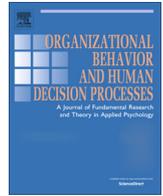




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

## Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/obhdp](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/obhdp)

## Me, a woman and a leader: Positive social identity and identity conflict

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 17 June 2013

Accepted 27 August 2014

Available online 23 September 2014

Accepted by Douglas Brown

## Keywords:

Women leaders

Positive social identity

Identity conflict

Well-being

Motivation to lead

Identity processes

## ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on women leaders' self-views as women and leaders and explores consequences of *positive social identity* (i.e., positive evaluation of the social category in question) for women in leadership positions. We hypothesized that holding positive gender and leader identities reduced perceived conflict between women's gender and leader identities and thereby resulted in favorable psychological and motivational consequences. Studies 1 and 2 revealed that *positive gender identity* indeed reduced women leaders' identity conflict. In Study 3, we found that by lessening identity conflict, *positive gender identity* reduced stress, increased life satisfaction, and caused women to construe leading more as an attractive goal than a duty. In contrast, *positive leader identity* directly affected women's motivation to lead, but did not reduce their identity conflict. Overall, these results emphasize the protective role of women's positive gender identity for their advancement in organizations and leader identity development.

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"It is hard to live in a man's dominated logic for ten hours each day and then go home/leave office and be feminine, caring, sweet, well-coiffed, in a good mood... it is really very hard."

[An anonymous participant]

## Introduction

As this comment of an anonymous participant of our study suggests, women leaders have to navigate between the requirements of their work and personal roles, which at times may be neither easy nor pleasant. Scholars have long noted that holding a healthy sense of self helps to deal with competing role requirements (e.g., Dixon & Baumeister, 1991; Niedenthal, Setterlund, & Wherry, 1992). In parallel, a fast-growing body of leadership literature acknowledges that integrating a leader identity into one's overall self-concept is essential for leadership development (e.g., Ibarra, Snook, & Guillén Ramo, 2010; Lord & Hall, 2005), and, consequently, intrapersonal processes need to be taken into account to understand the emergence of leaders in organizations (Hogue & Lord, 2007). However, despite recent calls for more studies in this area (e.g., van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003), surprisingly little research exists on how women leaders see themselves and how

they experience leadership roles. In this paper, we aim at exploring these issues.

To do so, we focus on women leaders' self-views linked to their gender and leader identities. We build on the growing literature on the role of *positive social identities* in organizations (e.g., Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010) and explore the consequences of women leaders' favorable evaluations of their membership in the social categories of women and leaders on their psychological well-being and motivation to lead. We propose that the effects of positive gender and leader identities are better understood when considered together with a yet another identity aspect—*identity conflict*, which occurs when women leaders perceive an incongruity between being a leader and being a woman (Settles, 2004; Van Sell, Brief, & Schuler, 1981; see also Biddle, 1986). We suggest that the perceived conflict between the two identities mediates the effect of positive gender and leader identities on psychological and motivational outcomes. In particular, we propose that holding a favorable regard for the social categories of women and leaders prevents women from construing the gender and leader roles as incompatible and thereby increases women's well-being and causes them to perceive leading as an attractive goal as opposed to a duty.

To test our hypotheses, we first verified the link between positive social identities and identity conflict in a survey and an experiment, both using samples of women leaders and leaders-to-be. We then used data from a large sample of women leaders who represent a diverse range of industries and countries. Our research provides novel results that contribute to the leadership literature in several ways. First, we integrate the ideas of leadership identity

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and gender dynamics thereby filling a critical gap in the leadership literature (Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011). This is important because while much has been written on the benefits of positive self-concept, findings obtained from broad samples may not be applicable to women leaders who face a unique set of demands (Ruderman, Ohlott, Panzer, & King, 2002). Second, we contribute to the research on leader identity by demonstrating that the positivity of women leaders' social identities plays an important role in women's psychological adjustment to the requirements of their professional and personal life. Third, we advance our understanding of the mechanisms through which positive social identity affects life and work outcomes. In particular, our results emphasize the importance of cultivating and maintaining a positive gender identity to diminish identity conflict. We present our conceptual model in Fig. 1 and develop our hypotheses in detail below.

### Social identities

Identity is a set of meanings that individuals attach to themselves (Gecas, 1982). As social identity theory postulates (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel, 1982), these meanings include a social component that is related to the social roles enacted by a person and his/her identification with collectivities or social categories s/he belongs to. As the individual enacts multiple social roles and identifies with multiple social categories, his/her self-concept includes multiple social identities (Deaux, 1993; Tajfel, 1982; Thoits, 1983). For example, one might possess the multiple identities of a woman, friend, leader, political activist, and a European. In this paper, we focus on two social categories: women and leaders. Leader identity is linked to an achieved state (i.e., "leader") and, applying Tajfel's (1982) definition of social identity, refers to the part of one's self-concept related to his/her membership in the social category of leaders. Gender identity is based on an ascribed characteristic and refers to the part of one's self-concept shared with other individuals of the same gender. Importantly, gender identity is to be distinguished from sex identity, which is determined by one's biological characteristics. In contrast, gender identity is linked to cultural expectations of beliefs, behavior, and feeling states associated with male and female social categories (e.g., Deaux & Stewart, 2001; Ely & Padavic, 2007).

Numerous researchers have argued that social identity is a multidimensional concept that includes such attributes as self-categorization (i.e., identifying self as a member of a particular social category), evaluation (i.e., the positive or negative attitude toward the social category in question, or positive–negative valence of the social category), importance (i.e., the degree of importance of a particular social identity to the overall self-concept), and content (i.e., the extent to which traits and dispositions associated with the social category are endorsed by the individual as self-descriptive) (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004; see also Deaux, 1996; Ellemers, Kortekaas, & Ouwerkerk, 1999; Jackson & Smith, 1999; Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998).

Taking women's gender identity as an example, these attributes mean the following (Ashmore et al., 2004): self-categorization into "women" (as opposed to "men") arguably happens automatically, importance is determined by the extent to which being a woman is central to the individual's overall sense of self, content includes self-attributed characteristics, as represented, for example, by various measures of femininity and masculinity (e.g., Bem, 1974), and evaluation refers to the extent to which women hold a favorable regard for women as a social category. The evaluative attribute of social identities has been evoked as an important source of individuals' self-esteem (e.g., Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990; Hogg, Abrams, Otten, & Hinkle, 2004), a shield against perceived discrimination and distressful events (e.g., Corning, 2002), as well as a trigger of positive outcomes for individuals in organizations (e.g., Dutton et al., 2010). We next theorize on the effect of positive evaluations of social identities for women leaders.

### Positive social identities

Ashmore et al. (2004: 86) suggested that "conceptualizing social identities as varying on a dimension of positive to negative evaluation or favorability" is "perhaps the simplest way to think about identity."<sup>1</sup> Crocker and Luhtanen (1990) echoed this idea by indicating that the evaluation of one's social identities is an important attribute of social identification. Indeed, individuals are fundamentally motivated to hold positive social identities (Gecas, 1982), and holding a favorable regard for a social identity in question is a straightforward way to instantiate a positive social identity (Dutton et al., 2010; Roberts & Dutton, 2009). We thus define the *positivity of one's social identity* in terms of positive–negative valence of one's affective and evaluative judgment of the social category in question (Ashmore et al., 2004; Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990; Sellers et al., 1998).

There are two interrelated components of positive evaluations of a given social category (Ashmore et al., 2004; Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990; Dutton et al., 2010; Sellers et al., 1998). The first is one's own evaluation of the social identity. The more favorable judgment people make about their membership in a given social category (e.g., "I am glad to be a woman"), the more positive their social identity. The second component is related to the favorability judgments that one perceives others to hold about the social category in question (e.g., "Others respect women"). The inclusion of the second component is important because others' attitudes toward an individual affect identity development (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959), and social acceptance is a necessary element for shaping one's self-view as a member of a social category (e.g., Bartel & Dutton, 2001; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; DeRue, Ashford, & Cotton, 2009). The two components of positive evaluations of a given social category have been referred to as private and public components or private and public regard (e.g., Ashmore et al., 2004; Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992; Sellers et al., 1998). The public and private components are often positively correlated, except for stigmatized racial identities (e.g., Crocker, Luhtanen, Blaine, & Broadnax, 1994; Sellers et al., 1998). Thus, our definition of positive social identity implies that the more favorable evaluation of the social category of women (leaders) an individual holds, the more positive her gender (leader) identity, and the more self-esteem she derives from it.

### Identity conflict

While holding multiple identities that one perceives as complementary increases well-being (e.g., Dixon & Baumeister, 1991;

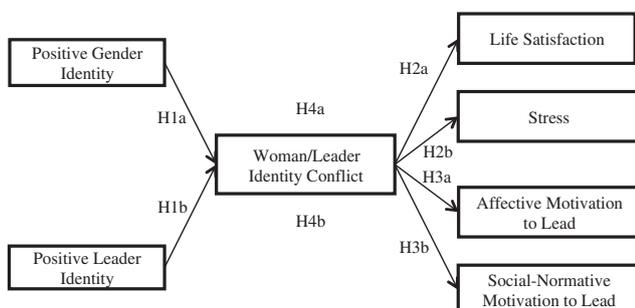


Fig. 1. Hypothesized Model.

<sup>1</sup> Ashmore et al. (2004) also emphasized that the evaluative element of a social identity should not be confused with the importance of the identity to the overall self-concept, since a person may hold a favorable view of an identity without acknowledging it as being centrally important to the definition of self and vice versa.

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