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Gender, Race, and Leadership

Research Symposium

# GENDER & WORK:

## CHALLENGING CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

# BACKLASH AND THE DOUBLE BIND

GENDER & WORK:

# GENDER, RACE, AND LEADERSHIP:
## An Examination of the Challenges Facing Non-prototypical Leaders

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Organizations have made impressive strides in the past four decades in increasing the representation of women and minorities in the workforce. However, the numerical representation of disadvantaged groups differs greatly as a function of organizational hierarchy. Specifically, there is a high representation of women and minorities in lower ranks within organizations, and there is even a respectable representation of women and minorities in middle management. For example, a recent survey by Catalyst estimated that nearly 40% of middle management positions are occupied by women. At upper levels of management, this representation plummets dramatically. For example, roughly 4% of *Fortune* 500 CEOs are women (and this is the highest percentage in history). Fewer than 3% of *Fortune* 500 CEOs are members of ethnic minority groups. These figures are similar when one examines the representation of women and minorities in top positions in governments, as well as industry, and when examining representation cross-nationally. In short, the traditional or prototypical leader in Western society is both White and male (Rosette, Leonardelli, and Phillips, 2008), and the numbers are consistent with these cognitive assumptions of what a leader is and what a leader should be.

The current paper sought to provide an overview of the factors underlying the stark under-representation of women and minorities in top positions of leadership within organizations. The paper also sought to fill a gap in the literature by investigating the categories "women" and "minorities" simultaneously, given that past research has tended to examine them in isolation. In other words, prior research on gender and leadership has almost exclusively looked at White women, whereas prior research on race and leadership has almost exclusively looked at Black men. Therefore, I endeavored to investigate the unique situation of Black women leaders, and whether they face similar (or indeed greater) challenges as (than) White women and Black men, or whether their situation is fundamentally different. In the paragraphs that follow, I will provide a brief overview of the research on gender and leadership, followed by a brief overview of some of the research on race and leadership. Finally, I will investigate the intersectionality of gender and race in the context of leadership by looking at the situation of Black women leaders. I will conclude with speculative conclusions about the significance of these findings for both research and practice.

Prior research on gender and leadership has shown that women are underrepresented in top leadership positions and often face biases when they do occupy these roles (see Eagly & Carli, 2007; Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011 for reviews). One problem is that people do not think "female" when they think leader (Schein, 1973). Consequently, women are not viewed as a good "fit" for leadership positions. This is due, in part, to the fact that gender stereotypes contradict leader stereotypes. However, the second challenge is that when women do obtain leadership positions, they are often unable to behave as leaders. Prior research has shown that women leaders are unable to express agentic behaviors and emotions without being punished. Agency can be defined as an emphasis on enhancing the mastery or power of the individual, in contrast with communion, which emphasizes interpersonal intimacy and connectedness with others (see Abele, 2003; Bakan, 1966; Eagly, 1987; and Foa & Foa,

1974 for discussion). Because agency is incongruent with traditional female gender roles, it results in backlash against women who express agentic behaviors or emotions (Rudman & Glick, 1999).

Because women have traditionally occupied caregiver roles, stereotypes of women include traits associated with warmth and communalism (see Cuddy, Fiske, Glick, 2008, for review; Eagly & Mladinic, 1989). Consequently, the challenge for women leaders is to prove that they can be strong, assertive, and agentic in leadership roles. Prior research has shown that successful female leaders must affirm their competence and agency, often at the expense of their perceived warmth (see Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt & van Engen, 2003 for review; Rudman & Glick, 1999), and often at the risk of producing "backlash" because leadership roles contradict warmth stereotypes and violate prescribed communal roles (Eagly, 2007; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004; Rudman & Glick, 1999). Research has also shown that increased warmth does not help women as much as decreased competence hurts them (Cuddy, Fiske & Glick, 2004).

Prior research has found that women, even those in positions of leadership and authority, suffer an agency penalty for exhibiting actions or emotions that are assertive, confident, aggressive, angry, or dominant (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010; Rudman, 1998; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004; Rudman & Glick, 1999). For example, Rudman (1998) demonstrated that self-promoting women were evaluated more negatively than self-effacing women—even in a context that demanded competitiveness, whereas no penalty was imposed on self-promoting men (see also Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010). In addition, Brescoll and Uhlmann (2008) experimentally demonstrated that female employees who expressed anger were conferred lower status and salary compared with male employees who expressed anger, or female employees who did not express anger. This finding held true whether the employee occupied the position of entry-level trainee or Chief Executive Officer (CEO), suggesting that the agency penalty is not restricted to women in lower-level organizational positions (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008). One proposed explanation for these findings is that although agentic behaviors and emotions are congruent with leader roles and expectations, they are not congruent with female gender roles and expectations, resulting in backlash against women who behave agentically (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Rudman & Glick, 1999). There is also evidence suggesting that women are punished for not behaving communally. For example, Heilman and Chen (2005) showed that men who demonstrated positive organizational citizenship behaviors (e.g. helping) were rewarded, whereas women who demonstrated positive organizational citizenship behaviors were not. Conversely, women who did not help were punished whereas men who did not help were not punished.

In short, research has demonstrated that communal behavior is required of women and that agentic behavior is prohibited for women. This presents a problem for women leaders because the roles themselves involve (and require) agency. This "double-bind" that women face, of needing to express agency in order to be consistent with the leadership role while being unable to express agency in order to avoid backlash associated with perceived violation of gender roles, is clearly illustrated in the Supreme Court case of *Ann Hopkins v. Price Waterhouse*. The plaintiff is a highly productive executive at Price Waterhouse in the 1980s who is denied partnership because, despite bringing copious revenue into the company, she is seen as brash, abrasive, and even unethical. The case reveals that many of her male contemporaries exhibit similar (or worse) behaviors. However, unlike Ann, their ornery displays are condoned or even rewarded. Thus, the court decided in favor of Ann Hopkins on the grounds that she found herself in an impossible double-bind, in which she would not be promoted if she behaved too warmly (because she would be seen as sweet but not tough enough to do the job) and would not be promoted if she behaved too aggressively (because she would be seen as tough but not very likeable or "lady-like").

Similar challenges confront Black men leaders. I have argued in prior research (e.g., Livingston & Pearce, 2009) that successful Black leaders need to possess "disarming mechanisms"— physical, psychological, or behavioral traits that attenuate perceptions of threat by the dominant

group. Thus, like (White) women, they are not permitted to show too much assertiveness or agency. However, the mechanism underlying their need to show communalism is distinct from that of White women. Agency is counterstereotypic for White women whereas it is not counter-stereotypic for Black men. In fact, the problem is that Black men are seen as too agentic. The hyper-agency of Black men represents a symbolic and realistic threat to White men, who have a keen interest in maintaining their position at the top of the social hierarchy.

Therefore, we hypothesized that disarming mechanisms (in particular, having a baby's face) would be beneficial to Black leaders because it attenuates the fear and negative affect that Black men in positions of power might create. Several theoretical positions argue that signals of warmth or deference have special utility for threatening outgroups (e.g., Blacks), compared with outgroups that are perceived as being less threatening (e.g., women). For example, intergroup image theory posits that the "barbaric image" (i.e., low status/high power) characteristic of (male) Blacks evokes greater feelings of threat and higher motivation to contain the group compared with the "dependent image" (i.e., low status/low power) characteristic of women and children (see Alexander, Brewer, & Hermann, 1999; Alexander, Brewer, & Livingston, 2005, for detailed discussion). More-over, social dominance theory maintains that racial discrimination is disproportionately directed toward outgroup males rather than outgroup females, due to the greater threat that the former pose to the hierarchical status of the dominant group (see Sidanius & Pratto, 1999 for discussion). Because baby-faced individuals evoke trust, compassion, and cooperation while minimizing feel-ings of threat and competition, baby-facedness could benefit Black males who find themselves in intergroup contexts (e.g., corporate America) in which their power or ambition might be perceived as a threat. Consistent with these ideas, we found that baby-facedness was beneficial to Black males but was detrimental to White males. We also found that disarming mechanisms were unnecessary for female leaders because they were already "disarmed" by virtue of their category membership.

In sum, past research has shown that both White women and Black men are punished for behaving in an agentic manner. But what about Black women? There are at least two possibilities. Because Black women occupy not only one, but two roles that are incongruent with leader expec-tations, the assumption here is that they would be dually penalized when displaying agentic-related emotion. This "additive" prediction, that Black women will incur the penalty of both White wom-en and Black men, has been referred to elsewhere as the "double-jeopardy" hypothesis, and is sup-ported by theory positing that individuals with two or more subordinate identities, such as Black women, are relatively more disadvantaged than single-subordinate groups, such as White women or Black men (Beale, 1970; Carter, 2007; Epstein, 1973; Reid & Comas-Diaz, 1990; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010; Settles, 2006). Specifically, some theorists even suggest that Black women leaders will be penalized more than White women leaders when they behave agentically (Bell & Nkomo, 2001).

A second possibility is that Black female leaders will suffer less penalty than either White female leaders or Black male leaders for expressing agentic emotions. The logic of this "interac-tive" prediction is twofold. The first assumption is that the Black female category is not merely the additive combination of race and gender. Rather, it has been argued that because of their dual subordinate identities, Black women tend to be defined as non-prototypical, marginal members of their racial and gender groups rendering them "invisible" (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008; Sesko & Biernat, 2010). That is, because the prototypical "Black" is male, Black women may be buffered from many of the racial hostilities directed toward Black men. This notion is also consistent with the *subordinate-male-target hypothesis* (SMTH) which argues that intergroup conflict and prejudice are primarily a male-on-male phenomenon that is fueled by a quest for dominance and power; thus, outgroup females are less relevant to these power struggles (McDonald, Navarette, & Sidanius, 2011; Navarette, McDonald, Molina, & Sidanius, 2010; Sidanius & Pratto, 1998).

If one of the causes of agentic backlash is violation of prescriptive stereotypes against agency, then backlash should be attenuated for subgroups that are more strongly associated with

dominance. Our data reveal that dominance is more proscribed for White women than for Black women (Richardson, Phillips, Rudman, & Glick, 2011). Moreover, Black participants tend to express less difference between stereotypes of men and women than do White participants (Durik et al., 2006). Finally, Black women are perceived as being more masculine than White women (Goff, Thomas, & Jackson, 2008; Sesko & Biernat, 2010).

Consistent with this idea, Livingston, Rosette, and Washington (2012) found that Black women leaders were not subject to the same agency penalty as White women leaders. Rather, Black women were allowed to express dominance without suffering backlash, and this was because participants did not see the dominance as unusual, as evidenced by their attributions (see Livings-ton, Rosette, & Washington, 2012).

These results emphasize the importance of considering both race and gender when examining the impact of agency on evaluations and outcomes of female leaders. Consistent with past research, Livingston et al. (2012) found evidence of a penalty against White women when they expressed anger versus sadness, as well as an agency penalty for Black men (Livingston & Pearce, 2009). However, the study did not find evidence of an agency penalty for Black women, clearly dis-confirming the existence of double jeopardy against Black women for agentic emotional expression.

At the same time, these results present an enigma. If Black women have the same latitude for agency as White men, then why aren't there more Black women in executive positions? There are at least two responses to this question. First, it is important to consider whether there are dif-ferent types of agency. Secondly, it is important to distinguish between agency and competence.

To address the first question, my colleagues and I collected data from the League of Black Women to assess the extent to which Black women leaders felt that they would suffer penalties for administrative agency versus ambitious agency. We defined administrative agency as assertiveness or willingness to be independent, proactive, or forceful in getting a task done. We defined ambitious agency as power-seeking, or the tendency to promote oneself in the service of status attainment and personal ambition. Ambitious agency also involves direct competition with others. What our preliminary analyses show is that Black women are not punished for exhibiting administrative agency, perhaps due to the fact that it is consistent with the image of Black women as strong, independent, and assertive. However, Black women are penalized for ambitious agency, as it represents a direct threat to the status hierarchy. In brief, Black women may not be able to climb the corporate ladder because displays of ambitious agency (which would be most instru-mental to power attainment) are not permitted.

Secondly, I believe that when perceptions of leadership ability are considered, it is impor-tant to make a distinction between penalties for agency and penalties for performance. Although a (competent) Black female executive might be able to get away with displays of agentic emotions, it is not clear whether a Black female executive can get away with making mistakes, as this might be interpreted as evidence of her incompetence owing to her lack of fit with the leader proto-type (i.e., White male). A recent paper suggests that the extent to which individuals lose status after committing a (competence-related) error is a function of the fit between the person and the position (Brescoll, Dawson, & Uhlmann, 2010). If Black women do not fit the mold of "leader" in general, they may be punished more harshly for making a mistake, relative to a Black man or a White man. Recent research by Rosette and Livingston (2012) demonstrated that Black women do indeed suffer double jeopardy for making mistakes because less-than-perfect performance high-lights the greater degree of incongruence between their social category and the established leader prototype (i.e., White male). Thus, there may exist a paucity of Black women leaders because they are disproportionately penalized for any mistakes on the job, given that these mistakes are (over-) interpreted as a general unsuitability for leadership roles.

In summary, I have provided an overview of the unique challenges that confront non-prototypical leaders. The data clearly show that women and minorities face obstacles to leadership attainment that White men do not face. However, the data also demonstrate that the particular challenges that women and minorities face are distinct in nature. White women suffer agency penalties because agentic behavior violates descriptive and prescriptive stereotypes. Black men suffer agency penalties because agentic behavior is seen as a (realistic) threat to White male patriarchy, due to the perceived strength and power that Black men possess. Black women do not suffer an agency penalty because they are not subject to the same descriptive or prescriptive communal stereotypes as White women, nor do they represent the same realistic threat that Black men do. Although Black women are not punished for being direct and assertive in their interpersonal manner, they are punished for being power-seeking and self-promoting in their ambition. Furthermore, they are also disproportionately punished for making mistakes in a leadership role.

While this paper focused on a specific ethnic group, African Americans, it is possible that other ethnic subgroups of women (e.g., Latina, Italian, or Jewish women) might also be allowed to express agency without penalty, particularly if the stereotypes associated with their subgroup do not proscribe assertiveness or agency. It is also possible that other subgroups of women, such as lesbians, might suffer less agency penalty. Consistent with this idea, research has shown that "androgynous" women are not prone to the same backlash as "feminized" women (Rudman & Glick, 2001). Given both the importance and the complexity of the present findings, it is critical that future research examine the intersectionality of multiple social categories in order to get a more comprehensive picture of the dynamic ways in which social category membership affects one's prospects of attaining leadership roles and the constraints that might face individuals who occupy these roles.

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