such as work-family issues, discrimination, and organizational barriers to women advancing (e.g., Eagly & Carli, 2007; Ely & Rhode, 2010; Kark & Eagly, 2010; Sinclair, 1998), yet this research suggests women continue to experience invisible yet powerful obstacles in accessing leadership roles and being supported to perform their best (Ibarra, Ely, & Kolb, 2013). A recent study shows, for example, that the often unfriendly and hostile working environment surrounding women engineers drives them to leave engineering all together (Fouad, 2014). By employing in depth interviews, we explore the identity tensions this difficult environment can elicit for senior women including tensions with respect to how they believe their colleagues perceive them, and how these experiences influence them.

Finally, our theory and research makes practical contributions to leadership practice. Our findings suggest that internal identity asymmetry may profoundly influence women leaders in male-dominated industries with the potential to damage success, well-being and longevity in their roles and professions. We find that women may feel more misidentified during times of professional (e.g., the transition to leadership) or personal identity transitions (such as pregnancy) that are unavoidably experienced publicly at work, and we unpack the various strategies they employ in response to this dynamic. Armed with this knowledge, we suggest

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