DIGI GEN

READER

FEMALE LEADERSHIP EMPOWERMENT

1 UNCONSCIOUS BIAS AND STEREOTYPES

Stereotyping is the cognitive process of categorising individuals or groups based on perceived characteristics, traits, or behaviours associated with a particular social category. Stereotypes can be based on factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, age, or occupation, and they can influence attitudes, behaviours, and interactions, sometimes leading to discrimination or prejudice.

Gender stereotypes are generalising assumptions about men and women. (Hentschel et al. 2017). These assumptions do not apply, or only apply, to a portion of all persons of one gender. A common stereotype is that women are more communal and men are more agentic (originated from Bakan 1966).[1] Beginning from early childhood, girls and boys are often steered towards interests,

---

[1] Agentic traits are assertive, dominant, and self-assured tendencies such as aggressiveness, ambition, independence, or self-confidence. Communal traits are characterised by concern for the welfare of others, such as affection, helpfulness, friendliness, sympathy, empathy, caring, or cautiousness.

Co-funded by
the European Union

behaviours, and career paths deemed appropriate for their gender. This early conditioning influences the development of skills, career aspirations, and self-perception.

Self-stereotyping occurs when individuals internalise and conform to these societal expectations, limiting their potential and reinforcing gendered norms. Furthermore, gender and self-stereotyping perpetuate disparities in caretaking tasks and responsibilities, with women disproportionately responsible for childcare and household duties. This unequal distribution of labour contributes to gender disparities in health, education, wages, and financial independence.

Unconscious biases are automatic, unintentional attitudes or stereotypes that influence assumptions and decisions without conscious awareness. The most common biases in the workplace that affect women's careers are:

- *Affinity bias* favours individuals with similar backgrounds, interests, or experiences, leading to preferential treatment or opportunities.
- *Gender bias* refers to prejudice or discrimination based on someone's gender, often resulting in unequal treatment or expectations due to societal stereotypes or norms.
- *Out-group bias* involves favouritism towards one's social group members while displaying prejudice or hostility towards those perceived as outsiders or different.
- *Status quo bias* is the inclination to maintain existing conditions or beliefs, resisting change even when it may be beneficial or necessary.
- *Beauty bias* is the tendency to favour physically attractive individuals over others, leading to preferential treatment or assumptions about their abilities or character based on appearance.

2 THINK MANAGER — THINK MALE

Besides having stereotypes about gender, culture, age, and many more diversity factors, everyone has their thoughts about leaders — an ideal which every leader must fulfil. Those ideals may create mismatches with other ideals and personalities, becoming leaders.

DIGIGEN
Professional career guidance for women in management
positions in the field of digital competence

3

2.1 Implicit leadership theories

In addition to the scientifically based leadership theories, everyone has a subjective idea of what a leader should be like. Such perceptions are shaped by experience and cultural values. Since expectations of a typical leader resonate unspoken, they are called implicit leadership theories. An implicit leadership theory is the cognitive structure that defines the traits and characteristics of leaders. (Mai et al. 2017)

In the history of leadership theories, women played a subordinate role for decades. Both the researchers of the time and the leaders studied were predominantly male. This gender disparity has led to implicit expectations regarding leadership being heavily male-biased. One of the first authors to address this issue was Virginia Ellen Schein. Her research shows "that successful middle managers are perceived to possess characteristics, attitudes, and temperaments more commonly ascribed to men in general than to women in general." (Schein 1973) The results of Schein's study became known as the "Think Manager - Think Male" paradigm and have spawned many follow-up studies.

Some 40 years later, Koenig et al. (2011) took the resulting studies as an opportunity to conduct a meta-analysis of implicit leadership theory research. The meta-analysis examines, among other things, the influence of the independent variables gender of the authors, year of publication, age of the participants, and gender of the participants on agentic stereotyping of leadership. Additionally, the authors consider three research paradigms.

The Think Manager - Think Male paradigm describes the correlation of associated leadership characteristics with associated female characteristics on the one hand and associated male characteristics on the other. With a higher male-leader correlation, leadership stereotypes are male. The agency-communion paradigm examines the association of agentic and communal connotated words with the ideal leader. If the agentic associations predominate, leadership stereotypes are masculine. The Masculinity-Femininity Paradigm simply asks whether a position or profession is

perceived as feminine or masculine. If the answers with a masculine perception predominate, leadership stereotypes are masculine.

Multiple regression analysis of the Think Manager - Think Male paradigm shows significant correlations in the female-leader-correlation with increasing years of publication, a lower proportion of male participants, and increasing age of participants. The male-leader correlation is significantly higher in higher leadership positions (Koenig et al. 2011). Statistically significant correlations between the year of publication and the status level of the leadership position are also found in the multiple regression analyses of the agency-communion and masculinity-femininity paradigms. (Koenig et al. 2011)

The authors of the meta-study argue that the association of communal-female characteristics with leadership increases because (1) gender stereotypes are broken down due to increasingly successful women leaders, and (2) more experience with female leaders can be gained with increasing age. The understanding of leadership is more agentic-male (3) in the leadership assessment of men and (4) in higher leadership positions. (Koenig et al. 2011)

2.2 Role congruity theory

Agentic-male implicit leadership theories conflict with communal-female stereotypes (implicit gender theory). This contradiction has practical implications for the career opportunities of female leaders and is known as role incongruence theory. Figure 1 provides a schematic representation of the interrelationships (Eagly and Karau 2002). Role incongruence occurs when agentic implicit leadership theories and communal implicit gender theories about women clash. If communal characteristics dominate a woman's perception, she does not fit a leader's agentic role. If a woman presents herself with agentic characteristics, she violates the communal image of a stereotypical woman. The resulting dilemma of never being able to fulfil both role stereotypes simultaneously is called the backlash effect. This backlash effect has a negative impact on personnel decision-making processes in which women apply for leadership positions or want to develop within a leadership position. (Hentschel et al. 2017)
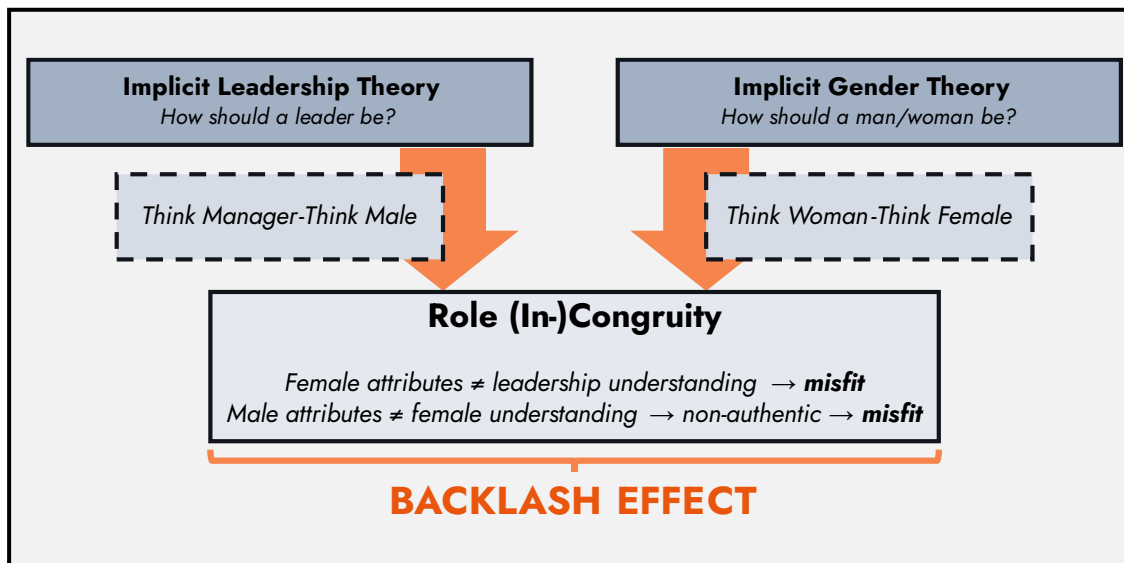
Figure 1: Role Congruity Theory and Backlash Effect; figure created by the authors.

3   EFFECTS ON FEMALE CAREERS

This chapter focuses on situations affecting female careers. Although it might seem that these problems are exclusive to women, this is not the case, nor is it DIGIGEN's intention. These problems/situations are presented because they are likely to come up in a counselling session, and therefore, guidance professionals should know how to address them adequately.

3.1 Female-specific challenges

Imposter syndrome is a psychological phenomenon characterised by persistent self-doubt and inadequacy despite evidence of success and competence. It manifests as a fear of being exposed as a fraud or feeling like an imposter in one's achievements and abilities. Women often experience imposter syndrome in professional settings where they may feel pressure to prove themselves in male-dominated fields or leadership positions. Research has shown that women with high levels of achievement are especially susceptible to imposter feelings (Clance and Imes 1978).

Imposter syndrome can *present* itself in various ways, including perfectionism, overworking, and difficulty accepting praise or recognition for accomplishments. Women may downplay their achievements, attribute their success to luck or external factors, and constantly compare themselves to others, leading to heightened anxiety and stress.

Co-funded by
the European Union

To *counter imposter syndrome*, it's crucial to recognise and challenge negative thought patterns. Strategies such as reframing thoughts, acknowledging accomplishments, and seeking support from mentors or peers can help women build confidence and resilience. Additionally, creating a supportive work environment that fosters open communication, feedback, and recognition can mitigate the effects of imposter syndrome (Inher Potential n.d.).

Queen Bee Syndrome refers to a phenomenon in which women in positions of authority or seniority in the workplace display hostility or undermine other women, particularly subordinates, to maintain their status. While it's important to note that not all women in leadership roles exhibit this behaviour, it is a recognised issue that can hinder gender equality and perpetuate negative stereotypes about women's ability to support one another in professional settings (Staines et al. 1974).

This phenomenon *presents* itself in various ways, including belittling, micromanaging, or withholding opportunities from other women. Women experiencing Queen Bee Syndrome may view other women as threats to their success and feel compelled to assert dominance to protect their position (Eagly and Carli 2007).

Counteracting Queen Bee Syndrome requires fostering open communication, establishing mentorship programs, and promoting diversity and inclusion initiatives. These interventions can help dismantle competitive behaviours and create opportunities for women to uplift one another.

Crab Basket Syndrome is a metaphor used to describe a social phenomenon where individuals within a group attempt to undermine or sabotage the success of those who are achieving or attempting to improve their circumstances. It draws its name from the behaviour of crabs in a bucket, where any crab attempting to escape is pulled back down by others. In professional environments, Crab Basket Syndrome may manifest when women perceive another woman's success as threatening their status.

The phenomenon *presents* itself in behaviours such as gossiping, backstabbing, or actively impeding the progress of others. The syndrome can also arise in settings where limited resources, unequal opportunities, and internalised sexism can exacerbate feelings of competitiveness.

To *counteract* Crab Basket Syndrome, fostering a culture of collaboration, support, and solidarity is essential. Encouraging empathy, celebrating the achievements of others, and promoting a sense of collective success can help. Furthermore, addressing underlying issues such as systemic inequalities, gender bias, and stereotypes is crucial in dismantling Crab Basket Syndrome.

3.2 Professional and Privat Challenges

Professional challenges for women in leadership originate from self- and third-party stereotyping. Private challenges often result from taking on a gender-expected role. There is no empirical evidence that women are less capable of being leaders than men (e.g., Mai et al. 2017). Also, the perception and internalisation of those stereotypes are individual issues and are not equally spread among all women. Therefore, this Reader does not present an exclusive list of professional and private challenges. It hints at topics a female counselee might bring up in a counselling session. Among those are gender stereotypes, ability stereotypes, private situations, and biological factors.

The extent to which a woman feels affected by these challenges varies and is not exclusively limited to a particular gender. Therefore, counselling should find a solution for the individual in its specific social and professional context. The best on-fits-all solution to be given at this point is to listen to what that specific female leader experiences, address her individual needs, and not pigeonhole her just because she's a woman.

3.3 Role Models

Role models serve as beacons of possibility, illuminating paths that may have seemed obscured or inaccessible. They represent a spectrum of achievements, attitudes, and approaches that expand the horizons of what is considered achievable. As the saying goes, "You can't be what you can't see," and role models provide vital visibility to aspirations and potential.

When women see others who have succeeded in their fields, it sparks a sense of ambition and the desire to aim higher. Research has shown that exposure to successful role models correlates with increased ambition and self-efficacy among women. By witnessing the accomplishments of others, women are inspired to set loftier goals and believe in their ability to attain them (Goldin 2023).

Moreover, role models demonstrate not just the result of success but also the mindsets and behaviours necessary to achieve it. Through their actions, they illustrate resilience in the face of adversity, perseverance in pursuing goals, and the importance of self-belief. Women observing these traits in their role models learn invaluable lessons about navigating challenges and overcoming obstacles on their journeys. In that understanding, mentorship plays a crucial role in supporting female leadership. In line with DIGIGEN's survey asking female leaders about their needs (see Needs Analysis at digi-gen.eu), women wish for a woman-2-woman mentorship to pursue leadership careers (Eagly and Carli 2007).

REFERENCES

Bakan, D.(1966): The duality of human existence. An essay on psychology and religion. Chicago: Rand McNally.

Clance, P. R.; Imes, S. A. (1978): The imposter phenomenon in high achieving women: Dynamics and therapeutic intervention. Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice, 15(3), 241–247. DOI: 10.1037/h0086006.

Eagly, A. H.; Karau, S. J. (2002): Role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders. In Psychological Review (109), pp. 573–598.

Eagly, A. H.; Carli, L. (2007): Women and the labyrinth of leadership. Harvard business review 85, pp. 62-71, 146. DOI: 10.1037/e664062007-001.

Goldin, C. (2021): Career & family. Women's century-long journey toward equity, Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Hentschel, T.; Braun, S.; Peus, C. (2017): Warum wird sie nicht Führungskraft? Geschlecht und Karriereentwicklung. In Simone Kauffeld, Daniel Spurk (Eds.): Handbuch Karriere und Laufbahnmanagement. Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer, pp. 1–31.

Inher Potential (n.d.): Imposter Syndrome Matters. Online: https://inherpotential.com/2020/07/24/why-knowing-about-imposter-syndrome-matters/ (last access: 05.03.2024)

Koenig, A. M.; Eagly, A. H.; Mitchell, A. A.; Ristikari, T. (2011): Are leader stereotypes masculine? A meta-analysis of three research paradigms. In Psychological Bulletin 137 (4), pp. 616–642. DOI: 10.1037/a0023557.

Mai, C.; Büttgen, M.; Schwarzinger, D. (2017): „Think-Manager-Consider-Female": Eine Analyse stereotypischer Ansichten über weibliche Führungskräfte und die empirische Überprüfung ihrer realen Persönlichkeit anhand der Big Five und Dunklen Triade. In Schmalenbachs Z betriebswirtsch Forsch 69 (2), pp. 119–152. DOI: 10.1007/s41471-016-0022-9.

Schein, V. E. (1973): The relationship between sex role stereotypes and requisite management characteristics. In Journal of Applied Psychology 57 (2), pp. 95–100.

Staines, G.; Tavris, C.; Jayaratne, T. E. (1974): The Queen Bee syndrome. Psychology Today, 7, 55–60.

Co-funded by the European Union