



## Race matters for women leaders: Intersectional effects on agentic deficiencies and penalties

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### ABSTRACT

A significant amount of the research on two types of biases against women leaders—agentic deficiency (perceptions that women have minimal leadership potential) and agentic penalty (backlash for counter-stereotypical behavior)—has generally presumed that the descriptive, prescriptive, and proscriptive stereotypes on which the biases are based are comparable for women across racial groups. We propose that the degree to which agentic deficiencies and penalties occur is contingent on the dimension of agency that is under consideration and its relation to the stereotypes associated with the target's gendered and racial group. The results of our literature review and analysis suggest that when considered in the context of gender and leadership research, at least two dimensions of agency, competence and dominance, closely align with perceptions of agentic deficiency and agentic penalty, respectively. Based on our analysis and the prevalent stereotypes of Black and Asian American women that are likely most relevant to the two types of biases against women leaders, we examined the interactive effects of racial stereotypes and the agentic biases. We suggest that when specific racial and gendered stereotypes are aligned with a specific dimension of agency, we can gain a more thorough understanding of how agentic biases may hinder women's progression to leadership positions.

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For more than four decades, substantial advances have been made in the study of gender and leadership, from Schein's (1973) seminal “think manager—think male” paradigm (demonstrating greater correspondence between managerial characteristics and men rather than women) to Heilman's (1983) lack-of-fit model (explicating how gender preferences restrict women's organizational entry) to Rudman's (1998) backlash effect (explaining how increased competence perceptions can simultaneously decrease likability for self-confident women). We now understand a great deal about the seemingly ever-present gender biases that can prevent aspiring women from successfully attaining and maintaining leadership positions. Perhaps the essence—though not necessarily all of the varying nuances—of this mounting body of research is predicated on the two types of agentic bias most aptly and succinctly depicted in role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002): (1) an agentic deficiency, the perception that women are insufficiently agentic to occupy leadership roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 1983) and (2) an agentic penalty, the social and economic backlash women face for behaving in an agentic manner that is at odds with their prescribed gender role (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Rudman, 1998; Rudman & Phelan, 2008).

When evaluated as agentially deficient, women are perceived as not possessing enough agentic characteristics (broadly defined) to be leaders. In other words, agentic deficiency is frequently associated with the evaluation of women's leadership potential. This mismatch between the leader role and the gender role occurs because the communal stereotypes affiliated with the female gender role are perceived as inadequate when paired with the agentic characteristics ascribed to typical leaders (Eagly

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& Karau, 2002; Heilman, 1983). Male stereotypes are quite similar to traditional expectations of leaders' behaviors and characteristics, whereas female stereotypes diverge from such expectations (Brenner, Tomkiewicz, & Schein, 1989; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, Block, Martell, & Simon, 1989; Schein, 1973, 2001). Hence, the agentic deficiency is derived from descriptive stereotypes, comprising beliefs about what women are like (e.g., kind but incompetent). In contrast, once they assume leadership roles and fulfill these roles' agentic requirements, women frequently incur an agentic penalty for violating gender norms and are evaluated negatively for doing so. Hence, agentic penalty stems from both prescriptive stereotypes (beliefs about how someone *should* behave; e.g., women should be nice) and proscriptive stereotypes (beliefs about how someone *should not* behave; e.g., women should not behave dominantly).

Although both types of biases hinge on the general concept of agency, we propose that the types of agency on which these biases are based are fundamentally distinct. Agentic deficiencies appear to rest on perceptions of leadership ability, which include the skills and talents required to carry out the function of leadership. Alternatively, interpersonal perceptions—perceptions of leadership behavior in relation to others—define the purview of agentic penalties. Therefore, contrary to the assumptions of much of the gender and leadership research (see for exceptions Rudman & Glick, 2001; Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Nauts, 2012), agency is more likely to be a multidimensional construct than a unidimensional one. Whether a woman experiences an agentic deficiency or an agentic penalty is partly contingent upon the dimension of agency that is under consideration. Additionally, much of the research on these two types of agentic bias has mostly presumed that the descriptive (in the case of agentic deficiency) and prescriptive (in the case of agentic penalty) stereotypes of women are generalized across racial groups. However, mounting research has documented that the stereotypes attributed to White women, the predominant group on which most of the existing gender and leadership research is implicitly based, can be quite distinct from those ascribed to racial minority women (e.g., Berdahl & Min, 2012; Ghavami & Peplau, 2012; Hall et al., 2012; Landrine, 1985; Millard & Grant, 2006).<sup>1</sup> Hence, we propose that the extent to which women are perceived as agentially deficient and incur an agentic penalty is contingent on at least two factors: (1) the specific dimension of agency being considered and (2) the woman's race.

First, we review existing research that suggests that agentic content is varied such that agency may not represent a single construct but is comprised of at least two dimensions that should be considered separately. In gender and leadership research, the term *agency* has been loosely employed to refer collectively to a variety of traits and behaviors, such as assertiveness, competence, dominance, and self-promotion (e.g., Diekmann, Brown, Johnston, & Clark, 2010; Heilman & Okimoto, 2007; Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkins, 2004; Jost & Kay, 2005; Madera, Hebl, & Martin, 2009; Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010; Rosette & Tost, 2010; Rule & Ambady, 2009; Scott & Brown, 2006; Witt & Wood, 2010). Hence, one of our goals is to attempt to merge two streams of existing research: (1) research suggesting that agency may be better represented as separate dimensions of an overarching construct as opposed to representing a single construct (e.g., Abele, Uchronski, Suitner, & Wojciszke, 2008; McAdams, Hoffman, Mansfield, & Day, 1996) and (2) research on agentic bias. In this regard, our purpose is to succinctly identify which dimensions of agency are likely applicable to each of the two types of agentic bias, agentic deficiency and agentic penalty.

Second, we propose that the degree to which agentic deficiencies and penalties occur for women not only depends on the dimension of agency being considered but also on each dimension's relation to the stereotypes associated with the target's specific gender and racial group. We draw on the intersectional framework, which posits that social identities based on race and gender are interdependent and mutually constitutive (Cole, 2009; Collins, 1991; Crenshaw, 1989; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). The intersectional framework implies and empirical evidence corroborates that there may be distinct descriptive, prescriptive, and proscriptive stereotypes for women from different racial groups. Thus, the specific agentic deficiency and agentic penalty incurred by women may be contingent on the stereotype associated with a particular gender and racial group. Using this framework, we review existing research suggesting that Black and Asian American women could have distinct advantages and disadvantages as compared to White women as they strive for leadership positions. By teasing apart the nuances of when and how the distinct agentic perceptions affect women of different races, this research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the agentic biases that can plague women's ascension to leadership positions.

We first summarize research that distinguishes between two dimensions of agency—competence and dominance—and provide arguments suggesting that these two dimensions are most aptly applicable to agentic deficiency and agentic penalty, respectively. Second, we explain how intersectionality and subgroup research serve as the basis of our framework, which considers the influence of racial stereotypes of Black and Asian American women on the two types of agentic bias. In addition, we provide the results of our free-response study and compare our findings to existing research to assess the stereotypic content associated with the three subgroups: White women, Black women, and Asian American women. Finally, we suggest that when specific racial and gendered stereotypes are isolated and then aligned with a specific dimension of agency, we can attain a more thorough understanding of how agentic biases may hinder women's progression to leadership positions.

### Distinguishing agentic-competence from agentic-dominance

Generally speaking, there are two comprehensive types of content dimensions present in perceptions of the self, others, and social groups: agentic content and communal content. Agentic content manifests itself as independent achievement, self-

<sup>1</sup> Gender and leadership scholars have not tended to explicitly designate the leaders in their research as White, but instead have referred to a broad superordinate category of women. Given that Whites comprise the racial majority in the United States and that "being White" represents a prototypical characteristic of leadership (Rosette, Leonardelli, & Phillips, 2008), the superordinate category of women upon which much of the gender and leadership research has been based is prototypically White.

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